INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN ATLANTIC CANADA: INVESTMENTS AND RETURNS

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights some of the returns from investments in internationalizing Nova Scotian campuses. A review of the current facts regarding international students' presence at Atlantic Canadian universities is followed by a discussion of long-term goals concerning campus internationalization as highlighted by various provincial stakeholders and the issues that may stand in the way of their achievement, given the status quo. Consequently, this article aims to help bridge the policy and service gaps that may undermine identified long-term goals by highlighting potential avenues for cooperation and synchronization of the current internationalization efforts encountered on two of Halifax's university campuses and in their surrounding communities.

The presence of international students on Atlantic Canadian campuses has, in recent years, become a prominent topic on the agendas of various stakeholders in the region. Policy makers, business and NGO leaders, university staff and faculty all currently recognize the internationalization of Nova Scotia's campuses as a common goal. However, the reasons behind the need to internationalize are as diverse as the actors involved in the various internationalization efforts. University representatives underline the reality that Maritime campuses rely on a shrinking population of local students and thus bringing students from abroad will not only enrich classroom dynamics, but will make the maintenance of the current number and size of Atlantic universities possible. Economists point to the inflow of foreign funds directed to covering tuition and living costs, which infuse the local economy and lead to the creation of new jobs.

Meanwhile, local employers and policymakers link campus internationalization efforts with longer-term goals, hoping that international students will help fill the labour force gap that is widening in highly-skilled sectors of local labour markets in the Atlantic Provinces. The potential settlement of international students as Canadian citizens adds yet another layer of complexity to the issue of campus internationalization. Young, holding Canadian degrees and familiar with Canadian life and culture, international students are deemed ideal immigrants by policy makers across Canada. The stakes of their successful permanent settlement run higher in Atlantic Canada, due to this region's particularly low rates of population growth.

Drawing from the multitude of issues that converge within current regional conceptualizations of university internationalization efforts, this article highlights some of the investments in internationalizing Nova Scotian campuses and the gains for Nova Scotia as a result of the province's increasing prominence as a destination for international students. Following a review of the current facts is a discussion of long-term goals and the issues that may stand in the way of their achievement, given the status quo. This two-tier approach aims to help bridge the policy and service gaps that may stand in the way of identified long-term goals by highlighting potential avenues for cooperation and synchronization of the current internationalization efforts encountered on Halifax's university campuses and in their surrounding communities.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Much of the data used for this analysis emerged from 14 semi-structured interviews conducted in Halifax in 2009. Amongst those interviewed were federal and provincial government officials, staff and administration from two of the city's largest and most international universities, as well as representatives of NGOs operating in the city's business and immigrant settlement sectors. The interviews were designed to parallel a study conducted in Moncton, New Brunswick by Wade and Belkhodja (in this issue) and to address the implications of international students' rising numbers for the region's demographic challenges. The Halifax study was commissioned by the Association of Atlantic Universities in collaboration with

the Atlantic Metropolis Centre. For the purposes of this article, the exiting interview data is complemented by the latest available figures concerning international students in Canada and Nova Scotia.

A NOTE ON THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF NOVA SCOTIA AND HALIFAX

In order to understand the importance of conducting a study focusing on international students in Nova Scotia, a note on the current economic and demographic situation of the city and province is warranted.

Atlantic Canada is a region traditionally associated with the out-migration of youths and low immigrant attraction and retention rates (Murphy and de Finney 2008, Akbari and Sun 2006). In 2010, Nova Scotia's population was estimated at 938,200 (StatsCan Population Estimates and Projections 2009). According to the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies' report tellingly entitled "An economic future with smaller numbers" (Denton, Feaver and Spencer 2009), while the province makes up about 2.9% of Canada's population, between 2001 and 2006, it was getting, on average, only 0.7% of Canada's immigrants, a steady decline from the previously recorded period of 1991 to 1996, when it was getting 1.2% (Denton et al. 2009, 11). Moreover, despite the national focus on attracting highly-skilled migrants, "the inflow of skilled immigrants [in Nova Scotia] has declined since the mid-1990s" although a slight increasing trend has been recorded since 2003 (Akbari, Lynch, McDonald and Rankaduwa 2007, vi). In consequence, Nova Scotia is facing an aging population and a diminishing labour force. In 2006, the average age of the province was 41, compared to 25 in 1971, while the labour force under 25 makes up only 17% of the population (Denton et al. 2009). The province is also lacking in diversity. 94.6% of Nova Scotians were born in Nova Scotia, out of which only 6.3% are first generation immigrants, compared to the national average of 23.8%. Only 7.5% of Nova Scotians self-identify as visible minorities, while white, British or American immigrants are still the largest incoming immigrant populations in the province (Akbari et al. 2007, 18).

NOTABLE INVESTMENTS AND SHORT-TERM GAINS

On this backdrop of low numbers of newcomers, low ethnic diversity and an aging population, the province stands out as highly successful in attracting young, ethnically diverse international students. Currently, Nova Scotia ranks as the fifth most popular destination province for international students Canada-wide, hosting a little under 5,000 young foreigners (Denton et al. 2009, v). Nova Scotia is outranked only by Ontario (35.5%), Quebec (22.8%), British Columbia (19.5%) and Alberta (7.2%) (statistics computed by the author based on Denton et al.'s report 2009, v). This is particularly impressive as Nova Scotia has some of the highest undergraduate tuition rates in the country (Siddiq, Holterman, Nethercote, Sinclair and White 2010, 11). The average tuition for international students in Canada is $14,419, while in Nova Scotia the average is $15,122 (Denton et al. 2009, 19). Nonetheless, according to university recruiters interviewed, Nova Scotian tuition requirements are very competitive when compared to those charged by American, Australian or British universities.

Consequently, Halifax and Nova Scotia are so successful at attracting international students that both the province and its capital host about twice as many international students as they host permanent residents, a situation that is not mirrored on the national scale. Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these notable trends.

The top source countries for students in the province are China, the United States, Korea, Japan, the Caribbean nations and the Middle East. The province hosts around 7000 students, and about 70% of those students study in Halifax, the provincial capital (CIC Facts and Figures 2009).

The province's success in attracting international students is also reflected in Nova Scotia's notable economic gains from the incoming youths. A 2009 study found the total economic impact of international students in the province to be $231 million in the last year, the number doubling the return of money spent by government, universities and private actors for incoming students (Siddiq et al 2010, 11). Universities collected 19 million in differential fees (Siddiq et al 2010, 11), while an estimated

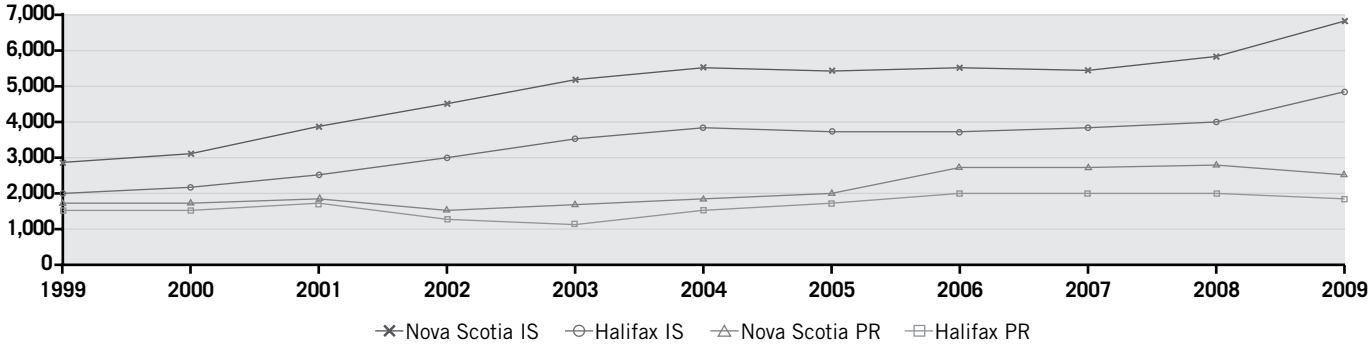
TABLE 1: International students (IS), permanent residents (PR) and the population of Halifax and Nova Scotia (2009)

TERRITORY	POPULATION (POP)	PERMANENTS RESIDENTS (PR)	PR/POP %	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (IS)	IS/POPULATION %
Halifax	398,000	1,792	0.45%	4,702	1.18%
NS	938,000	2,424	0.26%	6,614	0.71%
Canada	33,739,000	252,124	0.75%	196,227	0.58%

Source: Population numbers: StatsCan Population Estimates and Projections, 2009; Immigrant and International student numbers: CIC, Facts and Figures, 2009.

Note: Figure 1 situates the numbers presented in Table 1 in temporal perspective, illustrating a comparison between the numbers of permanent residents and international students from 1999 to 2009.

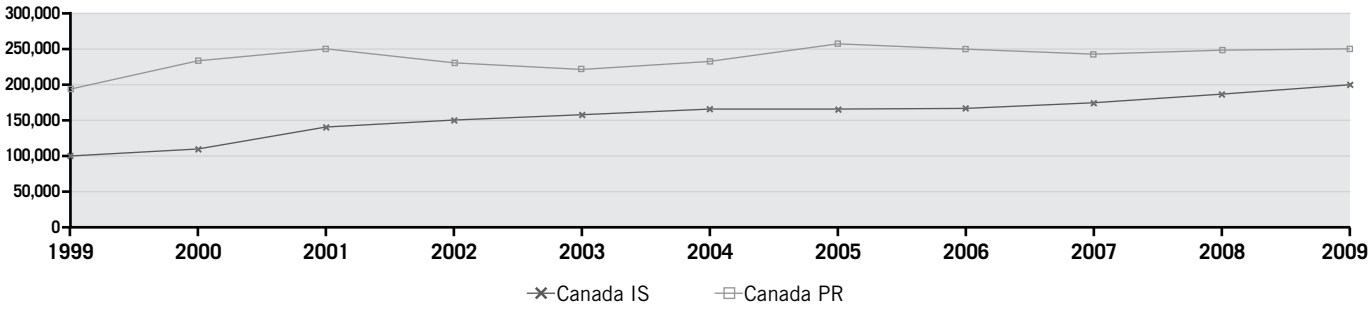
FIGURE 1: Numbers of international students (IS) and permanent residents (PR) in the province of Nova Scotia and the city of Halifax between 1999 and 2009



Source: CIC, Facts and Figures 2009.

Note: Figure 2 further illustrates those trends in comparaison, this time on the national scale.

FIGURE 2: Numbers of international students (IS) and permanent residents (PR) in Canada between 1999 and 2009



Source: CIC, Facts and Figures 2009.

2,360 jobs were created in the province as a result of the international students' presence (Denton et al. 2009, iv). In light of these figures, it becomes evident that international education has become a significant revenue-generating sector for the province.

Nova Scotia's success in attracting international students is, according to those interviewed for this study, largely the result of sustained investments from the province's top universities, which have built lucrative networks and strategies of advertisement and recruitment around the world. Private sector actors such as the Association of Atlantic Universities and EduNova have also been very active, working to develop Nova Scotia as a brand on the international education market. In the interviews conducted, it became clear that private sector involvement was meant to substitute support from government, which, until recently, has been reluctant to invest in adequately promoting Canada as a destination on the international education market. Thus, while governments in countries like Australia and the UK have been building strong national brands for their higher education systems for decades, Canada's national brand only came out in 2008, in a manner described by university strategists and recruiters, as well as by NGO leaders as "timid at best". Nonetheless, all interviewed agreed that the government's recent involvement has consolidated Nova Scotia's efforts to become a notable brand on the international education market, particularly as recent visa changes allow recruiters to advertise potential job opportunities during and after degree-programs in Canada. Thus, since 2008, international students are able to work off-campus during their degrees in Canada, as well as apply for work-permits after graduation, even without securing work offers. University recruiters underlined that the visa changes made a notable impact on the ground, as international students and their families see work opportunities as highly valuable experiences while abroad, as well as a lucrative opportunity to cover at least some of the expenses of international study.

LONG-TERM GOALS AND CHALLENGES

As the statistics provided thus far illustrate, attracting international students to universities in Nova Scotia is no longer a challenge, as the short-term goals of boosting university enrolment and accruing the financial benefits of international students' presence are clearly successfully met.

However, the presence of international students in notable numbers in Canada in general and in Nova Scotia, in particular, has sparked the interest of various other stakeholders outside universities. As Canada's national government has shifted its citizenship policies to fast-track applications from international graduates of Canadian universities under the Canadian Experience Class stream, the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration launched its Provincial Nominee International Graduate Stream Program, which specifically targets international graduates, offering them fast-streamed permanent residence with the condition that they secure permanent job contracts in the province.

Such post-graduation work permits are supposed to give local businesses in Nova Scotia a competitive advantage in retaining bright, young minds, while minimizing the costs of integrating the workers to Canadian work environments. In this context, international students theoretically fit the bill of 'ideal immigrant' arguably better than other immigration streams. They are young, trained in Canada and mostly studying in high-tech or science sectors. Currently, based on the data I obtained from local universities, the majority of international students are working towards their science, engineering and business administration degrees. Through their education in Canada, not only should they be able to by-pass lengthy and costly processes of language skills and education recognition (Reitz 2007), but they are also supposedly more familiar with Canadian life and culture, and more anchored in local Canadian communities than any other category of migrants. Such characteristics, matched with recent results of the Canada First survey conducted Canada-wide by the Canadian Bureau for International Education, which notes that about 1 in 2 international students said that they intend to settle in Canada after graduation (Humphries and Knight-Grofe 2009, 16), should, in theory, position Nova Scotia at an advantage with regard to attracting highly-skilled new migrants. However this is not the case, as the province continues to lag behind in attracting new migrants, and especially those deemed 'highly skilled' (Akbari et al 2007).

International students' adaptation to Canada has not been going as smoothly as predicted. Often very young, and part of visible and audible minorities, students stand out in the homogeneous academic and social environment of Halifax. Anecdotes of racism in the classroom and on the streets of the city marked some of the interviews with students' support staff at universities. In light of these factors, drop-out and transfer rates remain a concern for Atlantic universities.

Moreover, NGOs and university career services underline that international graduates often struggle to find adequate jobs, despite their high-tech skills and Canadian degree, most leaving the province or taking up employment that does not match their skill sets. The most notable reason cited by interviewees is the graduates' lack of ties to local communities. Career services staff on university campuses noted that in many fields, jobs are not advertised in the city and province, as positions are filled through socially established ties. This observation is in line with survey results released by one prominent university in the province, namely Dalhousie, where 67.5% of recent graduates stated that they made use of their social networks (family, friends) in their job search, while 33.8% noted that they actually got their job through their social network (2009, 6). Moreover, NGO representatives who work with the city's business community note that employers are often reluctant to hire graduates because of foreign accents as well as confusion regarding the legal status of the foreign youths in Canada. Such issues are not surprising given Halifax's lack of ethnic diversity as well as the fact that CIC's policies regarding international graduates are very recent.

Those interviewed for this study noted that a large part of solving this problem lies with university staff, particularly pointing to international students' service centers. For students to have a smoother transition to Canadian life and become integrated into local communities, such offices need to be expanded from dealing mostly with pragmatic day-to-day issues (visa renewal, health insurance, rent arrangements etc.) to helping interested students make Canada their home, especially after graduation. However, currently, many service centers geared towards international students only have sufficient capacity to deal with the pressing day-to-day issues, and activities such as community volunteering or employer outreach remain in the background.

Meanwhile, on their end, NGO leaders interviewed noted they are lobbying the government for funding to start programs to both educate employers and help match graduates with existing jobs. Their efforts are currently undermined by the status of international students and graduates as temporary residents in Canada, which deems them ineligible to access government settlement programs.

Such impediments have the potential to seriously undermine the province's long-term returns on ongoing investments in university internationalization. Thus, international students are arguably some of the most cost-effective migrants when weighing their potential settlement costs against their promised returns to local economies. Mostly working towards science and business degrees from Canadian institutions, settled international graduates can help reverse the provincial trend of youths' out migration and aging workforce and contribute to Nova Scotia's economic development. However, as this study underlines, a more dedicated approach to this population's successful

settlements needs to be taken by leading stakeholders, so as not to undermine the initial provincial investments in attracting the students to Atlantic Canada.

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