WELCOME TO CANADA?: IMMIGRATION INCENTIVES MAY NOT BE ENOUGH FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO STAY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Canada's current immigration policies to attract and retain international students as desired permanent immigrants. Juxtaposing them with the settlement and integration needs and services provided, it argues that immigration and settlement policy and practice are inextricably linked. Without adequately investing in the successful integration of all immigrants, these well-intentioned immigration policies will fail to deliver the desired results and skilled migrants may choose to settle elsewhere.

Canada has intensified its competition to recruit and retain international students through direct marketing and immigration policy changes. Making it easier for international students to work and stay in Canada as skilled immigrants is indeed a sound policy objective. However, without investing in the settlement and integration supports to create welcoming communities for international students and their families, Canada may not be able to successfully retain international students as permanent residents. Equipped with relatively recognizable Canadian credentials and experience, international student migrants who are not adequately supported may choose to immigrate elsewhere. This is not only a lost investment for Canada's post-secondary institutions, but could result in a direct loss for Canada, where desirable skilled immigrants are increasingly needed to meet national labour market demands.

PREFERRED IMMIGRANTS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

There have been significant changes in Canada's immigration policies vis-a-vis international students to better attract and retain them as skilled immigrants and eventual citizens.[1] It appears that these policies, in addition to an increase in global student mobility and a more unified Canadian marketing scheme, are increasing Canada's competitive edge in attracting students. In 2008-09, Canada ranked 8th place as a destination country for international students in tertiary education, and at a post-secondary level, the number of international students increased by 97% from 72,798 in 1999 to 143,826 in 2008 (CIC, 2009). In 2008, international students contributed approximately $6.5B to the Canadian economy, creating over 83,000 jobs and generating more than $291-million in government revenues (RKA Inc., July 2009).

At the same time, intense competition for international students and skilled immigrants internationally means that attracting students and creating avenues for their permanent immigration may not be enough to make them stay. Permanent stay rates in Canada stand at about 18%, compared to over 29% in Germany and 27% in France (OECD, 2010). In countries where immigration policies have catered increasingly to retaining international students as skilled immigrants, large numbers of economic migrants are now sourced within these countries, rather than offshore. For Australia, where the most rapid and aggressive immigration policies have been tailored to international students and changing labour market demands, 62% of primary economic immigrant applicants were former international students in 2006-07 and by 2009, 66% of all students from India transferred to permanent resident status (Hawthorne, 2010). For Canada, where stay rates are relatively low, there is a need to develop more incentives to encourage and support students to remain permanently.

POLICY CHANGES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In order to increase its edge in attracting international students both as migrants and as immigrants, Canada has introduced significant reforms to allow international

students easier access to Canadian work experience and to clear immigration pathways. In 2006, international students were given the right to work off-campus during their studies and in 2008, post-graduation work permits for international students allowed student graduates to work in a field unrelated to their education, anywhere in Canada for up to three years.

For international students in Canada, immigration policy has also brought forth two major immigration pathways from within the country – the federal Canadian Experience Class (CEC) and the Provincial Nomination Programs (PNPs). Within each of these programs, international students generally transition through two distinct phases – first, as a student and second, as a temporary worker[2] – before attaining permanent residency. These immigration changes have shifted Canada towards a "two-step" migration process (Hawthorne, 2010), changing the starting point for migrants from settling in their newly adopted country as permanent residents to proving themselves as worthy immigrants (through a period with temporary status) in order to gain permanent residency. These immigration streams may attract non-traditional international students whose primary intention is not to study temporarily but to immigrate and evidence from other jurisdictions where similar migration policy changes took place indicates that demand for education and permanent residence increased drastically.

The number of former international students immigrating to Canada through all channels has almost doubled in the last five years, from 5,486 in 2003 to more than 10,000 in 2008 (CIC, 2009). Based on the preliminary CEC data available for 2009, 869 of 1,176 individuals were admitted through the international student stream of the program. The implication is that international students and their families are likely to make up the majority of applicants through the CEC, and this could amount to 18,500 new permanent residents a year. In turn, the volume admitted through the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) who are selected overseas by the federal government – Canada's main immigration program for skilled immigrants – will be decreased in proportion to migrants applying through the CEC if current immigration levels remain unchanged.

International students – deemed 'designer immigrants' by some– are the most sought after immigrants, as they are able to avoid some of the hurdles faced by skilled immigrants such as the non-recognition of international credentials and foreign work experience and skills, and concerns over language and communication abilities (Simmons, 1999). For Canada, there is no conclusive evidence, but preliminary research does suggest that former international students have better economic outcomes, at least in the short-run (Sweetman & Warman, 2009).

However, in Australia, which has a longer history of experimentation with shifting immigration policy to retain international students, it was revealed that former international students had annual salaries of $33,000 (compared with $52,500 for landed immigrants selected overseas[3], while both groups were employed within 6 months almost equally (Hawthorne, 2007). In a study by Khoo et al. (2008), about half of international students who did not apply to become permanent residents in Australia, did not do so for "employment-related reasons", implying there are better opportunities elsewhere. In fact, Australia has found that a significant number of international student graduates eventually leave Australia, despite policy efforts (Khoo et al., 2008).

In Canada, the recent Canadian Bureau of International Education's (CBIE) 2009 Survey of International Students found that half of surveyed university students and three-quarters of college students choose to study in Canada because of post-graduate work opportunities (19). Another CBIE report explores the unique experiences of international students in attempting to enter the Canadian labour market, finding that due to real or perceived barriers, 68% of the international student respondents did not plan to stay in Canada to work. For 80% of the respondents, pessimism about career opportunities seemed to be the driving concern (2007: 18).[4] From the students' perspective, it is clear that employment opportunities and successful entry into the labour market play a large role in their decision to immigrate.

Connection to community is also critical to the success and retention of international students and permanent immigrants. Early intervention in settlement services and support has been shown to reduce the likelihood of poverty and underemployment (Statistics Canada, 2005; Picot & Hou, 2003). Ultimately, it has been found that "feeling more rooted in the new environment [in part achieved through settlement support services], newcomers are able to access their inherent skills to begin the climb back to independence and self-assurance – basic ingredients for integration into their new community" (Romberg, 1994). In Reitz' (1998) comparative study, he indicates how support for settlement is vital to migrants' economic success and inclusion in the community. Looking at early settlement support may have both short and long-term impacts on the success and integration of international students and their families into the labour market and society at large.

SUPPORT FOR SETTLEMENT: ESSENTIAL TO RETAINING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Successful immigration and settlement is not based solely on simplified and accelerated work permit procedures and permanent residency pathways. With the

increased interest in recruiting and retaining international students, "the roles of universities are changing dramatically" to include "immigration related-issues" (Suter & Jandl, 2008: 403). Martin (2004) notes that universities play a vital role in providing support to migrants' settling permanently. However, many post-secondary institutions provide limited, if any, services to graduated students, and international students, while in school and on work-permits, are ineligible for the majority of settlement services and supports in the community.

International Student Offices (ISOs) are an invaluable resource for international students as they are generally their first and main point of institutional contact (CBIE, 2007). International students seek academic, community and employment support through the ISO. According to the 2007 CBIE report, "for the most part… it is the staff at the ISO who carry the responsibility for institutional support" (25) and much of the time, they are not provided with the operational funding to do so. Highlighted in Gates-Gasse's 2010 literature review is how, for many post-secondary institutions, targeted international student services through the ISOs face funding and staffing challenges, despite the fact that international students pay more tuition than domestic students, but receive fewer investments to their education and supports. A 2010 study by Siddiq et al., which focused on all the Atlantic Provinces, found that international students spent $2.68 for every dollar spent on them by the four provincial governments.

In order to fulfill its objectives to successfully integrate immigrants, the Canadian Federal government funds a complex array of settlement services and supports. Unfortunately, federal settlement funds have strict eligibility criteria and international students and their families do not qualify for federal settlement services until they are granted permanent residency, which can take from three to ten or more years as they transition from student to worker to immigrant. Even though international students applying through the CEC will have settlement needs – which will be unique to those of economic immigrants arriving from outside of Canada – the only settlement services accessible to international students (both as students and temporary workers) are provincially-funded and have broader eligibility criteria. When considering all the settlement services provided within a province, both federally and provincially funded, overall there are fewer provincially-funded settlement services. In Ontario, only about 20% of settlement services are funded by the province and 80% are funded by the federal government.

For international students and their families, having access to settlement services may assist in a more effective transition for those pursuing permanent residency in Canada – and may indeed influence the choice of whether or not to remain in Canada. Other groups that do not have full access to settlement services have documented the difficulty they have integrating into the labour market. Since we know that labour market access and integration are critically important in international students' choice to immigrate, expanding access to settlement services for these migrants seems a logical policy move for retaining international students as skilled immigrants. A 2009 report by Chira on the internationalization of Halifax found that settlement agencies expressed interest in partnering with universities to support international students, but that the stringent eligibility criteria for services and the lack of provincial funds for international student settlement was a recurring issue that prevented successful partnerships.

We know that early support for newcomers in the community has strong labour market integration outcomes, as evidenced by the extra service supports and social networks that refugees and family class migrants have over other economic migrants in Canada. Due to these supports, these migrants do better than other immigrants in the economic class,[5] especially in their first years in Canada (Zietsma, 2007). In Australia, where only humanitarian migrants qualify for publicly funded settlement services, these services have been shown to increase early labour market entry and have a "strong and robust influence on employment 48 months later" (Liebig, 2007: 45). Looking at early settlement services and supports for international students may be the key to retaining them, and will certainly have both short- and long-term impacts on their success and integration into the labour market.

WELCOMING IMMIGRANTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTLEMENT SERVICES

In a 2005 study of 160 Chinese undergraduate international students at the University of Saskatchewan, the authors conclude that "…social and emotional adaptations are [as] critical as economic adaptations in facilitating intentions to stay permanently…" (Lu et al., 2009: 307). In the U.S., a 2006 study revealed the same need for a welcoming and supportive environment for international students to choose to immigrate. Just over half of the respondents reported that "feelings of alienation from U.S. culture" had influenced their decision to return home after their studies (Alberts & Hazen, 2006: 212). In Canada, for all immigrants, data shows that 13% of skilled worker principal applicants leave Canada, but that early intervention in terms of services and supports makes a significant difference in helping retain and integrate permanent residents. For international students with families, the importance of settlement support and community ties are magnified. A 2009 Masters thesis by Mandal found that of University of Manitoba students with

high rates of family and friend social capital networks, 89% indicated an intention to settle in Canada.

There is some evidence to suggest that international students are not being adequately welcomed into Canadian communities. A 2006 survey of over 2,500 Montréal students found that 47% were unsatisfied with their welcome by other students and 49% were also unsatisfied with their success in establishing friendships with Canadian students (CROP, 2006). The 2009 CBIE Survey of International Students found that only about one in three respondents reported "lots of success" in making friends with Canadian students.

However, there is a disconnect between CIC's policy objective of encouraging the immigration of international students as skilled immigrants to Canada and the lack of services to assist in their effective transition to the labour force. In addition to stringent eligibility criteria for accessing settlement services, the federal government has recently cut nearly $53-million from settlement agencies, mainly in Toronto. Given that Toronto will likely continue to receive the lion's share of new immigrants and already hosts the second largest share of international students in Canada – over 15,000 – providing services to Canada's current migrants to help them get established will become increasingly difficult. For a country which is internationally applauded as welcoming to immigrants, recent cuts and disinvestment in Canada's current migrant population's settlement needs may be sending a message to potential skilled immigrants, propelling many of them to look for opportunities elsewhere.

In light of their current immigration objectives, the federal and provincial governments need to review the eligibility criteria for their settlement services, as well as the array of services available, which could be modeled on and adapted for international students' unique settlement needs. In addition, settlement supports and services should continue to be funded and prioritized as a part of an integrated strategy to attract and retain skilled immigrants. By providing the necessary settlement and labour market supports, Canada will maintain its reputation as a welcoming and inclusive society, and will ensure that it maintains its competitive edge in attracting and retaining international students as skilled and successful permanent immigrants.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] This article is adapted from Erika Gates-Gasse's research findings compiled while working at WES for the report entitled "International Students as Immigrants: Literature Review and Good Practices" (in press, 2010).

[2] Some of the PNPs allow international students to apply for permanent residency without a post-graduate work period – and some without a job offer – thus avoiding a second period of transition as temporary workers.

[3] Documented in Australia as "offshore arrivals".

[4] This survey was conducted before revisions to the work-permit rules made it easier for international students to work, both on and off-campus and after graduation.

[5] Except principal applicants under the points system.

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