

Attracting and Retaining International Students through Canadian Work Experience

Issue

Jurisdictions across Canada are searching for ways to attract and retain more international students. A significant impediment to these efforts are policies that make it more difficult for these students to obtain work experience while attending Canadian post-secondary institutions or immediately after graduation. These restrictions have both (a) legal ramifications: example: permanent residency / citizenship requirements; and (b) practical implications: example: connecting with the student's host community, making post-graduation career contacts, and gaining work experience - which employers are increasingly demanding from graduates.

Background

Canada needs to grow its population, lower its average age, and increase the number of skilled workers to fill key positions that enable business growth. Indeed, the latter has been a Canadian chamber priority for several years and is an issue in every province and territory. Per the chamber's 2015 Top 10 Barriers to Competitiveness: "Currently Canada is not producing enough graduates with the skills needed for its economy. Canada has shortages and high demand forecast in a wide range of occupations, from heavy equipment operators to information technology professionals, and its immigration policies are hindering employers' abilities to meet those needs in the short term."

Immigration has long been identified as a key component to present and future growth. This was borne out in the latest census data: Canada added approximately 1.7 million people between 2011 and 2016, with two-thirds of this increase attributable to immigration¹.

The timing of a renewed Canadian effort to become a destination of choice for international students may never be better. With nationalist sentiments emerging and anti-globalist governments assuming control in some of Canada's top competitors for international students, we are in a position to capitalize on the increasingly attractive quality of Canadian post-secondary education. Post-secondary institutions have recognized this opportunity and are redoubling their efforts to attract more international students to their schools². The Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy states "International students in Canada provide immediate and significant economic benefits to Canadians in every region of the country." The panel advocates for a doubling of the number of international students studying in Canada over the span of a decade, from just under 240,000 in 2011 to over 450,000 in 2023³.

Bill C-6, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act and to make consequential amendments to another Act⁴, which passed the Senate (with amendments) on 3 May 2017, will partially address some of the pertinent issues for international students, for example:

- International students will be able to count each day spent during their studies as a half day towards their permanent residency or citizenship requirements (up to a maximum of one year)
- Permanent residents will only have to be in Canada for 3 of the preceding 5 years to qualify for citizenship (down from 4 of 6).

¹ Statistics Canada. *Population size and growth in Canada: Key results from the 2016 census*. February 8, 2017. Accessed online: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170208/dq170208a-eng.htm>

² The Globe and Mail. *Canadian Universities See Surge of International Students*. May 15, 2017. Accessed online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/international-admissions-to-canadian-universities-see-significant-increase/article34984977/>

³ *Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity*. 2014. Accessed online: <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/assets/pdfs/overview-apercu-eng.pdf>

⁴ <https://openparliament.ca/bills/42-1/C-6/?tab=mentions>

Bill C-6 is a start, however, international students will still face significant barriers to working while attending a post-secondary institution and getting on a clear path to permanent residency. Some of the employment-based barriers faced by international students in Canada include:

- Ineligible for the Canada Summer Jobs program
- Co-op terms and internships require a separate work permit for international students
- After graduation, international students have only 90 days to find employment before requiring a cumbersome bridge extension study limit outside of Atlantic Canada
- Bill C-6 will count the time spent as an international student count towards citizenship eligibility at a rate of one half day for each full day of studies (previously this was zero)

International students are particularly desirable immigrants because of their age, skills and their economic impact (as students). Global Affairs Canada estimates that international students spent \$11.4 billion on tuition, accommodation and discretionary spending in 2014, creating almost 125,000 jobs across the country⁵. At this time they represented about 9% of the college student population and 8.8% of the undergraduate student population in Canada - leaving room for significant growth⁶.

That international students are allowed to work at all in the country is a relatively new development. Following a pilot program offering a work permit to international students at select institutions in Alberta, the Government of Canada formalized this work permit option in 2006. As a result, international students were allowed to work up to 20 hours per week while in-study and full-time during study breaks, such as winter or summer holidays⁷. However, these rules only apply to full-time students; part-time international students are still ineligible to work in Canada.

The implications for business and the economy are clear. The country needs the next generation of consumers to sustain growth and the next generation of taxpayers to support our aging population. Businesses need skilled workers to innovate and grow. The 2015 Top 10 Barriers document reports that the persistent skills gap costs \$24 billion per year in Ontario alone. Increasing the number of international students at Canadian institutions represents an opportunity to address all of these concerns, but the employment restrictions detailed above are a barrier to fully realizing Canada's potential as a destination of choice.

Recommendations

That the federal government:

1. Allow international students to qualify for the Canada Summer Jobs program.
2. Modify student permits to allow international students to participate in co-op terms and internships without obtaining a separate work permit.
3. Extend post-graduate job-search period from 90 days to 6 months, thereby eliminating the need for a 'bridge' extension study permit.
4. Count all time spent in Canada as an international student towards citizenship eligibility (i.e. increase from half time to full time).

⁵ Government of Canada (Global Affairs), *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada – 2016 Update*. July 2016. Accessed online: <http://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2016/index.aspx?lang=eng>

⁶ *International students in tertiary education and distribution of international enrolments, by level of tertiary education, Canada and provinces, 2014* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2014). Accessed online: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-604-x/2016001/t/tblc1.1-eng.htm>

⁷ Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Backgrounder – Off-Campus work permit program*. September 12, 2007. Accessed online: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/backgrounders/2007/2007-09-12.asp>

⁸ Government of Canada (Immigration and Citizenship), *Work off campus*. February 3, 2015. Accessed online: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/study/work-offcampus.asp>

5. Change the length of time for which a post-graduation work permit can be valid to five years (from the current three years), regardless of the program of study, so long as it was at a recognized Canadian academic institution.
6. Expedite the process for international students to receive visas as well as the processing times for their permanent residency applications so long as they graduated from a recognized Canadian institution and are currently employed within Canada.