

# Assessing Canada's Support of International Students

A Comprehensive Review of Canada's Retention and Settlement of its "Model Immigrants"

Zaheer A. Dauwer

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## SERIES EDITORS

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research paper is to present the findings of an extensive literature review related to barriers international students experience transitioning to employment and permanent residency in Canada. International students who wish to work in Canada temporarily have difficulty receiving employment because of limited co-operative education opportunities and a lack of professional networks. The lack of settlement services, the numerous complexities of immigration policies, and the minimal awareness among students hinder the process for these individuals to immigrate to Canada permanently. These realities hold significant policy implications for the federal and provincial levels of government because Canada continues to admit educated and skilled labour in order to address national priorities such as long-term labour shortage and population decline. International students, especially those who hope to secure employment and permanency in Canada, are an attractive population, given the Canadian education and social capital they have received upon completion of their studies. This report will also provide a comprehensive review of several best practices and policy suggestions in addressing the challenges described above. Additionally, I will offer some practical recommendations for those involved in this transition process.

In section I, a brief overview of policies related to the retention of international students is presented, and in Section II, I provide the findings of more than twenty fundamental research studies representing a diverse group of students from all levels of study, nationalities and gender studying in different regions of Canada. Section III reviews policy suggestions in research literature related to settlement support for international students. Finally, I provide practical recommendations informed by research and based on evidence-based results.

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## **SECTION I: Policies Facilitating the Retention of International Students in Canada**

This section will provide an overview of Canada's 2014 International Education Strategy. The recruitment of international students has evolved over the past decade and, given this reality, Canada's immigration policies have adjusted to these changes. Consequently, it is essential to review the employment programs and permanent residency pathways that have been made available to international students who wish to seek employment and permanent residency in Canada.

The correlation between the recruitment and retention of international students intersects with policies in education, immigration, the economy, trade, foreign affairs and employment. These various intersections hold many complexities for policies concerning international students. The Canadian International Education Strategy is a critical piece of policy related to the recruitment of international students. In 2014, the Canadian federal government decided to make international education "a priority sector under the *Global Markets Action Plan*" (CIC, 2014). One of the goals under this priority was to increase the size of international students from "239,131 in 2011 to more than 450,000 by 2022" (Cox, 2014, p.6). Another priority was to invest in scholarships for international students and CIC's international student program (CIC, 2014). The immediate return for Canada was an increase in expenditures generated by international students from "approximately 7.7 billion annually" in 2012 to "over 16 billion by 2022" (Cox, 2014, p.4). In the long-term, this strategy will allow the government to "strengthen the economy through locally educated, skilled labour" and offer pathways for permanent residency to address long-term labour market needs and population decline (Cox, 2014, p.4).

The employment program began in 2005 with the introduction of the *Post-Graduate Work Permit Program (PGWPP)* "allowing international students the opportunity to apply for a work permit after graduation" (Cox, 2014, p.9). Later in 2006, the *Off-Campus Work Permit Program*

(OCWPP) was introduced allowing students to work while studying. The pathways for permanent immigration were established under the Provincial Nominee Program with different qualifying criteria, and in 2008, the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) was introduced as a stream which “targeted international graduates with professional, managerial, and skilled work experience in Canada” (Cox, 2014, p.11). The work experience international students receive through the employment programs and their Canadian education qualify them for permanent residency through other federal immigration categories available on Express Entry in addition to CEC.

The recruitment and retention of international students have expanded in the last decade. The number of international students who stayed was around an average of "between 15% and 20%" according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2008 (Suter & Jandl, 2008, p.411). According to CBIE (2016), the percentage of international students planning to apply for permanent residence in Canada rose to 51%, by 2016, representing a dramatic increase since 2008. During this same period, Canada has also witnessed a 92% increase in the numbers of international students (CBIE, 2016).

## **SECTION II: Barriers to Transition and Policy Gaps**

This section presents the findings of research related to barriers international students experience transitioning to employment and permanent residency. In terms of the transition to employment, there are three themes identified regarding obstacles international students experience in entering the Canadian labour market. Regarding seeking permanent residency, the barriers identified in the literature are policy gaps, complexities of policies and lack of awareness about pathways to permanent residency. Finally, the lack of settlement services is crucial in facilitating a smooth transition to employment and permanent residency.

### **Lack of Employment Preparation and Obstacles to Labour Market Integration**

#### **Real and perceived barriers to entering the labour market.**

The literature on this topic identifies that international students face barriers when entering the Canadian labour market. These barriers stem from employers' preference for Canadian work experience; the challenge of language and cultural adaptability to Canadian workplaces; and students' perceived barriers. Roach (2011) conducted interviews at international student offices in four Toronto post-secondary institutions. She found that Canadian employers "discriminate against international students' lack of Canadian work experience" (2011, p.39). Additionally, she uncovered that Canadian work experience was evaluated based on students' knowledge of the Canadian "workplace culture" (2011, p. 39). Consequently, in order for international students to proceed in their employment, these students needed training and information about the expectations of Canadian employers (Roach, 2011, p.39).

Lack of Canadian experience seems to affect both male and female international students, equally. Fais (2012), who wrote about the experiences of female international students, concluded that, like male international students, her female interviewees considered "lack of Canadian work experience as an obstacle to finding employment" as well (p.97). A study by Scott, Safdar, Trilokekar, & Masri (2015) that included 48 international students in two post-secondary institutions in Ontario confirmed that "prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory

behaviour" by Canadian employers were the "primary obstacle" to finding employment in their career (p.8). Finally, in her major research paper, Gomez (2017) found that temporary status also disadvantaged international students in "access[ing] opportunities otherwise made available to permanent residents or citizens" (p.52). Although it is difficult to determine what type of occupations and what type of employers require permanent status, it is important to acknowledge that a lack of permanent status adds additional obstacles for international students to find employment. Scott, Safdar, Trilokekar, & Masri (2015) claim that there is a "preconceived notion that IS [international students] would create an administrative burden due to paperwork and dealing with government" (p.8).

**Limited work placement opportunities and transition to relevant employment.**

Research indicates that there are limited opportunities for work placement for international students, and their temporary status and lack of experience make it difficult to access these opportunities. As a result, international students are left unprepared to enter the labour market and, therefore their long-term career aspirations are negatively affected. Qian (2017), who interviewed Chinese international students and the staff of the international student office, reached a similar conclusion. These interviews revealed that international students' failure to find employment was associated with difficulties they experienced securing a placement, "co-op and internship" (p. 44). In some cases, international students identified that there was a lack of work placement opportunities in their specific programs (Qian, 2017, p.44).

Scott et al. (2015) reported that "unlike domestic students, [international students] are not offered practicum or internship opportunities, and where such opportunities did exist, students regretted that they could not get hired" (p.8). Roach (2011) confirmed the findings of other studies that work placement opportunities are crucial to finding employment, and she argued that if provided to international students, those opportunities "even the playing field when international students are trying to enter the Canadian labour market for the first time" (p. 39).

Cox (2014) pointed out a lack of “initiatives” by institutions in “post-graduation employment readiness programs” for international students (p.43). Qian’s study acknowledges that there is lack of employment readiness and lack of Canadian work experience for international students, and she points out that international students’ experiences from outside of Canada were also “under-valued” by employers in Canada. (2017, p. 44). According to Lui & Schissel (2009) who survey 160 international students at the University of Saskatchewan, international students in the undergraduate programs are more disadvantaged than graduate students. First, their Canadian degree does not help them as much because of their lack of Canadian work experience. Secondly, undergraduate students have little work experience because of their age, and there are few opportunities for them to gain work experience on campus compared to graduate students (p. 286).

#### **Minimal professional networks.**

Arthur and Flynn (2011) who interviewed 19 undergraduate and graduate international students for their study revealed that another factor that facilitates and hinder the transition process to employment and permanent immigration are social and professional networks (p.229). Qian's study confirmed those findings that limited social and professional connections and a lack of strong English skills for workplace were the “barriers for them [international students] to find jobs in Canada” (2017, p. 44). Scott et al. argue that the lack of "same opportunities for networking and off-campus employment as domestic students" place international student in a disadvantaged position to find employment after graduation (2015, p.7).

#### **Complexities of Immigration Procedures and Lack of Awareness**

The international student office interviewed in Qian's study (2017) confirmed that one of the international students' serious challenges is navigating the "complexity of immigration policies" and procedures (p.51). The same concerns were raised by international students in Gomez's (2017) study they expressed frustration how the process of transition to work and permanent

residency seemed to be presented as easy and straightforward but was more complicated than it appeared to be presented (p.51). Gomez particularly emphasized time constraints related to applying for Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP), where the window of 90 days to apply for or leave was too short time for students to decide (2017, p.48). In Kelly's (2012) study, international students also expressed concern about time limitations in collecting the documents required as part of the application for permanent residency and the difficulty of obtaining them from their country of citizenship because in some cases they had to apply for them in person (p. 33).

Kelly (2012) who interviewed a diverse group of international students who were either working or were in the process of applying for permanent residency, reported that international students' expectations about the application process and timeline for permanent residency varied from one student to another (p.33). Kelly's findings are confirmed in Cobb's study that reported that the two sources of information about immigration process were internet and friends who had gone through the process indicating that there is a lack of accurate information about the immigration policies (2012, p.36). A study by Clovell, Neiterman, Atanackovic, Owusu & Bourgeault (2015), found that "lack of knowledge about the immigration system" was seen as a significant barrier alongside language (p.27).

### **Limitations of Services Offered by Offices Serving International Students**

There are inconsistency and lack of qualification and resources in service delivery by international student offices across institutions in Canada. Roach (2011) who studied service needs and gaps related to international students' services found "differential service provisions" exist across institutions (p. 29). For instance, the study revealed that only one international student office among the four that participated in this study could refer international students to "service providers in the community for extended support or settlement services" (Roach, 2011, p. 29). The study also reported that the number of advisors qualified to provide immigration advice was limited (Roach, 2011, p.29). Some international student offices were able to offer

bridging services, but this was inconsistent across the institutions and these services were “non-mandated” and did not seem “sustainable” (Roach, 2011, p. 31).

Roach also identified that international student offices were “overburdened” given the increasing responsibilities and growing complexity and uniqueness of those services. (2011, p. 32). One international student office in Roach’s study acknowledged that providing immigration advice and services to international students was beyond their capacity saying that the office’s practice of merely referring international students to government websites given the complexity of the process was not sufficient to address international students’ needs (Roach, 2011, p. 30). Roach concluded that it was not just the issue of qualification of international student staff, but also the nature and uniqueness of services, as well as lack of sufficient funding, were other crucial factors vital in serving the needs of international student effectively (2011, p. 33-34).

### **SECTION III: Policy Suggestions for Settlement Services**

Gates-Gasse argues that if Canada wants to retain international students as permanent residents “there is a need for comprehensive settlement services and supports for international students to facilitate a smooth transition towards their full integration and participation in Canadian society” (2012, p. 272). There is a significant body of research that advocates for settlement services for international students who transition to work and permanent residency; however, thus far, policymakers in Canada have been cautious and slow in responding to the calls for increased settlement services to improve them. Belkhodja argues that Canada as a host country should “intervene more quickly since the transition has an impact on integration, and integration has an impact on the transition towards a feeling of belonging to the host society” (2013, p. 4). In addressing the barriers international students experience during the transition to work and permanent residency, we need to examine the role of post-secondary institutions and within the international student offices, the employers and the local communities as well as the role of settlement service providers and immigration authorities. The next section addresses ways of overcoming barriers to transition for international students by reviewing evidence-based practices adopted in Canada and internationally.

#### **The Community**

The local community including employers, civil society and local and provincial governments have significant roles to play in assisting international students to make a transition to work and then ultimately to permanent residency. They can assist with the successful integration of this population into the community socially and economically. There are many best practices from both Canada and other countries that other communities can learn from, and the biggest challenge is to promote these practices across Canada in ways that take into consideration each community's unique needs.

#### **Economic integration.**

Gates-Gasse (2012) discuss an initiative by Halifax Regional Development Agency

designed to connect employers with international students and also to assist international students to gain employment (p.284). The center arranged workshops to identify what skills students needed in terms of finding employment and used the findings to plan training sessions to address their needs. The third phase of the project included a networking event with employers which was quite helpful in addressing issues of misconception about international students and allowed students to “practice networking skills” and learn about employers (Gates-Gasse, 2012, p.283-284). This initiative helps the business community in Halifax tap into a diverse pool of employees while also ensuring that a young and educated population immigrates to the province permanently. In another example of best practices by local governments, Bouajram (2015) discussed a one-year professional development program in Australia that is “designed as a bridge to facilitate the transition from temporary to permanent” status for international students (p.41). Through this program, students “gain structured career support, become familiar with Australian workplace culture and earn points as part of one’s immigration assessment for permanent residency” (Bouajram, 2015, p. 41).

William (2013) discussed the START program in Nova Scotia, which allows international students who graduate from the province (p. 57). The program connects employees with employers and subsidizes their wages for a period of time to allow employees to gain experience and help employers cover the cost of training. The experience of employment helps international students learn about Canadian workplaces, and they also become eligible to apply for permanent residency through the Canadian Experience Class (William, 2013, p. 57). A similar program was implemented in Newfoundland that encouraged employers to hire international students. The program was designed to "create a bond between international students and rural Newfoundland" (Gates-Gasse, 2012, p.285).

Flynn and Bauder (2013) discussed the role employers play in the settlement of newcomers under Provincial Nominee Programs specifically in the province of Manitoba. The employers were encouraged to actively "participate in the settlement process of employees as

much as possible by holding diversity and inter-cultural training sessions at the workplace" (p. 9). In a similar case, employers in Kelowna, British Columbia assumed a "leading role in nominee settlements" by hiring a staff member to assist their employees with housing, completing immigration papers and "referring them to different programs that would be useful in their settlement" process (Flynn & Bauder, 2013, p. 9).

### **Social integration.**

Social inclusion and creating a sense of belonging for newcomers are central to their successful social and economic integration. The diversity of population we have Canada is a crucial asset to consider for this purpose. Cox (2014) argues that we should connect international students to "social capital," referring to "social resources within immigrants' ethnocultural or linguistics community" and provide them with "opportunities to access and interact with resources" in order to improve their settlement experiences (p.41). Gates-Gasse's study emphasizes the importance of developing social and community connections referencing the findings of a consultation forum arranged by Halifax Region Immigration Strategy in which it was revealed that 89% of international students who had "developed strong social and community roots" intended to settle in the province (2012, p. 278).

Gresham & Clayton (2011) report about an initiative in Australia that connects international students with community members by addressing "issues of inclusion and social integration," assisting the community in managing "cultural differences" and "optimizing the experience of international students through community engagement" (p. 364). Called the *Community Connector Program*, it is coordinated by volunteers at the University of Newcastle. This program is promoted out of recognition that "social integration is essential to mental and emotional health, which in turn, assist in the delivery of better learning outcomes (Gresham & Clayton, 2011, p. 365).

### **Post-Secondary Institutions and International Student Offices**

Post-secondary institutions especially the international student offices have a significant

role to play in facilitating the transition of international students to work and permanent residency. The increase in the number of international students has been dramatic in the last decade or so, post-secondary institutions have not been able to adapt and respond to the increasing needs of international students. Lack of funding and the significant expansion of services have overwhelmed the international student offices. One of the most immediate issues for post-secondary institutions to address is to allocate resources to improve the experiences of international students during their studies and prepare them for post-graduation. Students in Badamos' study (2016) revealed that they felt "excluded from university experience" and that they could not "contribute to the Canadian society" (p. 74).

Scott, et al (2015) argue that policymakers "work proactively with academic institutions and employers" to address many concerns especially the provision of "co-operative education opportunities", educating "employers about the benefits" of hiring international students and finally creating a "general feeling of belonging" for international students (p. 10). As far as the service provided by international student offices, Roach (2011) recommends two streams of services. She suggests that the first stream of immigration services for international students should be related to "temporary" status in Canada. They need services related to study and work permit, family visit and a general orientation to the immigration system in Canada (p. 25). The second stream of services shall pertain to the services as "potential immigrants" for those who wish to remain in Canada as permanent residents and "require unique immigration services" that are not within the day to day services that international student office to provide (Roach, 2011, p.26). William (2013) in a report about international students and the role of post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia, recommends that funding for international student offices should be increased to reflect the expansion of their services and responsibilities as well as the needs of international students (p. 50).

Gates-Gasse (2012) reports that the University of Manitoba's Student Counselling and Career Centre assist international students in making a successful transition to work after

completing their studies. The center runs a semester-long program for two hours every week in which international students learn about job search skills, "employment skills" and discuss "Canadian culture and workplace norms" (p.283). The authors found a similar program offered by Memorial University in Newfoundland assisting international students transition to work (Gates-Gasse, 2012, p.285). These two cases reveal that career centers and international student offices combined their efforts to work with international students using all available resources in the institution. Guo and Chase (2011) report about an initiative by the University of British Columbia to offer a course twice a year for international teaching assistants who work at the university. (p.313). The program teaches participants about "understanding the Canadian academic environment, cross-cultural communication and teaching and presentation strategies" (Guo & Chase, 2011, p.313).

### **Immigration Policy Makers**

Research reveals many measures that immigration policymakers in Canada could take to facilitate the transition of international students to work and permanent residency. Collaboration with post-secondary institutions and the community, increasing funding for settlement programs and services and addressing policy issues related to work and permanent immigration of international students are some of the area prioritized by recent research.

Roach (2011) found in her interviews with different stakeholders that "they would like to see collaborative efforts between stakeholders such as CIC, post-secondary institutions, ISOs, career service centers, and immigrant-serving organizations and employment service centers in the community" (p.43). Flynn & Bauder (2013) identify a "major settlement service gap" during the "period of transition when migrant workers or students possess temporary status" which can be "anywhere from eight months to two years, immigrants are not eligible to receive government-funded settlement services" (p.9). Cox (2014) argues that "CIC settlement-funding model should be expanded that international students are eligible to use immigrant settlement services" because "the long-term economic intentions for international students should position

them within the qualifying boundaries for CIC-funded settlement services" (p.79). The lack of settlement services could impact the transition of international students, and Belkhodja argues that "transition has an impact on integration" in the long term (2013, p. 4).

## **Recommendations**

### **Federal Policy Makers**

The assumption that international students will integrate smoothly into Canadian society fails to recognize the reality that this population faces several issues and challenges. It is generally assumed that because international students have studied and worked in Canada; hold familiarity with the Canadian society, and speak the official languages with fluency, these individuals should not experience any issues transitioning to work and permanent residency in Canada. However, this assumption does not take into account the fact that international students require unique settlement services such as assistance in securing employment and permanent residency. Moreover, this belief does not recognize the limited and inconsistent settlement support available to international students. Finally, this assumption does not consider the reality that these young individuals with minimal life experience begin to encounter significant and life-changing decisions.

The policies related to the retention of international students in Canada both federally and provincially must provide adequate resources and funding to support comprehensive settlement services and assistance. The current immigration support provided by post-secondary institutions proves to be inefficient and inadequate. Therefore, these supports must grow to ensure the successful transition of international students. I propose that the Canadian federal government heighten its collaboration with post-secondary institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, and related employers. This collaboration would increasingly identify and address the barriers of transition to employment and permanent residency that international students face.

### **Provincial Governments and the Community**

The provincial government and the community have significant roles to play in the social and economic integration of international students into society. As such, these players must connect international students with employers and raise awareness about the benefits of international students as a skilled and educated population. Additionally, the provincial and municipal branches of governments must consider employment programs that provide incentives

for employers to hire international students. For example, the employment of international students in rural communities revitalizes the business and attracts a young and educated population to reside. Furthermore, I argue that employers increase their participation in the settlement process of their employed international students. Employers should become involved in this process by connecting international students with ethnocultural, linguistics, and other social resources in the community. Through this employer participation, international students are more likely to have a positive experience during their settlement as well as integrate smoothly into Canadian society.

### **Post-secondary Institutions**

Post-secondary institutions and their international student offices should receive additional funding resources and training in order to serve international students well. Although the number of international students has increased dramatically over the last decade, post-secondary institutions have not been able to adapt to the increasing needs of international students. The lack of funding, expertise, and specialized services overwhelms international student offices in its service delivery. Since international student offices are well positioned to provide settlement services for this population, these offices must be better equipped with the necessary tools to assist international students in their temporary status, potential employment opportunities, and pathways to permanent residency.

Additionally, post-secondary institutions as a whole must operate in specific ways to assist international students in their settlement experience. For instance, post-secondary institutions could offer more co-operative education placements, bridging programs, and educational courses on the Canadian labour market as a way to contribute to their successful employment transition in the future. Post-secondary institutions could also combine their available institutional resources to assist in the labour market integration of this population in particular. For example, career services could be made available specifically to international students in order to prepare them for post-graduation and future employment. In addition to these services, post-secondary

institutions could allocate additional attention and resources in order to improve the settlement experiences of these individuals. Through these adjustments, post-secondary institutions would increasingly incorporate international students in responding to their needs.

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