

From student to immigrant: Migration and settlement trajectories of international students

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Abstract

Like many countries, Canadian higher education institutions have sought to expand recruitment of international students. International students pay higher tuition fees, bringing revenue to post-secondary institutions. They are also often perceived by immigration policymakers as ideally prepared to contribute to the Canadian labour market after graduation. The possibility of staying in Canada improves the value proposition in the eyes of many potential students, so educational institutions and immigration policymakers alike are invested in efforts to retain international students following their graduation. However, international student mobility involves a large number of stakeholders, including students, brokers, educational institutions, employers, and multiple levels of government, who approach the issue with diverse goals.

To further scholarly understanding of international student mobility and immigration pathways, the research investigates three questions:

1. What are the geographic and demographic characteristics of international student mobility to Canada between 2010 and 2019?
2. What is the geographic distribution of former international students who remain in Canada after their study?
3. What immigration pathways do former international students use to remain in Canada, and how long does it take to achieve permanent residence under these various pathways?

The questions are addressed using quantitative analysis of data obtained through a custom data request to Statistics Canada. The dataset includes connections between IMDB data and tax files that show economic activity after study in Canada. The findings show an uneven growth in international student mobility, suggesting an ad hoc response to pressures, rather than a coordinated strategy guiding expansion of the international student program. The findings also show that immigration pathways are complex, usually involving multiple steps and varying substantially. This suggests that there is no clear and available path for post-study immigration. The resultant multi-step immigration pathways mean that international student mobility is not part of two-step immigration, but rather three-, four- and five-step immigration. The multi-step process introduces numerous opportunities for challenges, uncertainty and the potential to lose status in Canada. Ultimately, complex immigration pathways may result making Canada a

less attractive destination for international students. Finally, the studies show that former international students who remain in Canada are more likely to remain in the province of study than to relocate to a new province.

Biography

Kathryn Tomko Dennler is a Research Associate II with the Immigration Knowledge Area at The Conference Board of Canada (CBoC). Her most recent publication with CBoC examines the availability of settlement services in small and rural communities. She is currently working on a study of the immigration trajectories of international students in Canada. Prior to working for CBoC, Kathryn has worked on immigration as a researcher, educator and service provider for over fifteen years and across five countries. In 2020, she earned a PhD in Geography from York University. Her dissertation focused on how immigrants with precarious status in Canada cope with uncertainty about the future. Prior to that, she worked with immigrants in London, UK, as a caseworker and advocate. She also holds an MA from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University, where she researched everyday transnationalism among Mexican immigrants living in New York City.