

Submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Immigration System

November 2, 2020

Subject: International students and immigration rules during the pandemic

1. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

Importance of the contribution of international students

- a. Economic impact
- b. Intercultural and regional diversity
- c. Demographic balance
- d. Source of skilled labour
- e. French speakers
- f. Vitality of CEGEPs
- g. Program sustainability

Economic impact in Canada

\$21.6 billion: amount that international students contributed to Canada's GDP in 2018¹

572,000: number of international students in Canada in 2018¹

167,000: number of international students in Quebec in 2019²

Demographic situation in Quebec³ in 2018

Birth rate below 1.6 children per woman

1.04% population growth rate

The population is older than the rest of Canada (19.3% over 65 years of age and 20.8% under 20 years of age). Average age of 42.

Quebec took in 16% of immigrants to Canada, which is below the Canadian average.

One third of babies have at least one foreign-born parent.

Demographic context in Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean

Population older than the Quebec average: median age 46.7 years, 22% over 65 years of age

Low annual population growth rate: 0.6 per thousand

Deaths outnumber births (2018)

Migration deficit with other regions of Quebec (a net loss of 554 people in 2017–18), especially among young adults.

¹ Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan)

² Fédération des cégeps, *Portrait des activités internationales*, 2019

³ Institut de la statistique du Québec, consulted November 2, 2020,
<https://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/population-demographie/bilan2019.pdf>

Vitality of CEGEPs and programs in the regions

Over 14,000 students are enrolled in post-secondary institutions in Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean, of which 1,800 are international students.

Their contribution means:

- Some programs can continue to offer training in areas in demand by employers.
- At the Jonquière CEGEP, the technical programs for mechanical engineering, industrial engineering and electronics technology welcome many international students, including a large number of African students.
- Over 50% of the students in the chemistry, business management and multimedia technical programs come from abroad.

2. CHALLENGES

2.1 Challenges related to attracting international students

- a. Financial investment by schools to participate in international recruitment activities (fairs, missions, partnerships)
- b. Specialized resources to support students in their studies

2.2 Challenges related to the immigration process

- a. Requirements from both levels of government and the Ministry of Education
- b. Long process
- c. Many approvals must be obtained before students can come to Canada to study or do an internship
- d. No direct line for information with IRCC
- e. Interns are considered workers for the purposes of a work permit
- f. Different requirements between our immigration departments and those of our partner countries
- g. Reciprocity difficult to achieve with our institutional partners as regards mobility
- h. Refusal of study permits for students from West African countries

3. COVID-19 HAS MADE THE SITUATION WORSE

- a. Post offices, visa application centres and biometrics collection centres have closed
- b. Processing times have increased
- c. Errors and inconsistencies have increased
- d. Officers lack training, different answers are given in Canadian centres and abroad
- e. Questions remain unanswered
- f. Students have difficulty accessing IRCC's support line

- g. Institutions must provide proof as regards quarantine plans, non-discretionary travel

Conflicting opinions and errors:

1. DAI (International Affairs Directorate of the Fédération des cégeps du Québec) April 28
Applications for study permits without a CAQ letter of approval – Caution

On April 23, 2020, we sent a note to the network explaining that, in the current context and on an exceptional basis, IRCC is not rejecting applications for non-compliance, which means that it is accepting incomplete applications for study permits. Examples of missing documents included the CAQ letter of approval. This information had been validated with IRCC.

Despite this information from IRCC, we were advised that the Canadian visa office in Paris was telling students that the application for a study permit could not be submitted without the CAQ letter of approval.

We informed IRCC officials of this conflicting information and we are waiting for clarification and a final answer on this issue. In the meantime, we encourage you to be very careful in communicating with your students regarding whether or not they can apply for a study permit without a CAQ letter of approval.

2. DAI October 12 (Trois-Rivières CEGEP)

A student from Benin, who deferred his studies from Fall 2020 to Winter 2021 because of COVID-19, has just informed me that his application for a study permit for Winter 2021 had just been refused. One reason given was that he had not submitted a CAQ. However, he says he included his CAQ letter of approval for Fall 2020.

Cancellation of registration

As a result of the government's decision to close the borders, and the extended delays in obtaining approvals, 25% of the international students who were initially admitted to the Jonquière CEGEP have cancelled their enrollment. Other students pushed back their arrival dates for the winter and fall semesters. However, the delays and the most recent closures at biometrics collection centres will make it too tight for those who finally obtained their permits in the last few weeks.

Some programs of study will be more affected by these cancellations than others. For example, the electronics technology program is losing more than half of its first-year cohort.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 On immigration services

1. Improve the training of immigration officers, as well as communication between centres, to reduce errors and contradictory messages sent to students;
2. Increase the number of officers so files can be processed faster (it takes 24 weeks to process a study permit in Senegal);
3. Reinststate a direct telephone line for student recruitment officers; and
4. Provide improved service to students through an accessible line and officers who are trained and available.

On immigration processes and procedures

1. Streamline student acceptance procedures (federal, provincial, departmental);
2. Promote welcoming and attracting talent and students to Quebec;

Quebec's small and medium-sized cities are making an effort to attract French-speaking immigrants. However, marketing a city, promoting its image, and attracting a subset of the population is expensive and takes a great deal of effort. It is important to note that students are migrants interested in Quebec. Their one- to four-year programs will give them time to establish themselves and get a Quebec diploma. It is a constructive investment.

3. Offer student internships without having to do a LMIA; offer a simpler reciprocal system for our students from partner institutions;
4. Give students the option of having their biometrics collected when they arrive in Canada, especially for those who do not have a centre in their region; and
5. Create an information-sharing mechanism

While demand for educational programs from institutions across Canada has increased significantly in West Africa, approval rates have declined. IRCC data suggests that this is due, at least in part, to an increase in cases of fraud and misrepresentation. A mechanism that would allow Designated Learning Institutions (DLIs) to systematically share information about students who have received a letter of acceptance and also allow visa offices to share information on the results of study permit processing not only would help strengthen the integrity of the system but also would reduce processing times and increase approval rates. This is a systemic problem that predates COVID-19, but it has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Earlier this year, IRCC had little or no information on the number of acceptance letters in the system and therefore could not accurately plan its processing capacity.

Make regions and post-secondary institutions more attractive to international students to increase their vitality

1. Develop scholarship projects (Canadian and/or Quebec) to encourage international students to attend CEGEPs and universities in the regions;

Take the example of France, which offers many student scholarships with the aim of revitalizing small universities in medium-sized cities. The Mexprotec scholarship (a French government scholarship) offers Mexican students the chance to study for one year in France at a French university. These students become the best ambassadors for France. Having developed their language skills, they will then wish to invest in, immigrate to or do business with France.

2. Foster collaboration between businesses and educational institutions for student recruitment (through grants or otherwise);

Businesses in the regions are recruiting from abroad as well, just like educational institutions. By recruiting young people and training them in Quebec, we can ensure that their skills are directly related to our labour market.

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