
Submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration: Study on the recruitment and acceptance rates of foreign students

The Voice of Canada's Universities



Introduction

Universities Canada is the voice of Canada's universities at home and abroad. Canada's universities – through teaching, research and community engagement – transform lives, strengthen communities and find solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing our country and the world. Throughout the pandemic, Canada's universities delivered. They are providing educational opportunities for 1.4 million students, advancing research and serving both as stabilizers and catalysts in communities faced by disruption - and the task ahead remains great. Never has the value and impact of research and expertise been more evident.

The important contribution that international students make to our campuses and communities

Canada's need to attract skilled talent pre-dates the pandemic. As our population ages and our labour force shrinks, our future prosperity depends on our ability to welcome immigrants from around the world. Universities are an integral part of Canada's immigration system, welcoming well over 200,000 international students per year. Once in Canada, these students are able to take advantage of government pathways to permanent residency. Our institutions can be key partners in attracting, training, and retaining skilled talent.

At all levels of study, international students bring new perspectives, ideas, and valuable human connections abroad. As students, they contribute \$21.6 billion to the Canadian economy annually. As graduates, many become highly skilled individuals contributing to local Canadian communities or return home with an appreciation for what Canada has to offer as a society and business partner. A recent Statistics Canada survey also showed that international students are a growing source of labour for the Canadian economy that extends well beyond their periods of study. The study shows that about 75% of Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) holders are employed, their median income has increased from 2008 to 2018, and almost 75% of all PGWP holders became permanent residents within 5 years of receiving their permit.

While they are here, international students are a crucial part of our research and innovation ecosystem. Our ability to conduct research and to make new discoveries that strengthen our economy is dependent on a steady flow of international talent. In particular, international graduate students are the “arms and legs” of Canada's research enterprise.

The global competition for talent

In a world economy increasingly powered by ideas, Canada is in an enviable position in the global competition for talent. We are a country of open communities, and we have an accessible, world-class, bilingual higher education system. And we have taken steps, like the international student program, to make coming to Canada attractive to highly skilled individuals. As we gear up for the recovery from COVID-19, our ability to attract the world's top talent will be critical to drive Canada's prosperity.

The global competition for talent remains fierce. For international students, borders are reopening around the world, providing more choice than even just two years ago. Our competitors have recognized the contribution that international students make to their university campuses and communities and are boosting immigration measures and other supports to expand their recruitment efforts. While our international brand remains strong, Canada will have to work even harder to secure the world's brightest minds.

International students and researchers create opportunities for Canadians and it will be critical that our immigration system remains competitive. We look forward to working with this Committee to ensure timely and accurate visa processing and to implement the Budget 2021 commitments to modernize the global case management system to streamline processes and build a more applicant-friendly experience. With proper investments, we can grow and diversify our international student pools, remove barriers to permanent residency and increase access to post-graduate work opportunities—all of which are necessary to seize this moment to grow our skilled talent pool.

Universities stand ready to support IRCC's efforts to improve approval rates

A more urgent challenge that we need to address is the high visa refusal rates in many of our priority markets, and we appreciate this Committee's efforts to examine this issue in greater detail. High refusal rates have a direct impact on our recruitment efforts and on Canada's brand as a welcoming place to study and build a life.

Canada's universities take the time to process all applications before sending out letters of acceptance. This due diligence has generally been reflected in high approval rates for study permit applications. On average, the largest international source countries for university enrolment see an 80% approval rate, with some countries as high as 95%.

However, despite the same due diligence by Canadian universities, some of our most important emerging markets in Africa show significantly lower approval rates for study permits. For example, the 2019 study permit approval rate for undergraduate students from Nigeria was 20%, Morocco was

55% and Senegal was 20%. Several member institutions have also raised concerns regarding the low approval rates for students from Afghanistan, who are often offered full scholarships as part of our humanitarian response to the ongoing crisis. The 2019 study permit approval rate for Afghan undergraduate students was 18%.

The primary reason provided by IRCC for study permit refusals is that applicants often submit improper documentation and cannot demonstrate their intent to return to their home countries after completing their studies. While applicants can express their interest in pursuing post-graduate employment and securing permanent residency or “dual intent,” they must still demonstrate that they could leave Canada at the end of their studies.

We recognize that universities have a role to play in addressing this growing issue. We are ready to work with the federal government to help ensure our prospective students meet the necessary requirements to receive a favourable decision on their study permit. Our institutions are often the primary point-of-contact for students experiencing challenges with the study permit application process and we can help disseminate updated guidance and support to ensure students submit proper documentation and better demonstrate dual intent in their application. We also continue to communicate emerging issues to inform IRCC’s efforts to continuously improve the accuracy and timeliness of study permit processing in key markets.

The impact of high refusal rates on our market diversification efforts

Canada’s universities are key partners in the implementation of the Government of Canada’s International Education Strategy. We continue to diversify our international student population to ensure international student enrollment remains sustainable and our campuses realize the benefits of true global diversity.

Universities Canada is also leading a market recovery and diversification strategy to support member institutions in retaining students from traditional markets and diversifying source markets for international student recruitment through engagement and relationship-building in priority countries.

Addressing high refusal rates in many of these markets is an important first step in our efforts to diversify our international student population. As we work to build Canada’s brand in these emerging markets, it will also be critical that IRCC dedicates adequate visa processing capacity to help support the growing interest from prospective students seeking a Canadian education. To achieve success, we need a Team Canada approach that involves our federal partners, the provinces, and universities to help attract the brightest minds to study in Canada. By working together, we can ensure enrolment remains sustainable and our campuses realize the benefits of true global diversity.

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