

Meeting our Labour Needs by Attracting and Retaining International Students (2023)

Issue

Current legislation restricts the ability to attract international students and creates barriers for those who have been trained in Alberta to obtain permanent residency. Adjustments to provincial and federal immigration programs can improve the retention of domestically trained international students which will help to overcome the gaps in labour and skills availability to meet Alberta's labour needs.

Background

Businesses across Canada are struggling to find skilled employees to meet their labour needs, and it is costing the economy billions.³¹¹ In Q3 of 2022, Alberta alone had a job vacancy rate of 5%, or 103,380 positions.³¹² International students represent a significant and currently underutilized opportunity for meeting the needs of the Albertan economy as they are proficient in at least one Canadian official language, have Canadian credentials, and have in-demand labour skills. They also contribute an estimated \$21 billion to the Canadian economy each year.³¹³ There are currently 24,636 international students studying in Alberta that could join the labour force after graduation.³¹⁴

Attracting and retaining international graduates can be a successful strategy to help face the consequences of aging baby boomers and severe labour force shortages that Alberta is currently facing. The problem is current legislation restricts the ability to attract international students and creates barriers for those who have been trained domestically to obtain permanent residency at each stage of the process.

Study Permits

Applications for study permits from outside of Canada require proof of acceptance at a Designated Learning Institution (DLI) and take over 13 weeks to process. According to the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey, 49.2% of international students experience issues with obtaining a student permit pre- arrival.³¹⁵ Many post-secondary institutions continue to advocate to IRCC regarding the struggles of international students to receive their study permits in time to begin classes.³¹⁶

³¹¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/9224124/canada-labour-shortage-economy-loss/>

³¹² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410032501>

³¹³ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-international-students-deserve-to-be-treated-as-more-than-just-a/>

³¹⁴ <https://erudera.com/statistics/canada/canada-international-student-statistics/>

³¹⁵ <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CBIE-2021-International-Student-Survey-National-Report-FINAL.pdf>

³¹⁶ <https://www.ualberta.ca/international/international-student-services/immigration/immigration-travel-employment-information.html>

While in Canada on a study permit, students often struggle with feelings of isolation as they are experiencing an entirely new culture.³¹⁷ On a study permit, they are required to study full-time, meaning that they are taking three to five courses. If a student breaks the term of their study permit, they are at risk of being deported. Study permits are valid until 90 days after graduation.

Employment During Schooling

While attending a post-secondary institution in Canada, students often work either because their program requires it or to earn money to pay living expenses. In fact, 32.7% rely on off-campus work income, 10.6% on on-campus work income, and 3.4% on work-integrated learning income for financial support during their studies.³¹⁸ 48.5% of international students indicated that they were working and of those, 43% indicated difficulty finding work, lack of experience being the largest barrier.³¹⁹

While in full-time studies, an international student can work an unlimited number of hours on-campus. Until December 2023, this applies off-campus as well. After this period, international students will be limited to 20 hours of work per week as many jurisdictions in Europe do.

To work a coop or work-integrated learning term, international students require a coop or intern work permit. This is temporarily on hold until December 2023. If this permit is not obtained prior to arriving in Canada, the student may not be able to continue in their program and would be at risk of breaking the terms of their study permit.

Employment Following Graduation

After graduating from a Designated Learning Institution (DLI), international students must obtain a work permit if they wish to stay in Canada. The most common option is a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) which 72.6% of international students plan to apply for.³²⁰ A PGWP is valid for 8 months to 3 years depending on the length of program. Other work permits exist as well, and they require a job offer to obtain.

Permanent Residency

60% of international students plan to apply for permanent residence in Canada and 77.3% of students in Alberta intend to stay here after receiving PR.³²¹ There are a few streams through which can become a permanent resident in Alberta. Each of these require job experience and most require a valid job offer:

- Canadian Experience Class requires:
 - A certain language level.
 - At least 1 year of skilled work experience in Canada in the last 3 years before application.
 - There is no education requirement, although accreditation from a Canadian institution gives the applicant more points.

³¹⁷ <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CBIE-2021-International-Student-Survey-National-Report-FINAL.pdf>

³¹⁸ <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CBIE-2021-International-Student-Survey-National-Report-FINAL.pdf>

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ <https://cbie.ca/infographic/>

³²¹ Ibid.

- Federal Skilled Workers Program requires:
 - 1,560 hours of skilled work experience in certain National Occupational Classification (NOC) job groups within the last 10 years. Work must be paid, volunteer work and unpaid internships do not apply.
 - Work experience gained while studying may count towards minimum requirements if the work:
 - Was paid by wages or commissions
 - Was continuous (no gaps in employment), and
 - Meets all the other requirements of the Program
 - Proof that the applicant performed the duties set out in the lead statement of the occupational description in the NOC.
 - Proof of Funds.
- Alberta Advantage Immigration Program requires:
 - A valid work permit.
 - Full-time work in an eligible occupation in Alberta for either:
 - A minimum of 12 months full-time work experience in your current occupation in Alberta within the last 18 months, or
 - A minimum of 24 months of full-time work experience in your current occupation in Canada or abroad within the last 30 months or both – this work experience can be a combination of experience gained in Alberta, in Canada (outside Alberta) or abroad.
 - Post-Graduation Work Permit holders require a minimum of 6 months full-time work experience in your current occupation in Alberta within the last 18 months.
 - Note: Work gained while studying does not qualify unless it was paid, full-time, completed in Alberta, and directly related to the applicant’s current occupation.
 - The appropriate license to do said work.

Barriers exist for international students to join the labour force in Alberta at each stage of the path to permanent residency. Should these be addressed, international students have the potential to help meet the labour needs of Alberta’s businesses.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends;

That the Government of Alberta:

1. Change the employment requirement under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program from six months of full-time work to allow for a one-year offer of employment.
2. Reduce the barriers for graduates applying to the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program.

That the Government of Canada:

1. Expedite processing times for potential international students to receive study visas to mitigate the issue of not receiving them in time for fall semester.
2. Allowing work-integrated learning under a study permit without application for a work permit to allow access to the labour market without requiring that work-integrated learning opportunities be a mandatory program requirement.
3. Expand eligibility requirements of federal work-integrated learning programs to allow international student access so they have increased opportunities to work while studying.
4. Cease limits on the number of hours that an international student can work so they may support themselves through school and be eligible for immigration following their schooling. International students should be subject to the same employment standards as Canadians in each jurisdiction.
5. Change the length of time for which a post-graduation work permit can be valid, from the current status of valid for no longer than three years, to five years regardless of the program of study, so long as obtained from a recognized Canadian institution.

That the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada:

1. Work together with post-secondary institutions to strengthen Canada's global brand as a study destination to attract international students to Alberta's post-secondary system, especially in the fields that particularly suffer from the insufficiency of qualified labour force.
2. Prioritize applications for permanent residency based on in-demand occupations to get much needed roles filled more quickly.
3. When considering applications for permanent residency, consider the experience that an international student gains through entrepreneurship, working off campus, working on campus, co-op and internship programs, and volunteer opportunities.
4. Work with post-secondary institutions and the business community to support programming that helps international students integrate into their new communities and set them up for long-term career success.