

Universities Canada's Submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Canada at a Crossroads: Securing Our Status as a Global Talent Hub



Canada is at a critical juncture. To retain our status as a premier destination for global talent, decisive action is needed. As the federal government moves to limit the number of international students in the coming years, Canada risks losing the highly talented newcomers who have the potential to drive economic growth, address labor shortages, and secure our future prosperity.

Recent trends highlight a troubling decline in interest from the very international students and researchers Canada needs most. The federal government's policy changes have damaged Canada's global reputation as a sought-after destination for post-secondary education.

While the government's goal of managing the pressures on housing and immigration capacity is understandable, the blunt, one-size-fits-all approach of recent policy changes has had wide-reaching and unintended consequences. Inefficiencies in processing study permits, including lengthy wait times and lack of transparency, further discourage prospective students and researchers. These challenges undermine Canada's ability to attract the global talent required to meet economic and demographic challenges.

Among other benefits, international students help strengthen our research and innovation. Universities play a key role in giving students and researchers the skills to solve big problems, such as developing sustainable farming practices to feed a growing global population or advancing artificial intelligence. The work done at Canadian universities not only boosts our economy but also makes a difference globally.

In Manitoba, for example, Dr. Mark Belmonte's research on white mould, a major threat to canola crops, is crucial to safeguarding a Canadian agricultural export that is in demand the world over. In Quebec, Dr. Monia Rekik's team at Laval University is developing AI algorithms that could endow the 300,000 Canadians who live with type 1 diabetes with new freedom to live their lives safely and securely.

Beyond their immediate impact, Canada's university research labs also serve as critical training grounds for the next generation of innovators, renewing the pool of highly skilled workforce critical to well-paying jobs and the increased investment that is essential to Canada's standard and quality of life.

These changes and ongoing uncertainty are damaging institutions in Canada and its reputation abroad. The international education system needs time to assess the long-term impact and adapt to these policies.

The fallout from these policy changes is not confined to international students. Domestic students, university staff, and communities are also feeling the impact. Universities, already operating under tight budgets, are facing significant financial strain due to declining international enrolment, which has traditionally been a key source of revenue. This has forced institutions to make difficult financial adjustments, including layoffs, reduced program offerings, and a diminished student experience.

A few examples of these difficult decisions include:

- The University of Windsor has announced that it will lay off staff and cut academic programs to stem the \$10 million shortfall in international student tuition.
- Thompson Rivers University has cut contract teaching positions and plans to make further budget reductions. A lack of contract teaching positions will reduce the opportunity for graduate students to teach classes, thereby halting their academic skills development.
- The University of Winnipeg has implemented a hiring freeze. This means that professors cannot hire teaching assistants to help with large classes of 200+ students.

Employment at universities extends beyond academic staff to include administrative workers, IT specialists, career counselors, maintenance staff, librarians, program officers, and mental health professionals. These individuals enhance student life by offering mental health support, guiding students through grants and scholarships, and organizing job fairs. They also pave the way for post-graduation success by providing career advice and fostering alumni connections.

Canada faces urgent economic challenges: low productivity and an aging population. Once a productivity leader, Canada now ranks 29th among OECD countries, with growth projected to lag all members from 2030 to 2060. At the same time, an aging population is straining public finances, driving up healthcare costs, and creating labor shortages, as retirements will account for 63% of nearly 8 million job openings by 2031. International students offer a vital solution, contributing \$7.4 billion in tax revenue in 2022 alone and providing a pipeline of young, skilled workers trained in Canada's universities.

The government must get to work repairing Canada's well-earned reputation as a magnet for the world's best and brightest. The global competition for talent is fierce, and Canada can't afford to fall behind. We can't afford to turn away global talent or risk losing out on cutting-edge research and our ability to attract investment.

It's taken decades for Canada to forge its well-deserved reputation as a preferred destination for the best education, training and opportunity.

Let's not squander that with short-sighted "ripped from the headlines" policymaking.

A Path Forward

It is urgent that the Government of Canada communicate the allocation of provincial attestation letters to avoid a repeat in disruption. In addition, Universities Canada proposes three key actions to address the current situation and secure Canada's future:

1. Develop a unified, sustainable immigration strategy.

To restore Canada's global reputation as a top destination for international students, the federal government must develop a unified, sustainable immigration strategy that aligns with economic and social goals. A whole-of-government approach is essential, requiring coordination across federal departments and levels of government to ensure immigration policies support Canada's productivity, address its aging population, and attract global talent.

2. Modernize Canada's immigration system.

Accelerating the Digital Platform Modernization at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) will improve processing times, enhance data-sharing capabilities, and allow institutions to make informed decisions. Reducing delays and inefficiencies will help Canada attract top global talent before other countries capitalize on our shortcomings.

3. Implement the Recognized Institutional Framework (RIF).

RIF offers a targeted solution to streamline study permit processing for institutions meeting high standards of support, housing, and recruitment ethics. By adopting an outcomes-based, data-driven approach, the RIF can enhance accountability and ensure the framework benefits smaller institutions and regions.

