



# Submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on attracting and empowering global talent to strengthen Canada's economy

Submitted by Universities Canada

June 2026

## Summary of recommendations:

Universities Canada recommends that the federal government:

1. Modernize Canada's International Education Strategy into a comprehensive International Higher Education Talent, Research and Innovation Strategy aligned across Global Affairs Canada, IRCC, ESDC and ISED to support Canada's trade, workforce and innovation priorities.
2. Improve the performance and predictability of Canada's mobility and visa systems through a phased, risk-informed approach that supports university students, researchers and highly skilled talent, rebuilds confidence in the Canada brand and maintains program integrity.
3. Support targeted bilateral talent, research and innovation partnerships aligned with Canada's trade and economic priorities, including opportunities that strengthen linguistic duality and access to bilingual talent.
4. Expand and build upon programs that allow for targeted attraction of top talent such as the Global Skills Strategy.

## Introduction

As the national voice of Canadian universities in every region and community, Universities Canada is committed to being a constructive partner in shaping immigration solutions that work for students, communities and Canada's future prosperity. We appreciate the opportunity to provide recommendations to the committee on this important priority: attracting top talent and building up Canada's economy.

International education is already a major economic and strategic asset for Canada. It contributes more than \$39 billion to Canada's GDP, supports over 400,000 jobs, strengthens research and innovation and helps build the highly skilled and adaptable workforce needed to support Canada's long-term economic growth, productivity and competitiveness. These strengths are significant, but right now they are not being fully leveraged as part of a coordinated economic, trade and talent strategy.

Meanwhile, global competition for talent is intensifying, with competitor countries moving aggressively to attract and retain students and skilled graduates through faster processing, clearer pathways and more predictable systems. Canada's reputation as a top destination for talent and investment has long been a competitive advantage, but that advantage cannot be taken for granted. We need a coordinated and predictable approach that strengthens public confidence in our system and supports economic priorities while preserving our position in global talent and research.





## A comprehensive strategy

A new strategy would help Canada communicate to the world that it remains open to high-quality international talent, committed to research collaboration and serious about leveraging international education to advance economic and national priorities.

It should focus on markets aligned with Canada's trade, talent and innovation objectives, while also recognizing the importance of linguistic duality, francophone mobility and access to bilingual talent in supporting workforce needs, regional development and long-term economic growth. This would strengthen competitiveness, support export diversification and improve policy coherence.

The strategy should be led by Global Affairs Canada, in close collaboration with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada. A closer, more intentional cooperation between departments will help rebuild public confidence in the Canada brand at home and abroad. It can support outreach efforts and partnership building while at the same time upholding program integrity, aligning immigration flows with labour market needs and ensure that Canada remains competitive on the global stage.

The strategy should:

- rebuild Canada's global brand as a high-quality, trusted and welcoming destination for international students, researchers and innovators;
- strengthen talent attraction and retention by aligning international education with labour-market needs, immigration pathways and research priorities;
- expand two-way mobility so more Canadian students and researchers gain international experience;
- deepen research and innovation partnerships with priority countries and regions.
- improve policy coordination and predictability across trade, immigration, research and education; and
- support public confidence by preserving the integrity and quality of Canada's international education system.

Canada has the institutions, talent and global relationships needed to compete. What it needs now is a clear strategy that brings these assets together.

## A competitive system

Talent attraction and visa processing are inseparable: beyond international students, Canada's ability to attract global talent depends not only on the policies it announces, but on whether the immigration system can deliver timely, predictable and credible decisions. This is a core determinant of Canada's competitiveness across sectors relative to peer countries such as the U.K. and Australia.

Inconsistent processing timelines, repeated changes in eligibility requirements and limited transparency are creating uncertainty across the sector and affecting recruitment, enrolment and workforce planning. These challenges are also shaping how students, researchers, institutions and





international partners perceive Canada as a trusted and competitive destination for study, research and talent. Restoring Canada's competitiveness and strengthening its global brand should be an immediate priority.

This could begin with:

- reviewing and modernizing processing standards to better reflect globally competitive benchmarks;
- addressing unexplained variations in approval rates and inconsistent decision-making outcomes;
- improving transparency, communications and predictability throughout the study permit/ application process to strengthen confidence in Canada's global brand and competitiveness;
- eliminating ad hoc policy changes through greater long-term policy stability and implementation planning; and
- strengthening pathways aligned with workforce shortages, research priorities and strategic economic sectors.

System performance is central to Canada's ability to compete for global talent, research partnerships and investment. Without first making the necessary system improvements, Canada will not be able to compete for the top global talent it is looking to attract.

## Targeted program design

Universities Canada is supportive of programs that prioritize top talent such as the Global Skills Strategy which, among other groups, can facilitate the hiring of the researchers and academic talent Canada needs.

To fully realize the benefits of these programs for Canadians, Canada must move beyond attraction to retention, ensuring that high-skilled global talent who choose Canada can build long-term careers, contribute to innovation, strengthen productivity and put down roots in communities across the country. To achieve this, modifications can be made to existing programs such as Express Entry to create clearer and more predictable pathways for professors, researchers, academic physicians, postdoctoral fellows and other highly specialized talent. This could include targeted and consistent category-based selection, improved recognition of academic job offers and greater attention to NOC codes related to university professors and lecturers, post-secondary teaching and research assistants, STEM professors and academic physicians.





## Conclusion

International education is key to attracting, developing and retaining top talent in Canada. It is not only a pathway for students to study in Canada, it also supports trade diversification, research collaboration, talent attraction, innovation and long-term relationships with priority partners.

At a time of shifting global alliances, rising economic uncertainty and intensifying competition for talent, these strengths matter more than ever. Countries that can attract, develop and retain global talent will be better positioned to grow their economies, advance research and innovation, build resilient supply chains and respond to shared challenges in areas such as climate change, artificial intelligence, health, energy and security.

In order to achieve its goals of attracting top talent, Universities Canada recommends that the government:

- expand Canada's International Education Strategy into a comprehensive International Higher Education Talent, Research and Innovation Strategy aligned across Global Affairs Canada, IRCC, ESDC and ISED to support Canada's trade, workforce and innovation priorities;
- improve the performance and predictability of Canada's mobility and visa systems through a phased, risk-informed approach that supports university students, researchers and highly skilled talent, rebuilds confidence in the Canada brand and maintains program integrity;
- support targeted bilateral talent, research and innovation partnerships aligned with Canada's trade and economic priorities, including opportunities that strengthen linguistic duality and access to bilingual talent; and
- expand and build programs that allow for targeted attraction of top talent such as the Global Skills Strategy.



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Universities Canada represents 97 universities across the country. We are a membership organization that provides universities with a unified voice in higher education, research and innovation. Our member universities are located in communities across Canada, serving over 1.4 million students.

