

## Meeting Canada's Labour Needs by Attracting and Retaining International Students

In the report titled "The Top 10 Barriers to Competitiveness", the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has identified the Canada's skills crisis as the *major socio-economic challenge confronting this country*<sup>1</sup>. The Government of Alberta estimates that Alberta alone will experience a shortfall of 114,000 mostly skilled workers by 2019.<sup>2</sup> Many initiatives, as engaging the Aboriginal people, youth and older people to the labour market, are underway to help mitigate the challenges associated with the massive shortage. Nonetheless, the business community fears that what is currently being implemented is not sufficient and does not provide the access to highly educated and specialized workforce.

Despite government's concerted efforts placed on solving labour challenges with economic immigrants and the underemployed sectors (i.e. persons with disabilities and Aboriginal populations), Canadian employers continue to be faced with a stressful, looming shortage, which in the long term will have serious negative implications on Canada's growth and prosperity.

In October 2011, the federal government launched an Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy that will reinforce Canada as a country of choice to study and conduct world-class research. In 2012, Canada welcomed over 100,000 international students and over the last three years more than 23,000 international students transitioned to permanent residency status. The federal government estimates that international students currently contribute more than \$8 million to the economy and support 86,000 jobs across Canada.

International students are increasingly seen as an excellent talent pool and there is a strong push to keep international students in Canada after they finish their studies through the post-graduation work permit and permanent immigration through the Canadian Experience Class. The federal government also recently announced a new International Education Strategy which proposes to double the number of foreign students studying in Canada, to 450,000 by 2022.

Bill C-24, "Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act," was introduced in the House of Commons on February 6, 2014 and passed into law on June 19, 2014. It is the first comprehensive reform to the Citizenship Act since 1977. The changes will require permanent residents to wait longer to apply for citizenship, introduces tougher language laws, and increases the power of the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. It also aims to reduce the current backlog of applications by streamlining the application process.

Despite the new International Education Strategy and *Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act*, Canadian employers believe their skills and labour needs should also be incorporated into the effort to attract and retain international students. In spite of the urgent need for skilled workers in many parts of Canada, a number of regulatory and legislative barriers still exist which prevent and/or delay the successful attraction and retention of skilled labour into the country and remain unaddressed by the new act. While the intention of the bill to make sure applicants are supporting and integrating within Canadian society is laudable, removing the ability to count time spent studying and working in Canada prior to receiving permanent resident status disadvantages and delays citizenship to the very individuals we most want to preserve for Canada's workforce.

At present, attracting a potential international student to consider Canada a place to study and retaining that student in the country post-graduation, as a permanent resident, has four main stages:

- Stage 1: Student to start the study permit application processes and get accepted into Canadian institution
- Stage 2: Student to possibly find work opportunities during their studies; ie. working on campus, working off campus, co-op & internships
- Stage 3: Post-graduation work permits procedure; begin work with a Canadian employer
- Stage 4: Student, now employee, applies for permanent Residency in the frame of Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program (International Graduate Category) or Canadian Experience Class procedures.

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Retrieved on May 16, 2012 from: <http://chambertop10.ca/skills-crisis/>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Alberta. Employment and Immigration. Alberta's Occupational Demand and Supply Outlook, 2011-2012. Retrieved in August 2011 from: <http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/occupational-demand-and-supply-outlook.pdf>

At present, the processing times for study permit applications examined by the visa officers outside Canada can take up to 15-18 weeks.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, the applications for a study permit submitted online inside Canada require only two weeks.

Once the international student is accepted and enrolled in an educational program at the public or private post-secondary institution recognized by the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), there are three options for him to gain Canadian working experience. These are working on campus, working off campus and co-op & internship programs. Nonetheless, none of these experiences currently count when applying for the Permanent Residency.

It is possible for a student to apply for the post-graduation work permit (within 90 days of receiving written confirmation stating that the student has met the requirements for completing the academic program).<sup>4</sup> One of the impediments to benefit from young, well-educated international workforce is the duration of the post-graduation work permit they are given by the CIC. According to the present regulations, an international student has to complete an educational program that would last at least 8 months. Then, the work permit is awarded for the exact same number of months that the duration of one's educational course. If the student was enrolled in a two year program or longer, than the work permit is awarded for 3 years. The international graduates that completed 8-11 month educational program are particularly harmed by this regulation as they are not legally allowed to gain a full one year professional experience in their skilled discipline.

It is generally accepted for an employer to get full economic benefit from a hire, the employee needs to be employed with the organization about four to five years. Having an international graduate of an 8 month program only being able to work for 8 months, presents a disincentive for employers to hire international students. This creates a large incentive for these educated, skilled and already assimilated potential employees, to leave our country, making Canada never actually see the full long term economic value from these students.

Once the international graduate obtains the post-graduation work permit and starts working for a Canadian employer, there are two possibilities to apply for Permanent Residency, both which are at present fairly cumbersome.

To become a permanent resident, the international graduate can either apply on the provincial level, in the frame of the Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program (AINP) for International Graduates, or on the federal level through Canadian Experience Class (CEC) category. In both cases, it takes approximately 15 months for the CIC to provide the applicant with a response if he has been given the Permanent Residency status and can fully contribute to the Alberta and Canadian economy.

Attracting and increasing international student numbers without a long-term strategy on how to keep them in Canada will result in not only damage to our international reputation as a world-class destination for education, but will deter students from seeing Canada as a destination of choice for permanent residency.

The new Citizenship Act should consider and give recognition to students who have graduated from Canadian post-secondary institutions, who stayed on work permits after graduation and made the decision to immigrate permanently by applying for their permanent resident status. It is important to recognize that these individuals are integrating into and contributing to Canada, with no interventions from the government, and are the ideal new Canadians we want to attract and retain.

## **Recommendations**

That the federal government:

1. Work with post-secondary institutions to continue to attract international students to Canada's post-secondary system, especially in the fields that particularly suffer from the insufficiency of qualified labour force.

<sup>3</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Retrieved on May 15, 2012 from: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/times/temp/students.asp>

<sup>4</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Retrieved on May 15, 2012 from: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/study/work-postgrad-who.asp>

2. 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.
3. Improve its student visa procedure to make it quicker and easier for potential international students to receive study and work visas.
4. When considering applications for permanent residency, take into account the working experience that an international student gains through working off campus, working on campus and co-op & internship programs.
5. Speed up processing times for the overseas study permit application as well as for the permanent residency applications from all international students who graduated from recognized Canadian institutions, and are currently employed in Canada.