

Quick action on international students could boost Canada's economic competitiveness

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If we don't move quickly, Canada risks seeing many of these young, bright minds take their talents elsewhere.

Ambitious, skilled and often multilingual, international students are a great source of talent. They fill jobs and create new ones through innovation and entrepreneurship — Silicon Valley is a prominent, international example. Research by the Conference Board of Canada shows [immigrants help expand](#) and [diversify](#) Canada's global trade. International students could do the same, helping Canada trade in markets such as Asia, where economic growth is greater than in the U.S. and EU — Canada's largest trading partners.

However, ensuring Canada fully benefits from the skills, global connections and experience of its international students requires quick action on the following issues.

Attraction

Canada's international student population — 356,600 — has doubled over the past decade. However, Canada's study visa processing times have increased and [lag behind competitor nations](#) (PDF). In a recent global survey, recruitment agents viewed Canada as one of the most attractive international student destinations, yet also cited it as the country with the [most study visa difficulties](#). This could be harming Canada's efforts to attract more international students.

Canada is taking action to ensure study visas are processed in a timely manner. More visa application centres have opened abroad and Canada is implementing [modernization initiatives](#) (PDF) such as electronic processing of visas. Canada will need to continue such efforts to avoid losing out on prospective international students who may choose to study elsewhere.

Settlement and integration

Conference Board research reveals that international students are often unable to receive adequate settlement services, such as language training. Part of the reason is that financially constrained governments cannot provide settlements services to all international students who require them. This ties into another challenge that international students frequently experience: difficulties establishing social networks.

One potential solution is to earmark more government settlement funds for highly skilled international students, such as medical students, who would offer tremendous long-term benefits to Canada if they were to attain permanent residence (PR). Taking a targeted approach would help control costs and improve Canada's efforts to settle, integrate, and retain international students who possess critical skills.

One collaborative, innovative solution shows how stakeholders can help international students settle into communities across Canada. Simple, yet effective, the [Connector Program](#) links immigrants and international students with local business and community leaders who help newcomers expand their social and professional networks, find work, and improve their language skills — all of which are crucial to successful settlement. As the international student population continues to rise, the scale of such initiatives will need to expand appreciably to help international students reach their full potential in Canada.

Retention

A [2015 survey found](#) that 51 percent of Canada's international students intend to apply for PR upon completion of their studies. However, international students typically find it difficult to attain PR. In 2015, the median [Express Entry](#) score for an international student was 408 points — short of the 450 points needed to apply for PR.

Based on the evidence, it makes economic sense for Canada to provide PR to more international students who are young, well educated, and ambitious. Taking concerted policy action, for example by giving international students 50 additional Express Entry points for being a graduate of a Canadian post-secondary institution, would help ensure more international students attain PR.

Time is of the essence

In light of Canada's pressing demographic challenges and growing international student population — many of whom want to make a life in Canada — time is of the essence. Without quick action, Canada risks seeing many of these young, bright minds take their talents elsewhere — which would be a great lost opportunity. Acting now will help ensure that today's international students become the skilled workers, innovators, entrepreneurs and exporters of Canada's 21st-century economy.

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