



FROM PERMITS TO PERMANENCY:

Supporting the International Student in Status Transition

J U L Y 2 0 1 6

As Canada's national, membership-based organization for international education, the mandate of the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) includes fostering spaces for like-minded professionals [[Professional Learning Communities \(PLCs\)](#)] to connect and share best practices about their work in international education. One such active pan-Canadian group is the Student Services PLC, which communicates year-round through the CBIE-managed student services listserv 'SACE.'

In consultation with community members, the CBIE research team sought to better understand and illuminate the often complex status transitions which many international students navigate prior to, during and following their studies. This investigation was undertaken to identify problematic trends in communication and administrative processes among stakeholders, and to produce recommendations on system improvements which could ultimately increase the attractiveness of Canada as a study destination for international students. With

a rich dataset in-hand from those providing direct advisory services to international students, CBIE also conducted an analysis of SACE listserv content spanning July 2014 to September 2015.

As of September 2015 the listserv had 845 subscribers across Canada. During this period 147 inquiries from representatives at 58 education institutions were posted to the listserv pertaining to student status transitions with regard to study and work permits.¹

MUTUAL INTERESTS: CANADA AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

Canada is known internationally for its favourable policies towards international students, helping establish it as a global education hub. Through policy frameworks and formative national efforts such as the [International Education Strategy \(IES\)](#) the Government of Canada positively communicates the social and economic benefits of international students in Canadian classrooms and as possible future citizens.

Accordingly, a growing number of international students have demonstrated a keen and sustained interest to pursue studies in Canada and pathways to permanent residency. CBIE's 2015 International Student Survey (ISS) indicated that over 50% of international students

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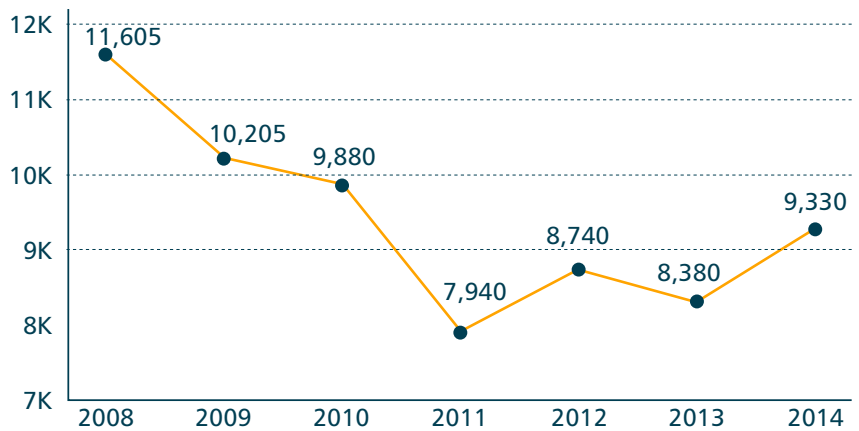
intend to apply for permanent status.

As shown in figure 1, the number of international students who transition directly to permanent resident status following their studies in Canada remains fairly small however, with 9,330 such cases in 2014. Almost three-quarters (74%) of these international students transitioned directly to permanent resident status under the Economic category (selected for their skills and ability to contribute to Canada’s economy). The remaining 26% transitioned to permanent residency under Non-Economic categories which include Family Class, Humanitarian and Compassionate/Public Policy, Permit Holders Class and Protected Persons.

There are a number of reasons, in particular eligibility criteria, that few international students pursue and obtain permanent resident status immediately following their studies. A far more common pathway for international students is the (often nonlinear) student > temporary status > permanent status model which many students pursue as they negotiate various roles over time.

“ I have a student who applied to extend his student permit. To this date, they still have not even started the application. The student and I have called numerous times to CIC but they said there is nothing they can do, and that it is still being processed.”

Figure 1: Number of international students who transitioned to permanent residency (2008–2014)



Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, formerly Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Accordingly, in a [release from Statistics Canada](#), it was found that considerable cohorts (20–27%) of international students from the 1990s and 2000s became permanent residents of Canada within ten years of initiating their study permits. The cumulative transition rate over ten years (the share of international students who become permanent residents a number of years after obtaining their first study permit) was as high as 49% in the early 2000s for international students who pursued graduate studies.

GETTING TO AND STAYING IN CANADA: STUDY PERMIT PROCESSING

Prior to studying in Canada prospective international students must obtain an offer of admission from a Canadian institution and apply for a study permit from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), formerly Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

Obtaining a study permit, even with an offer of admission, can be quite complex for some international students. In the ISS 9% of respondents indicated that acquiring their Canadian study permit was a significant hurdle.²

Study permit challenges usually fall into two main categories: lengthy processing times and low approval

² This figure was generated from a sample of students who were successful in obtaining their study permit.

“ I want to inform you that my study visa application was rejected... I am therefore requesting a refund of my tuition and health insurance fees so that I can use it [sic] to study elsewhere.”

rates. Both challenges inconvenience and cause stress for students and institutions alike, and could arise prior to a student’s first term, or at the point of permit renewal during their program.

However, the average processing time of off-shore study permits has declined slightly since 2011 from an average of 40 days to 35 in 2014 (see Figure 2).

With regard to study permit approval, the overall rate has remained stable in recent years, with 72% of all applications being approved in 2014 (compared with 74% in 2011).

Study permit applications may be refused by IRCC for a variety of reasons, including a prospective students’ failure to provide proof of identity or financial sufficiency during the first year of studies or failure to satisfy that the student will leave Canada by the end of the period authorized for her or his stay.

LOCATION MATTERS

In the ISS the proportion of students having difficulties

Figure 2: Average study permit processing time in days (2011–2014)



Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

Figure 3: Priority Education Markets of Canada’s International Education Strategy by Study Permit Approval Rate (%) and Processing Times (days) (2014)

| COUNTRY | APPROVAL RATE 2014 (%) | PROCESSING TIME 2014 (DAYS) |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Global Average | 72 | 39 |
| Algeria | 34 | —* |
| Bahrain | 88 | —* |
| Brazil | 89 | 35 |
| China | 87 | —* |
| —Beijing | —* | 43 |
| —Hong Kong | —* | 31 |
| —Shanghai | —* | 43 |
| Egypt | 57 | 44 |
| India | 66 | —* |
| —New Delhi | —* | 21 |
| —Chandigarh | —* | 20 |
| Iraq | 19 | —* |
| Israel | 65 | 32 |
| Jordan | 46 | 30 |
| Kuwait | 92 | —* |
| Lebanon | 53 | 46 |
| Libya | 39 | —* |
| Mexico | 88 | 30 |
| Morocco | 50 | 33 |
| Oman | 84 | —* |
| Qatar | 50 | —* |
| Saudi Arabia | 85 | 25 |
| Tunisia | 65 | 87 |
| Turkey | 78 | —* |
| United Arab Emirates | 82 | 50 |
| Vietnam | 55 | 61 |

Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

* Data unavailable.

obtaining a valid first-time study permit from overseas was marked by regional variances, with just 6% of Europeans finding it a challenge to obtain a study permit compared to 12% of South Asian students.

When comparing study permit approval rates and processing times to the listing of priority markets identified by the Government of Canada in its 2014 International Education Strategy (IES), the potential impact on international student recruitment is disconcerting. As shown in figure 3, 12 of the 21 priority countries in the IES fall below the average study permit approval rate of all countries. In the figure those numbers shaded in red reflect administrative outcomes which are poorer than average for all points of service overseas.

Furthermore, four priority markets for attracting international students as identified in the IES are the same markets in which students face both low approval rates and high processing times: Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia and Vietnam. Students may be deterred by such challenges to obtain their permit to study in Canada, an outcome which would be in direct conflict with the strategy developed and championed by the same body overseeing these administrative processes.

In keeping with this concern, in the ISS those international students from priority education markets identified in the IES who did arrive to study in Canada were more likely (12%) than all students (9%) to report that obtaining a study permit posed a significant hurdle.

Lengthy permit processing has also affected students in Canada renewing study permits. Finding few options to obtain more information or recourse is a source of stress and frustration for both student adviser and student alike.

Overall, complex permit processes may limit the effectiveness of the IES and hinder recruitment efforts at schools and institutions across Canada as institutions provide offers of admission to students who ultimately cannot study in Canada due to timing and unapproved permits.

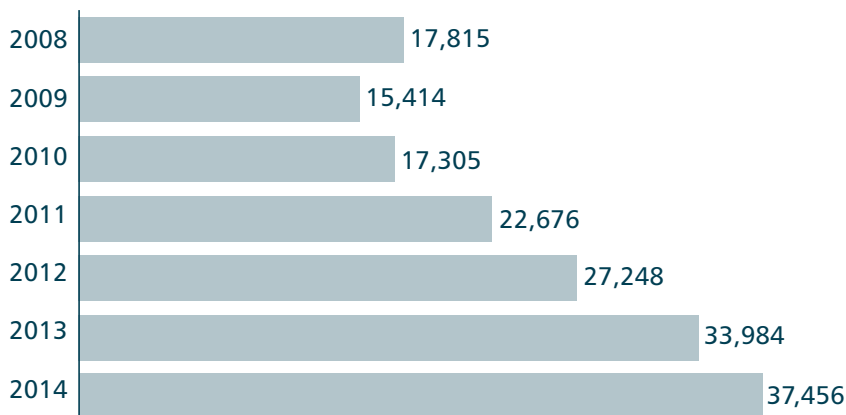
POST-GRADUATION WORK PERMIT

The Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) is a highly popular temporary status for international students who have graduated from a participating Canadian post-secondary institution, allowing them to gain valuable Canadian work experience following the completion of their studies.

As can be seen in figure 4, the number of PGWPs issued to international students has grown steadily since 2010, increasing by approximately 110% between 2008 and 2014.

One of the most common challenges faced by students during this period, as evidenced in the analysis of SACE postings, is that of timing in relation to when the program of studies ends and the 90-day window for

Figure 4: Number of post-graduation work permits and extensions issued (2008–2014)



Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

“ We also have employers who are frustrated with the system contacting us after contacting Service Canada and being told there is nothing they can do about expired SINs (Social Insurance Numbers) without a new work permit. It is difficult enough for these students to get jobs; it also inconveniences employers who may not want to continue to hire international students without proper documents.”

“ [The student] has called CIC three times and received three different responses regarding the validity of her study permit during the time of her proposed [maternity] leave.”

“ I have several students who have asked me if they are allowed to work in the summer between the semester they graduate from a program and the semester they start another program of study... I don't see any clear instructions regarding the transition between two programs of study.”

“ Trying to be upbeat and positive, but when I see it is taking 62 days to process a PGWP it all goes out the window... Many of the students have started or are soon starting their work terms, but cannot as they do not have the proper work permits.”

new graduates to transition into PGWP-holder.

Those working directly with international students cited miscommunication and lack of clarity of government bodies responsible for administering the program, identifying myriad exceptional cases during this period when many students are navigating and

transitioning between several roles such as parent, bridging from undergraduate to graduate student, becoming an employee or intern and fulfilling dissertation requirements.

SACE postings indicated that responses from administrators within the department itself were slow and/or incongruent. Several suggested that the PGWP remains unclear for

stakeholders at best and inflexible at worst.

Other postings alluded to lengthy processing times for the PGWP, which is often applied for and must be activated within a brief window of time.

Two postings underscored the impact that this lack of timeliness and clarity has for employer buy-in to the program and the perceived risk by employers who are responsible for ensuring the legality of their hires.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rapid policy change, communication challenges and incongruity across administrative jurisdictions all pose risks to Canada's ability to attract and retain international students, and may magnify the challenges that students themselves are facing during periods of status transition within their own lives. Without clear avenues to address transitional status complexities, the positive reputation of Canada as a global education hub is at risk, hindering the competitiveness of Canada's international education sector, and the long-term nation-building and economic priorities of Canada.

- Policy and administrative bodies across governments should better coordinate, communicate and assess the implications of policy change before implementation, and be open

“ **Allowing students to work during the 90-day transition period (between their studies and activation of the post-graduation work permit) makes sense for continuity and to facilitate their transition to the workforce.**”

“ **[Working between graduation and activation of PGWP]... We have many, many students in that situation...and we don't know what to answer.**”

“ **I have several students who have asked me if they are allowed to work in the summer between the semester they graduate from a program and the semester they start another program of study... I don't see any clear instructions regarding the transition between two programs of study.**”

to making adjustments when incongruences and potential problems are raised by those providing direct services to international students.

- Regulated International Student Immigration Advisers (RISIAs)

and Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants (RCICs) at institutions are key allies to both students and policy analysts and administrators through complex status transition periods. Access and circulation

of seamless communication between these professionals and policy administrators would enhance the effectiveness of the overall system and improve outcomes for all stakeholders.

- Greater attention should be paid to ensuring consistent, rapid study permit processing. Lengthy study permit processing times inconvenience and cause stress for students, and can weaken our ability to compete internationally for globally mobile students.

CBIE and its Immigration Advisory Committee will continue to work with IRCC, alongside its membership, to inform policy relating to international students so that Canada's reputation as a welcoming country is strengthened, and to urge corrective action where it is needed.