



Canadian Bureau for
International Education

National Dialogue on International Students

*Charting a Path Forward for a Sustainable and
Responsible International Education Sector*



May 22 - 23, 2024

Context

Canada's international education sector is at a crossroads. Canada's success in growing its international education sector has brought immeasurable benefits- not just for international students who study at our high-quality institutions, but for domestic students and the institutions and the communities that receive them. The terms of the bargain have always been clear.

International students, in exchange for their tuition, receive a high-quality international education experience in a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment. While here, they enrich the quality of life on campus and in their host communities. After completing their study programs, they emerge job-ready with first-rate qualifications that are globally recognized.

Host institutions provide incoming students with appropriate, culturally sensitive wraparound supports that allow for a successful, high-quality education experience (i.e. orientation, access to housing, health, mental health, job search and other services). They also facilitate and support mutually beneficial academic and research exchanges.

Communities and businesses that host or rely on international students to address demographic imperatives or bridge labour market gaps, provide them with opportunities for personal and professional growth, and ensure access to necessary health, social and community services.

Governments welcome and sometimes directly support incoming international students to achieve a variety of public policy objectives - to enhance the quality and sustainability of institutions, foster people-to-people connections that build global understanding and solidarity, meet United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, advance foreign policy and trade interests; strengthen competitiveness by attracting and retaining the best global talent; and, to counter population decline.

Done properly, this virtuous circle is a win-win for everyone.

However, with the sector's unprecedented growth, pressure points have been building in select regions, institutions, programs, and communities. The number of international students opting for Canada has increased sharply. And against a backdrop of economic uncertainty, inflation and insufficient access to health care and affordable housing, consensus for how to address these pressure points is proving elusive.

Moreover, there are growing instances of international students reporting negative study experiences while in Canada. These include, among others, shortages of adequate, affordable housing, mental health issues, lack of diversity in classrooms, oversaturation of certain programs and destination cities, financial and work challenges, racism/intolerance and lack of integration into Canadian communities, etc.

These trends culminated in January 2024 with IRCC's announcement of a temporary intake cap on new international study permit applications. This was in addition to other recent new requirements that prospective students prove increased financial capacity to afford their studies in a context of more limited options for working part-time, off-campus.

Implemented unilaterally with limited notice, these measures were a jolt to Canada's international education sector.

These policy instruments- admittedly among the few available to the federal government to calibrate the rate of international student enrolment- have had deleterious consequences.

For some institutions, these abrupt changes pose an existential threat. They also risk eroding Canada's hard-won global brand as a destination of choice for international education and our ability to attract the best and brightest international students that our businesses require. Furthermore, the abrupt changes have left many international students in limbo, who had been encouraged via the EduCanada brand to study in Canada despite following all the rules. Given the uncertainty and confusion, these students may choose other study destinations.

Provinces and institutions - especially those with the highest levels of international student enrolment - are working hard to adapt to these new measures. With the implementation of this cap, the number of allocated study permits is now significantly lower than the supply of international students who (prior to the cap at least) were interested in studying in Canada. Jurisdictions are struggling to make difficult decisions on how to allocate them between universities, technical colleges and degree programs, and how to remove bad actors from the equation altogether.



As Canada embarks on a new chapter in international education, we have an opportunity to reflect and strategize – to get it right – and design an ethical and sustainable IE framework for Canada. A more strategic, agile, inclusive, and better-informed approach to international education planning and priority-setting is required and must involve a wider range of actors.

As a sector, we must ensure that we are living up to the commitments and values we promote to international students under the EduCanada brand.

To provide international students with a positive study experience in Canada, we need to support them from when they apply to study with a Canadian institution to post-graduation and transition to work.

Doing so will ensure the success of individual international students and enable Canada to benefit from their training and skills, securing our long-term position as a top destination for international education.

For Discussion

At a time when solidarity and consensus for how to move forward is critical, public squabbling between sectors and institutions on how to balance these alternatives is making headlines and has the potential to further erode the EduCanada brand. Instead, the collective focus of international education practitioners, policymakers, institutions and stakeholders should be on reimagining IE in Canada.

There are big questions and wicked problems:

- How do we revitalize the IE sector to ensure it clearly and unambiguously contributes to specific public policy objectives?
 - If the rationale for the temporary cap on international enrolment is to allow time to “realign policies and programs to maintain a welcoming and supportive environment for international students”, what precisely does “welcoming and supportive” mean in policy and programmatic terms? And who is accountable for setting that threshold and assessing if it is being met?
 - What does this mean for individual, institutional, and jurisdictional roles and accountabilities in delivering and maintaining quality IE?
 - How do we set realistic and realizable priorities within and across sectors without timely, consistent, comparable, trustworthy and complete data on IE progress and outcomes? Too much is at stake to continue to allow IE decision-makers to make policy and program decisions in a vacuum. Indeed, the current crisis in the sector is arguably the result of a failure of the policy-making process in the absence of a fulsome data picture. Why was it suddenly a surprise to learn that investment in core capacity for accommodating the needs of international students was not keeping up with enrolment growth? Where were the forecasts for planners to make the right investments?
 - Most importantly, how do we ensure international students get the quality IE experience they paid for, and host institutions, communities, and employers derive the myriad benefits smart IE programming can deliver?
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A National Dialogue



This national event will focus on charting a path forward for the Canadian international education sector and its support to international students. Discussions will focus on what we have done right, where and when things started to go wrong, and how, as a country, we can chart a sustainable path forward.

To that end, we will convene a range of both traditional and non-traditional actors in this sphere to delve into the complex issues faced by some international students and explore how best to support them in areas such as labour market and community integration, housing and mental health.

Following the event, a summary report of the key recommendations that emerge from the discussions will be produced and shared with relevant federal and provincial governments and other key stakeholders.

This report will endeavour to provide recommendations about necessary leadership, structural, policy and programming changes, the development of new strategic partnerships and coalitions, mechanisms for sharing and scaling up best practices, along with additional research, data and knowledge mobilization required to support the sector's continued efforts to support the success of international students and uphold the integrity of the EduCanada brand.