

Meeting Alberta's Labour Needs by Attracting and Retaining International Students

Issue

Current immigration legislation and the supporting models to facilitate economic migration create barriers to the attraction and retention of the highly educated and specialized workforce available to meet Alberta's and Canada's labour needs through international education.

Background

By 2025, Alberta is forecast to experience a labour shortage of nearly 49,000 workers.¹ International students represent a significant and currently underutilized opportunity for meeting the needs of the Alberta and Canadian economy and supporting an economic driver for Alberta and Canada in the long term.

Many initiatives to engage underrepresented communities in the labour market are underway to help mitigate the challenges associated with the massive shortage. Even with high levels of engagement the new participants would not be sufficient to fill the needs of the labour market nor would it provide access to the highly educated or specialized workforce that international students represent.

International education in Canada is estimated to produce approximately \$11.4 billion to the economy annually, which support 122,700 jobs across the country.² Alberta's well-regulated public and private post-secondary institutions can thrive in the international education market. A 2014 report published by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE), *Canada's International Education Strategy, Time for a fresh curriculum* states that:

"Canada has fallen behind Australia and other advanced economies in seizing the opportunities presented by the burgeoning business of cross-border education. These opportunities go well beyond the number of students a country attracts or the money they spend. International education is fast becoming a valuable tool in trade, development aid, and diplomacy....Canadian institutions and policymakers all too often view international education through the narrow lens of boosting student numbers and revenues".

The Government of Alberta can exercise options available within the Provincial Nominee Program and overcome the systemic gaps in labour and skills availability by involving employers more in the process to attract and retain foreign students. Foreign students can help meet Alberta's economic needs and by

¹ Alberta Labour, *Alberta's Occupational Demand and Supply Outlook, 2015-2025*, Pg. 4

² Global Affairs Canada, *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada – 2016 Update*

adjusting the international student offer of employment restrictions imposed by the Alberta Provincial Nominee Program.

The Province of Manitoba, for example, only requires a six month offer of employment from an employer to an international student who graduated from a post-secondary institution and seeks permanent Canadian residency. Under Alberta's Provincial Nominee Program, employer offers must be at minimum one year to similarly qualify graduates for permanent residency.

With a coherent provincial strategy that includes advocacy to the federal government and implementing changes within provincial jurisdiction, the Government of Alberta can offset federal policy barriers to attracting and retaining international talent and position international education as a key long-term economic driver for Alberta.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta:

1. Expand the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program to allow foreign graduates from Canadian Private Post-Secondary Institutions to immediately obtain a Canadian Work Permit upon completion of their degree, diploma or certificate program;
2. Improve the student visa procedure to make it quicker and easier for potential international students to receive study and work visas;
3. 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.
4. 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 public or private Canadian institution;
5. When considering applications for permanent residency, take into account the work experience that an international student gains through working off campus, working on campus and co-op and internship programs; and
6. Reduce the employer offer of employment requirement under the Alberta Provincial Nominee Program from one year to six months to qualify foreign graduates from recognized institutions for permanent residency.