



Academic and Socioeconomic Experiences of International Students in Atlantic Canada

Atlantic Research Group on Economics of
Immigration, Aging and Diversity

Disclaimer: This report is funded by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) under the Atlantic Policy Research Initiative, which provides a vehicle for the analysis of key socioeconomic policy issues in Atlantic Canada. The views expressed in this study do not reflect the views of ACOA or of the Government of Canada. The author is responsible for the accuracy, reliability and currency of the information.

Dr. Ather Akbari; Professor of Economics - Sobey School of Business; Chair- Atlantic Research Group on Economics of Immigration, Aging and Diversity; Saint Mary's University

MAIN FINDINGS

- About 40 percent of international students waited more than 3 months for their Canadian visa applications to be processed. Out of the six top source countries, those from Nigeria waited longest followed by those from Cameroon and China. While the process was faster for those from Bangladesh, India and Philippines, more than 35 percent of them also waited for more than 3 months. Overall, a quarter population had to delay their studies by more than a month due to visa delays.
- International students mostly learned about an academic institution in Atlantic Canada through their personal contacts (family and friends). The prominence of other sources of information, such as social media and third-party recruitment agencies varied among countries.
- Cost played an important role in choice of an institution. However, students also cited other factors such as academic reputation, value of qualification from Canada, flexibility and duration of programs and the reputation of qualifications from the institution they attended.
- Less than a quarter were satisfied with the pre-arrival information they had received.
- College students are more likely to have accessed campus services than university students. The most popular campus settlement services were academic and employment counselling. Mental health support was used by only less than a quarter, even though its use rose by almost 8% after the Covid-19 outbreak. About 55% were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the academic counselling they received while this was true for less than 45% in case of other services. Only 36% expressed satisfaction with mental health support they had received.
- More than 70% were satisfied with the various features of their institutions such as graduates' employment rates, teaching quality, use of up-to-date technology, etc. However, concerns exist in the areas of personal finances, finding accommodation, access to mental health support and social isolation on and off campus.
- Most reported good levels of academic achievement. However, there can be a selection bias in this result.
- Nearly 90 percent of students worked during their studies, mostly part-time. However, just about half of Chinese students worked citing not having enough time to work due to pressure of studies.
- Upon graduation, about two-thirds of international students found their first job in the province where they studied, with better retention rates in NS and NL. Over half of students were working in their fields of study, two-thirds found a job within three months of finishing their studies. Although they generally had good experiences with their employers, some felt they were being discriminated.
- Given a choice, most (70%) international students would like to stay in the province where they studied, but the chances of their staying are lowered if they felt mental stress during studies due to financial concerns and due to their accommodation experiences. Their chances of staying are higher if they had felt cultural acceptance in their province of study and were able to make friends during their studies.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given that Atlantic Canada receives fewer international students than rest of Canada, and that it strives to attract more, visa delays and any complexity of process should be addressed at the policy level. An exit survey at the time of completion of the application process could provide input to visa offices necessary to address complexity of applications.
- To reach out to potential international students, educational institutions should combine their third-party recruitment efforts, especially ones through recruiting agents, with alumni engagements. Country-specific social media campaigns should also be considered.
- In the light of expected increase in cost of education to international students, institutions should devote more resources in meeting student expectations of the non-financial factors that are important to them. Some of these factors include social life on campus, up-to-date courses, a high reputation, and high service quality.
- Institutions need to refine the quality of the information provided to incoming students both to “manage expectations” and to give a fair assessment of the challenges new arrivals could face.
- Cultural and language barriers that prevent interactions between international and domestic students should be addressed by faculty who can encourage classroom interactions. Inclusivity in students’ group formation for assignments should be encouraged. International students’ centres can also work collaboratively with the faculty.
- Given that international students are entering a strange living and educational environment, institutions should improve the quality of, and access to, campus settlement services and counselling. They should be accommodative of the unique cultural characteristics of international students who may want to access their mental health support and other services. Faculty and staff can be provided knowledge of different cultural practices through formal training.
- Provinces and academic institutions should work together to facilitate the availability of accommodation for international students.
- Provinces should consider allocating more PNP slots for international students. To widen their social experience which is essential for their successful integration in Canadian society, institutions should enhance efforts to introduce international students to wider segments of Canadian society, including domestic student groups and off-campus.



CONTEXT

Although population in Atlantic Canada has increased quite markedly over the past few years, reversing decades of stagnation or decline, there are still concerns about how the population is aging, and its impact on economic development. While the median age of population across Canada is almost 41 years, in Atlantic Canada it ranges from about 42 in Prince Edward Island to 48 in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Despite recent population growth, other parts of Canada are increasing faster. The Atlantic share of the national population declined from 8% in 1996 to 6.5% in 2023. Population increase in the region in recent years has been due to net positive migration flows, both from other parts of Canada and from other countries. International students have formed a significant addition to these inflows because of federal and provincial economic development strategies in the region that embody demand for a well-educated and skilled labour force.

The inflow of international students at Atlantic Canada's institutions more than doubled between 2010 and 2019 as universities and colleges increased recruitment efforts, and provinces designed initiatives to retain students who would like to stay in Canada upon graduation.

Unlike those who come to Canada as permanent residents (PRs) having studied in their country of origin, international students are potential PRs who do not face the issue of their credential recognition in labour market after finishing their studies. They are also fluent in one or both official languages and are familiar with the Canadian culture. During studies, they help fill shortages, mostly at lower skill levels, in local labour markets. Immigration programs are put into place to facilitate their transition into a permanent residency status and join the permanent high-skilled labour force at the end of their studies.

International students also contribute to the financial health of post-secondary institutions as they pay significantly higher tuition fees than domestic students do. Domestic student population is declining due to falling numbers of domestic young adults (owing to falling birth rates of 1990s and early 2000s). About three-quarters of university expenditures in Atlantic Canada are fixed that do not fall when student population falls. Hence, through their presence, international students prevent the decline of post-secondary institutions in Atlantic Canada.

Although greater numbers of students have been coming to the region, some studies suggest

that retention levels remain low, and reasons for this must be understood and addressed if international student attraction is to play an effective role in regional economic development. One way to gain this understanding is through an assessment of their academic and socioeconomic experiences while pursuing their studies.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This project sought to assess the experiences of international students in Atlantic Canada by means of an online survey. The target population for the survey was almost 69,000 students enrolled at regional institutions between 2017 and 2023. They were approached by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) through email contacts to fill in the survey questionnaire. There were 3,584 valid responses to the questionnaire, roughly equally split between males and females and over a wide range of ages. About 71-73% had attended/were attending universities, the rest of them colleges. The top five institutions attended by 60% of survey respondents were Cape Breton University, Dalhousie University, Memorial University, Saint Mary's University, and the New Brunswick Community College.



SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS

For total population

Most international students have had a positive experience, in such areas as educational performance, use of campus

services, social interactions on campus and within the wider community, employment, and the immigration process. But there are areas of concern.

About 60% had received their study permit within three months of application, and some

had delays in starting their programs as a result. They found Canadian application process to be generally comparable to, if not easier than, those they experienced in other countries.

Top six countries of current citizenship of international students

India	26%
Nigeria	9%
China	7%
Bangladesh	5%
Philippines	4%
Cameroon	3%
All other	46%

About half of them learned about Atlantic Canada as a place to study through family and friends, with one in five citing a recruitment agency or social media, suggesting a greater role for personal relationships in increasing recruitment, through alumni, for example. Cost of living, tuition fees, academic reputation, value of qualification, and flexibility and duration of programs were top reasons for choice of the region for study, but some said they faced unexpected hikes in tuition and accommodation costs once they had arrived. Advance information provided by institutions was generally less than satisfactory. Only about one in five respondents said it was accurate, although there was a wide range of reasons for dissatisfaction.

Almost 90% of students worked while they were studying, mostly part-time. However, this percentage was much lower among Chinese students (55%). Some expected their incomes would cover living and tuition costs, not realizing that available employment is mostly low-paid jobs for students. More than 70% expressed satisfaction (“extremely” or “somewhat”) with their work experience. Most of those not working said they had no time on top of their studies for work.

More than 70% were satisfied with their interactions with domestic students, although some admitted it was easier to make friends with other international students, and about one-third reported social isolation on campus. Improving ways to introduce international

students to wider Canadian society should be examined, to supplement their formal education and to enhance their appreciation of the cultural environment within which they may end up working.

About half were satisfied with their accommodation experiences or choice of institution, although about two-thirds had difficulty finding accommodation. Most respondents either lived with other international students, or in a combination of international and domestic students. About one-third of respondents reported social isolation on campus, with reasons for this including cultural and language disconnection, social dynamics and exclusion, and personal and interpersonal challenges. Social and cultural barriers with



domestic students must be addressed if retaining international students is a development goal.

Almost a quarter of respondents reported having been hosted by a family off-campus, with almost 60% of these reporting this interaction to be warm and welcoming.

Almost three-quarters of international students accessed some kind of settlement service on-campus, mostly for academic or employment counselling. Only about one quarter used mental health services. Financial concerns were a major source of mental stress, which affects academic performance

Most respondents were satisfied with the academic counselling they received. In rating their teachers, passion for teaching was high as a source of satisfaction, although other reasons also ranked highly.

More than 90% of students had good to excellent grades, with over half of these as excellent. None had below “satisfactory” grades. There was no dominant factor affecting academic performance, although adjusting to a colder climate, adjusting to a new academic structure, difficulty of finding accommodation were all challenges. High quality teaching was a positive effect.

Of those who completed their education programs, almost two-thirds found their first job in their province of study, however,

more than 10% were unemployed. Over half were working in their fields of study, and nearly two-thirds were permanently employed. Almost two-thirds found a job within three months of completing their studies. More than four in five found their employers to be flexible and supportive, although almost one in five thought they had suffered from discrimination or unfair treatment.

For top six source countries

More than 60% study permit applicants from Bangladesh, India and Philippines waited less than 3 months for processing of their applications while this was true for lower percentages from China, Cameroon and Nigeria. More than half of students in Bangladesh, Cameroon and Nigeria found out about Atlantic Canada as a place to study through family and friends. Social media was another important source, especially in Philippines where it was used by a quarter of the students. In China and India, recruitment agencies were also reported to be information sources by more than 10% students. Students from China also reported finding out about Atlantic Canada through a university/college representative which could be because of formal linkages between some Canadian and Chinese universities. About 55% of students from China worked for pay during their studies while this was true for about 90% of students from

other countries. More than 30% from Bangladesh, China and India reported social isolation on campus, and about a quarter from Cameroon and Nigeria expressed the same. Only 10% from Philippines reported social isolation. Cultural and language disconnection was chosen by 44% of Chinese and 39% of Philippines students as the source of social isolation while this factor was reported by less than 20% of the rest. Social dynamics and exclusion were the least concern among Chinese and Philippines students while it was a dominant reason among others, followed by personal and interpersonal challenges. Least percentage of Chinese students reported financial concerns and mental health and well-being as reasons for their social isolation.

Employment counselling was accessed by the highest percentage of students in all six countries, followed by academic counseling. This finding is reversed from the overall finding reported earlier. Identical percentages of Bangladeshi students accessed employment and academic counseling. Except for students from Cameroon and China, more than a quarter student from other four countries did not access any settlement services.

The top percentage of students achieving excellent grades (A- to A+) were from Nigeria (69%) while the lowest was from Cameroon. Percentage of Chinese students were also



below the overall average (54% versus 56%).

Close to 90% of former study permit holders (those who have graduated) from Philippines were permanent employees and only 0.67% of them were unemployed. Only 60% of Chinese were permanent employees which was the lowest among students from all six countries. About 15% of them were unemployed which was the highest percentage, matched by Nigerians. Unemployment percentages exceeded 10% for all six top source countries. About 69% students from Philippines found a job within a month of completing their study. This was true for only about 48% of those from Cameroon, 43% from India, 41% from Nigeria, 37% of Bangladeshis and for just 27% of Chinese students.

More than 70% from all six top source countries did not feel any discrimination or unfair

treatment by their employers. However, this percentage varied across countries. About one-fifth or more students from Bangladesh, Cameroon and China felt they were unfairly treated by their employers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A large proportion (70%) of students surveyed expressed satisfaction with the services they received while pursuing their studies. But this still leaves a significant proportion (30%) who were dissatisfied. This proportion indicates that authorities should carefully examine the quality and delivery of services they provide. Social experiences and visa delays can also be causes of mental stress that can affect academic performances of students and their retention.

Experiences of current and past students during their study determine expectations of future students which in turn determine their decision to choose an institution. Hence, it is important that host institutions and governments be aware of these challenges and address them.

Data gathered in this survey on the academic, financial and social experiences of international students in post-secondary institutions of Atlantic Canada are instructive for their future attraction. Major challenges to be addressed have been highlighted in the policy recommendations section of this policy brief. A detailed discussion of data that back up these recommendations are provided and analyzed in the full report.