

Canada is falling back in retaining its foreign grads

Barriers drive obviously skilled potential immigrants to home countries or U.S.

Pauline Tam

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Canada is losing ground to other countries in keeping the foreign students who graduate from its universities and colleges -- just as the competition for them is heating up, says a report being released next week.

With an aging population and a labour shortage looming, Canada needs to be more aggressive about keeping these skilled immigrants-in-waiting, the report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education concludes.

The agency, which represents 200 post-secondary schools, says Canada continues to squander a valuable talent pool that could add as many as 30,000 skilled immigrants annually.

The report, to be released Tuesday, is highly critical of Canada's immigration policies and calls on the federal government to create a national strategy on international students.

It also urges officials to drop the barriers that drive many foreign graduates back to their home countries -- or to well-paying jobs south of the border.

This "brain drain" is happening as the U.S., Britain and Australia move swiftly to attract and retain more foreign students.

Once ranked as a top-five destination for international students, Canada has dropped to 14th place among the world's richest nations, well behind Belgium and Spain, which have not traditionally been known for welcoming foreign youth. Canada receives less than three per cent of all international students.

"There seems to me to be a failure of policy on the part of Canada," says Sheryl Bond, a Queen's University professor and the report's lead author. "Whether it intends to or not, this country's policy turns away the kind of immigrant that Canada says it wants."

The study, based on interviews with 900 foreign nationals either studying in Canada or newly graduated, documents for the first time their experiences of finding work in this country.

It concludes that, despite being model newcomers who are fluent in English or French and have worked hard to fit in, only one-third of foreign students who graduate from a Canadian university plan to stay. The rest, disillusioned about their prospects, either plan to return home or seek work in the U.S., believing there are better opportunities for them there.

"Most foreign students do not believe that Canada sees the merit in having international graduates stay," the report says. Many are in high-demand fields such as science, engineering and computer science, and a majority come from the U.S., France, China or India.

"Canada finds itself in a vulnerable position: Not only will we lose two-thirds of our highly educated graduates as contributors to the labour force, we are losing half of this group to our trading partners and competitors," the report says.

The study accuses Canada of giving mixed messages to its international students. On the one hand, officials pay lip service to the idea of attracting more skilled immigrants. On the other, they throw up bureaucratic hurdles that discourage even the most motivated graduate from staying.

"These are people who have worked hard," says Ms. Bond. "They've built their social networks all the way through university or college ... They have done everything to get broad exposure to Canadian culture and work. Frankly, those who stay do so in spite of the system."

The report proposes a sweeping overhaul of immigration policies, including a streamlining of the student-visa process. It also recommends allowing foreign graduates to remain in Canada longer to give them a better chance of finding work. Existing visa requirements forbid foreign students from remaining if they haven't found work within 90 days of graduating.

Ms. Bond would like to see that period extended to 18 months, which is in line with the average period for Canadian-born graduates to find employment. ""That is the most important signal that the government could make because it's eminently doable," says Ms. Bond. "It doesn't require government to reorganize its policy framework."