

# Canada must fix 'pathetic' record on recruiting foreign students

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HO CHI MINH CITY — Lam Ngoc Dinh is 17, just finishing Grade 12 and thinking of studying abroad. She has come to an education fair at a Ho Chi Minh City hotel to check out Canada.

"Canada's education is very good and famous, and I think I could learn a lot there," she says as she takes a pause from visiting kiosks for Canadian colleges and technical institutes. "Canada has beautiful scenery and the environment is clean. It's safer than the United States."

That neatly sums up Canada's advantages as a destination for students: high-quality education; clean, safe cities to study in; and the lakes, sea, mountains and prairie to boot.

Then why don't more students come to Canada? A new report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education says that Canada, once one of the top five destinations for international students, has fallen to 14th. This country gets just 3 per cent of international students.

That is a major handicap for Canada as it tries to take advantage of Asia's economic rise. More than 80 per cent of students who go abroad to study come from Asia. That number is due to rise to more than 90 per cent by 2025. Countries that attract Asian students can use them to build bridges to Asian economies. A student who studies business administration in Ottawa may decide to settle in this country and build a business here; or, she may go back home and do business with Canadian companies.

Even if bridge building weren't important, educating students is a big earner. Foreign students are already worth \$4-billion a year to the economy and the potential for growth is enormous. It is just the sort of "export" Canada wants: high-end, information-based - a 21st-century alternative to shipping logs to Japan and mining ore in Indonesia.

Already, South Koreans spend more on Canadian education than Canadians spend on South Korean cars, so educating students is a way of balancing the flood of imports from Asia with a product of our own: good schooling.

In Vietnam, the latest Asian tiger economy, the opportunity for Canada is "so massive I can't even describe it," says Miles Fahlman, Vietnam rep for the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology. With the economy growing at 7 and 8 per cent a year, Vietnam desperately needs to train up its work force. Education-mad Vietnamese crave foreign education the way they lap up French wine and Swiss chocolate.

The problem is that other countries are beating us to the punch. "We're so, so far behind Australia, so behind the U.S. or the U.K.," laments Theresa Bennett, who came to the education fair to attract students to Vancouver's Columbia College.

"There just haven't been the resources put into promoting Canada as an education destination. It's just so Canadian. We'll just sit back and let everyone else jump in."

Australia has a national strategy to attract foreign students, backed by millions in federal funding and a "branding" campaign to portray the country as an attractive destination for students. As a result, Australia gets nearly 10 per cent of international students. It saw 169-per-cent growth in foreign student enrolment from 1998-99 to 2004-05, says JWT Education, a branch of the J. Walter Thompson agency. Canada's enrolment growth over the same period: 14.8 per cent.

At the education fair, Canadian educators blame a lack of government support and a lack of Canadian initiative.

Ross Gillis, a student recruiter for Alberta's SAIT Polytechnic, calls the federal effort "pathetic." "The government will do all kinds of marketing for the auto industry, why not for education?" he says.

Canada doesn't have a federal ministry of education, so the recruiting effort is divided among the provinces. If anything, Ottawa has a negative influence on recruiting. Worried about foreign nationals using education as a back door to immigrating, it has toughened student-visa requirements.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education report calls for a streamlining of student-visa processing and an easing of the rule that says students must leave Canada if they haven't found work within 90 days.

Whatever the answer is, Canada obviously needs to be doing more to attract and keep foreign, and particularly Asian, students. Otherwise they will simply seek greener pastures.

Along with Canada, Ms. Lam, the Vietnamese student, is considering Singapore. The go-go Southeast Asian city state has set a goal of getting 5 per cent of its GDP from education and becoming "schoolhouse to the world." Those are goals Canada could emulate.

If Canada wants to attract eager students like Ms. Lam, it will have to be a lot more welcoming - and a lot more aggressive about marketing Canadian education.

### **By the numbers**

**3%** - Percentage of international students that enroll in Canada.

**14<sup>th</sup>** - Canada's rank as a destination for international students.

**169%** - Australia' growth in foreign-student enrolment between 1998/99 and 2004/05.

**14.8%** - Canada's growth in foreign-student enrolment during the same six-year period.

*Sources: Canadian Bureau for International Education;  
JWT Education*