

# Importing the best brains

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Canadians can no longer assume because we offer basic freedoms and high quality of life that Canada will automatically be the most desirable place for the best and brightest to immigrate. We need to end our complacent attitude if we're going to stay strong in the 21st century.

Our birthrate is low and our skills shortage is worsening. Even the wages of unskilled workers are climbing. We used to get some of the best minds from China and India banging down our doors to get jobs in our hospitals, universities, and high-tech industries; now, those people are finding ways to make their fortunes without leaving home. Shanghai and Mumbai are themselves becoming destinations for other migrants with in-demand skills and entrepreneurial spirits. The real risk-takers want to go where the rewards are highest.

Of course, sometimes the biggest rewards are to be had in exploiting immature political and regulatory systems. Canada can't compete that way and we wouldn't want to, but we can at least take down some of the barricades to the best and the brightest. A new report for the Canadian Bureau of International Education (which represents dozens of major universities and colleges that take international students) lists these barricades -- a whole lot of them.

The obstacles facing foreign-trained professionals are well-known. That we have physicians and chemistry PhDs from Asia driving taxis because they can't get credentials to work here is both a problem and an embarrassment. Worse, the bureau is now exposing problems that are faced by people we've trained here, in our own schools.

We put our feet wrong in the first step: the study permits we issue foreign students begin by telling them they're not allowed to work while they're here, except in the most restricted ways, and when they're done with their degrees or diplomas, they'll have to get out. The underlying message is that they're lucky to have overcome our suspicions to get in here at all, and they'd better not get comfortable.

After graduation, we get even tougher. Foreign graduates from Canadian schools have 90 days to find jobs in their fields or leave; according to the international-education bureau, it typically takes a Canadian graduate twice that time.

What exactly does it mean to get a job in your field if your degree is in, say, sociology? More importantly, as long as you're paying your own bills, what do the rest of us care?

Having graduated and found jobs, foreign students then start the process of getting work permits. In other words, they have to convince employers to hire them and hope the government approves. The bureau recommends easing the government's restrictions, and one way to do this is by providing open one-year work permits for new graduates (with options for extensions) before they graduate, and by making the system easier for both students and potential employers to navigate.

The U.S.'s resurgent suspicion of foreigners should be put to our advantage -- the bureau's researchers found many foreign students by default want to work in the U.S. but would prefer to live here. We haven't fallen into the American trap of insularity yet, but we also haven't recognized that the global landscape is changing.