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Permit process failing foreign students: Report

Canada losing international grads after degrees earned

By Shannon Klie

Alyana Javer left her family in Kenya and came to Canada seven years ago when she was just 17.

She completed high school and then went to the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont. Last year, she graduated with a degree in managerial and organizational studies and two months later found a job as an HR assistant at Rol-Land Farms, a mushroom and specialty crops producer in Campbellville, Ont.

Unfortunately, Javer is among the minority of international students who stay in Canada after graduation, according to a study commissioned by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE).

The report, which included interviews with 900 international students and recent graduates, found only one-third choose to stay in Canada after graduation, with about one-third returning home and one-third going to another country, usually the United States.

These findings mean Canadian employers are losing out on a crucial source of skilled talent, said Jennifer Humphries, vice-president of memberships and scholarships at CBIE.

International graduates are a great alternative to skilled immigrants who don't have any Canadian experience and may have trouble getting their credentials recognized, said Humphries.

"With international students, you've kind of leaped over that whole recognition process and you have people who have been here for anywhere from two to six years doing their education and are an absolute gold mine of knowledge and potential," she said.

However, international graduates face several barriers to finding a job and qualifying for a work permit, according to the report *Northern Lights: International Graduates of Canadian Institutions and the National Workforce*, conducted by Sheryl Bond, a professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont.

Students have 90 days after graduation to find a job in their field and get a work permit, which is not enough time, said Rachel Crowe, communications co-ordinator of international student services at the University of Western Ontario.

"It's difficult for anybody to get a job right after university, but international students have a few more hurdles to jump over," she said.

Students have to find a job in their field of study to qualify for the work permit which also makes it harder, as Javer found out during her job search.

"Companies are looking for three to five years of experience. That was really tough," she said. "If I was able to work as an administrative assistant somewhere, that would be easier than jumping right into HR."

Humphries would like to see the 90-day period doubled to six months, more in line with how long it takes Canadian-born graduates to find jobs in their field of study, or open up the work permit so graduates can qualify regardless of the type of job they get.

Recent policy changes allow international students to work off-campus for up to 20 hours a week during the school year, which will give them some experience and make it easier to find jobs after graduation.

International graduates who either went to school in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver, or who want to work in one of those three cities, can only get a one-year work permit instead of two years like in the rest of Canada. This restriction makes these graduates less attractive to prospective employers, said Ben Yang, director of the University of Toronto's international student centre.

While the policy is supposed to encourage students to settle outside Canada's three main urban centres, it's actually counter-productive, he said. If a University of Toronto forestry graduate wants to take a job in northern Manitoba, he would only qualify for a one-year work permit instead of two, so the policy discourages what it's trying to support, said Yang.

"That's really illogical, irrational," said Humphries. "It doesn't make sense and we have to work on that."

Instead, she would like to see graduates be able to work for up to five years like they can in Australia.

The study also found many employers have misconceptions about hiring international graduates. Either they don't know they can or they think they have to sponsor the student and hire an immigration lawyer when all they have to do is write up a job offer.

"They do not really need to treat international students any differently. All they should be focused on is hiring the most qualified candidate," said Yang.

To help employers overcome their misconceptions and encourage them to hire more international graduates, Humphries would like Citizenship and Immigration Canada to hold workshops for employers and have officials meet with employers regularly to find out where the problems are.

"We just have to get the mechanisms working effectively so (students) feel comfortable in applying and employers feel comfortable in engaging them when they want to engage them," she said.

Even though Javier is currently working, her future in Canada is uncertain as her job contract is up at the end of January.

While Javier wouldn't have a problem finding a job back in Kenya, where her Canadian education makes her attractive to employers, she would rather stay in Canada.

"I've been here for seven years," she said. "I feel like Canada is my home now."

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