

International Students: A Profile

Each year, about 178,000 international students leave their homes around the world to study at Canadian universities and colleges. The Canadian Bureau for International Education regularly evaluates the experiences that international students have in Canada with a survey. Last year, CBIE polled 5,925 international students from 22 universities and four colleges across Canada, and the following are some of their conclusions:

Choosing Canada

Overall, 53 per cent of the students listed Canada as their first country of choice in which to study abroad. However, among university students, the number of those who said Canada is their first choice has consistently fallen from a high of 59 per cent in 1999.

Students reported that there are many important factors that influence their decision to come to Canada for their education. The most common factor appears to be the quality of education in Canada, with almost three in four students considering it very important in their decision to study in Canada. The second most commonly cited reason is that Canada is a safe country.

These results are very similar to the 2004 survey finding. Since 2004, major changes have been implemented regarding off-campus and post-graduation work. Asked about the influence these opportunities had on their decision to come to Canada, many students said they found the work opportunities attractive. For example, 63 per cent of college students and 29 per cent of university students reported off-campus work opportunities were very important in their decision to come to Canada. In each case, post-graduation work opportunities were more important (49 per cent of university and 74 per cent of college students).

About half of the students said they remembered seeing or hearing advertising about studying in Canada.

Among those, about nine in 10 said this had at least somewhat influenced their decision to study in Canada.

Ninety-five per cent of university students and 93 per cent of college students used the Internet to gather information when they were choosing an institution. This is up from 2004, when about eight students in 10 reported using the Internet to help choose their institution.

Canada advertises itself to international students as “a great place to reach your potential.” Almost all students (95 per cent of university students and 96 per cent of college students) said they think of Canada as a place to reach their educational potential, including 47 per cent who very much think this is the case. Like the decision to study in Canada, students’ choice of educational institution appears to be based on a number of factors.

However, the most important reasons are educational, with the single most important being the quality of education students will get at their current institution, followed by the availability of a particular program at the institution.

Numerous students at university and college level had previously studied at a language school or public or private secondary school—as many as one in three at university level had done some secondary education in Canada prior to their university program. Clearly, entrance to post-secondary education is often via the secondary “pathway.”

Typically, students applied to about two Canadian institutions, and the vast majority (more than three in four) reported they are attending their first choice.

Students are split on whether their decision to study in Canada was driven primarily by the country or the institution. About half of university students said they

had wanted to study in Canada, and then decided on an institution, while the other half wanted to study at a particular institution in Canada. College students are more likely to say they chose the country rather than the institution. Almost two in three college students reported they wanted to study in Canada, and then decided on an institution.

Most students reported that both their courses and institution are meeting or exceeding their expectations. About eight students in 10—whether thinking of their courses or the institution at which they are taking them—said that they are as expected or better than expected. Indeed, almost nine students in 10 agreed that they are satisfied with the decision to attend their current institution.

As was the case in 2004, this year’s survey found that almost nine students in 10 are satisfied with their decision to study in Canada, and more than eight students in 10 would recommend that other students from their country undertake study in Canada.

Financial institutions

The typical international university or college student spends approximately \$14,000 annually for tuition, books, and other study materials. Both college and university tuition have increased an average of about 86 per cent in the last 10 years, well ahead of the rate of inflation in the same period.

About six in 10 international students reported that they come from families with average wealth. About one in four come from families that, in their home countries, are considerably better off than average. Less than one in 10 come from families who are considerably worse off than average. However, the number of students coming from such families has decreased. In 1988, 12 per cent of university students were from families with below-average wealth, decreasing to 10 per cent in 1999 and 2004, and to only eight per cent in 2009. In part,

this may reflect that the increase in Canadian tuition fees has made a Canadian education unattainable for many.

The vast majority of students remain dependent on their families and/or personal savings to pay for their education. Indeed, 85 per cent of college students and 67 per cent of university students reported that parents, relatives, or guardians help pay for their education.

Many students reported working in Canada while attending school. Working either on or off campus is more common among university (46 per cent) than college (33 per cent) students. However, fewer were working at the time of the survey (26 per cent of university and 15 per cent of college students). In part, this may reflect that while many students want to work, it is difficult to do so.

While several respondents acknowledged recent changes in off-campus work policies and were grateful, many would like work permits to be more flexible, including changing the restriction on what parts of Canada students can work in, lifting the cap on 20 hours per week, changing the length of time students have in which to find employment, and allowing part-time students to work.

This survey also suggests that for many international students, it is difficult to meet the financial demands of living in Canada. About one in four reported that they were struggling, saying it is sometimes or always difficult to pay their living expenses. Further, about four students in 10 reported problems obtaining money for living expenses, and about as many reported problems obtaining money for tuition fees. About half reported having helped other international students by lending food, money, or accommodation in the past year.

Arriving in Canada

Students' experiences with Canadian immigration officials appear to be improving over time. A majority of students reported no difficulty when dealing with Canadian immigration officials in their home country.

However, about three students in 10 reported having at least some difficulty, including a few who reported having much difficulty.

In 1999, 41 per cent of students reported at least some difficulty. This has fallen slowly, and in 2009, 30 per cent of students reported the same.

About eight students in 10 reported no difficulty with Canadian immigration officials at the port of entry. Nineteen per cent reported having at least some difficulty, including two per cent who reported having much difficulty with immigration officials at Canadian ports of entry. Again, over the past 10 years, fewer students have reported difficulties. About 26 per cent reported such difficulties in 1999.

Among those who have contacted officials in Canada to renew or change their study permits or to apply for a work permit, many reported at least some difficulties.

For example, about one in three reported at least some difficulty when renewing their study permits, including just under 10 per cent who had much difficulty. More than one in three reported at least some difficulty applying for a work permit, and similarly, about three in 10 reported at least some difficulties when requesting a change to their study permit.

Experiences in Canada

Most students reported being satisfied with services and facilities they have used at their institutions. For example, about eight in 10 students who had experience reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the International Students Handbook, recreational facilities, international student advisers, and study skills and learning support services.

Almost nine students in 10 reported their instructors treat them fairly in class and consider their instructors to be accessible outside of class. However, only about six in 10 reported that their instructors have taken a personal interest in their academic progress.

While more than six students in 10 agreed they have not experienced any form of racism in Canada, about three in 10 disagreed. This is particularly pronounced among

students from sub-Saharan Africa, where 42 per cent said they have experienced some form of racism.

Similarly, about one student in four reported that his/her instructors did not show sensitivity to racial issues. However, in this case, it is students from North Africa/Middle East (42 per cent) and East Asia (41 per cent) who are most likely to say their instructors are insensitive to racial issues.

Student backgrounds

As in 1999 and 2004, about half of international students are female. This is up significantly from 1988, when only 35 per cent of university students were female.

The average age of international students studying at university was 25 years and at college 24 years. About 21 per cent of university students are married (or common-law), compared to 14 per cent of college students. Of the married students, most reported their spouse is living in Canada.

Future plans

Students' plans after completing their current program vary, and their plans are not necessarily mutually exclusive. More than six in 10 will continue their education, including about one in five who plan to get another degree at either their current institution in Canada or another institution.

More than three in four have work-related plans, including a majority who plan to work in Canada for three years and then return home.

Over half of all students plan to apply for permanent resident status in Canada.

Student recommendations

Asked if they had any advice for Canadian governments about possible changes in policy on international students, about six in 10 students provided recommendations.

The recommendations made by students fell into three broad areas: financial, employment, and procedural.

■ **Financial**—The single most common recommendation (provided independently by about one in five students) is to lower tuition fees for international students and to provide scholarships or bursaries for international students (about one in 10).

■ **Employment**—The ability to work off-campus was raised as an issue, especially among college students (about one in five mentioned it). Although international students have the opportunity to work off-campus, many mentioned difficulties being able to take advantage of this benefit due to specific restrictions.

■ **Procedures**—Several students made recommendations to simplify the process for obtaining study permits (about one in 10 made such recommendations), as well as making it easier for students to become permanent residents (similarly, about one in 10 made this recommendation).

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