

Article

The Indo-Pacific Region, immigration, international students and small mid-sized cities in the BC Interior – policy and capacity issues

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region figures prominently in Canada's immigration strategy, which has of late become a critical policy file to address a wide range of existing and potential financial, economic, and social, challenges, most notably retaining immigrants and international students to enhance future growth prospects in the face of an aging workforce. Despite a strong political consensus at all levels as to the need to annually increase immigration and international student levels overall, inadequate policies and financial commitments exist in many broader policy areas to address the implications of this aggressive "numbers game". This assessment provides an analysis of the elevated significance of economic immigration and international education and the conflicted motives within these two policy areas (despite both being viewed as serving larger immigration goals), resulting in serious capacity and equity issues that jeopardize the overall numerical successes – potentially undermining what is our most valuable long-term exchange with the Indo-Pacific Region.

Résumé

La région de l'Indopacifique tient une bonne place dans la stratégie d'immigration du Canada, qui est récemment devenue un dossier politique essentiel pour relever un large éventail de défis financiers, économiques et sociaux existants et potentiels, notamment la rétention des immigrants et des étudiants internationaux pour améliorer la croissance future. Face au vieillissement de la main-d'œuvre. Malgré un fort consensus politique à tous les niveaux quand à la nécessité d'augmenter chaque année le niveau global d'immigration et d'étudiants internationaux, des politiques et des engagements financiers inadéquats existent dans de nombreux domaines politiques qui sont trop larges pour faire face aux implications de ce « jeu de chiffres » agressif. Cette évaluation fournit une analyse de l'importance élevée de l'immigration économique et de l'éducation internationale et des motivations conflictuelles dans ces deux domaines politiques (bien que les deux soient considérés comme servant des objectifs d'immigration plus larges), entraînant de graves problèmes de capacité et d'équité qui compromettent les succès numériques globaux - potentiellement nuire à ce qui est notre échange à long terme le plus précieux avec la région Indopacifique.

Keywords: Small Cities; Canada; Immigration; International Students; Indo-Pacific, International Education

Mots-clés : Petites villes ; Canada; Immigration; Étudiants internationaux; Indo-Pacifique, Éducation international (Kading and Thomas)

Introduction

Over the last 10 years, efforts to increase the levels of immigration and international students into Canada have become not just a competitive challenge among Developed Nations, but also the various levels of government in Canada – provincial and local. The Government of Canada has recently set what are the highest yearly target levels for immigration in our history (some 1.25 million over the three-year period from 2021 to 2023). Based on past trends, success in meeting these yearly targets is predicated on the continued and significant emigration from various countries of South and Southeast Asia.

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Overall yearly increases in immigration, establishing permanent residency (PR) and a path to citizenship, are expected to serve several critical purposes at the domestic and global levels. From a global perspective the promotion of higher levels of economic class immigration targets at this time are viewed as a strategic advantage, establishing Canada as an outlier versus almost all other Developed Nations in remaining open and accepting of immigration from across the globe. Canada has promoted itself as the sole proponent of significantly higher immigration into a receptive society defined by tolerance and accommodation, which, long-term, will further serve to diversify global trade and investment opportunities and attract international investment (Asia Pacific, 2019; Asia Pacific, 2020).

Domestically, economic immigration generally, and the retention of international students in particular, is viewed as necessary to: address a declining domestic birthrate, replace a large aging population that has left (or will leave) the workforce, resolve sectoral labour shortages across the country, generate the tax revenues to sustain important programs (healthcare, pensions), reduce inequities in wealth within the federal system, create a larger consumer market, spur innovation and investment, reduce inflationary pressures, address critical employee shortages in important areas made evident by Covid, support funding short-falls in education, and cumulatively – to enhance Canada’s international status and clout.

Less visible in the considerable discussion on immigration has been the dominant role of international education and international students in serving these ends – which is a category with unique qualities within the overall discussion of immigration due to the immediate and significant economic impact on both post-secondary institutions and local communities. Successful collaboration among powerful agents over policy decisions¹, represented by the Government of Canada and all the provincial governments, supported by dominant business sectors federally and provincially, have been effective in facilitating the rapid rebound in numbers in both areas despite the Covid Pandemic.

However, important policy limitations, both persistent and emergent, may be seen in three areas: long recognized limitations in addressing the integration and employment aspirations of economic immigrants and international student graduates, thus devaluing their potential contribution to the economy and society; responding to policy deficiencies related to the unanticipated and rapid growth in international students - particularly those as both students and members of the local workforce; and the lack of information and policies / policy coordination between local governments and post-secondary institutions as to the capacities of local institutions and local communities to accommodate the necessary economic class immigrants while retaining the benefits of international students.

The present short-term motives of policy agents from all levels with regards to international education suggest there are contradictory and damaging implications of existing practices to retaining immigrants to address the longer-term needs of these smaller urban centres, in contrast with the immediate benefits of the expanded enrollment of international students, unless other policy areas are addressed. The experience of British Columbia, and interior cities in particular (Prince George, Kelowna, Kamloops), in relation to international students and immigration, highlights both the different potential opportunities and advantages, and the challenges posed by these two distinct categories of entrants in retaining them as residents and securing long-term growth benefits to the community.

In contrast to our largest urban centres, small to mid-sized cities distant from large centres confront much lower rates of population growth, particularly in attracting new immigrants. This quality has been recognized as a significant impediment for the prospects for these urban centres, since the “effect of immigration is to inject a relatively young cohort into the overall population From a community perspective, municipalities that can successfully attract and integrate immigrants will be better positioned to adapt to an aging population” (Federation, 2013b: 12). Of late, universities and colleges in the cities of Prince George, Kamloops and Kelowna have experienced a notable growth in international students, particularly from the Indo-Pacific region.

For this immigration strategy to succeed at all levels, this analysis highlights the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the varied reasons for emigration from the different nations of the Indo-Pacific region as economic class immigrants or international students (or as both). It also emphasizes a proactive community approach (municipal & post-secondary) that may be used in securing long-term residency by offering an alternative to Canada’s largest urban centres. By recognizing the differing community and educational needs and inducements to retain various immigrant classes and international students, we may better support the long-term economic growth prospects of these types of cities across Canada, and the regions they serve.

Canada and Immigration Policies

The rise in the standing of immigration, and more recently international students, may be viewed primarily as an expansion and deeper penetration of the process of economic globalization and the internationalization of public policy at the provincial, regional, and local levels. Over two decades ago, Abu-Laben and Gabriel recognized that as the ideals of global competitiveness, individual self-sufficiency, economic performance, and fiscal restraint became paramount through the 1990s, “Canadian immigration policy in particular has emphasized the need to attract highly skilled, well-educated, flexible workers as prospective citizens, to compete in a rapidly changing global economy” (2002: 96). Despite adopting in the 1960s a “neutral” point system based on education and skills (versus country of origin) to determine successful entrants “this construction of a model citizen tends to favour male applicants from countries with extensive educational and training opportunities, thus serving to reinforce current gender and ethnic / racial exclusions within the policy” (Ibid).

This was evident as reductions were introduced in managing the economy directly through immigration but “the Canadian state” maintained and reasserted “its control over those [immigrant] categories deemed less desirable, such as women (in the family class) and refugees” (Abu-Laben and Gabriel, 2002: 97), further observing that “some new immigrants encounter a labour market that does not allocate jobs on the basis of skills and education alone” in which credentials are not recognized and “membership in a particular group may negatively affect employment decisions” (Abu-Laben and Gabriel: 2002: 97). As the authors’ emphasized, with the increased internationalization of immigration policy, in which Canada influences and is influenced by developments abroad – “the stress on how contemporary immigration must be situated in the international context and in relation to globalization is qualitatively different than in the past” (Ibid). This insight has become more evident of late with the expanded provincial and post-secondary roles at the international level in

coordination with the federal government (Tamtik et al., 2020). In addition, the authors' more critical insights regarding the "less desirable" and labour markets remain prescient, but certain exclusionary features have been tempered as acceptance of much higher levels of immigration have become an absolute necessity in a broad variety of economic sectors.

A major political change occurred in the 1990s with the other provinces, replicating Quebec's example from the 1960s (over selection and integration), exercising their constitutional rights within immigration (as a shared jurisdiction) to have a greater role in the formulation of policies and authority over more aspects of programs (selections, settlement). Like many other policy areas, immigration became subject to decentralizing trends (greater provincial roles) and asymmetrical federalism (different funding arrangements and conditions negotiated with each province) – creating what has become the most complex immigration system of the 38 countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Banting, 2012).

Despite this complexity and maze of differing Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs), with varied criteria and point systems from across the different paths to enter Canada (provinces, territories and the federal government), provincial and territorial nominee programs tend to identify a need for less skilled individuals in a wide range of areas e.g., trucking, trades, retail – thus potential candidates' ability to "knock on several doors" increasing their likelihood of success. The positives (for potential immigrants) were that they were no longer limited to federal government criteria to enter Canada, which had a historical bias in favour of professionals and highly skilled and educated individuals. This mobilization by provinces was initially undertaken to address changes in their respective economies and population decline (with a notable lead by Manitoba) or growth pressures (Alberta), and the need to be proactive to address the unfair distribution of immigrants across the federation and highly unequal settlement funding by the federal government (Paquet, 2017).

By the 2010s a second factor that would drive policy changes and increase the internationalization in immigration would be the recognition of the impact caused by the retirement of the baby boomer generation and low domestic birth rates / workforce replacements, leading to anticipated and significant skills and labour shortages in a wide variety of areas. (Federation, 2011; Government of BC, 2012). As with the Covid Pandemic, the Government of Canada response was distinct versus competitors – the Immigration minister noting that "While other countries have cut back immigration levels as a short-term response to the global economic downturn, our government is actually maintaining its immigration levels to meet the country's medium- to long-term economic needs", further celebrating that "Canada will again welcome more new permanent residents than the average annual intake during the 1990s" (2009).

Notable at the time was the promise to increase numbers for provincial PNPs, address the significant backlog in federal skilled worker applicants (some 425,000) and a commitment that those "applying now under the federal skilled worker program can expect to receive a decision within six to twelve months, compared to up to six years under the old system" (2009). This new Action Plan clearly signalled a heightened resolve at the federal level to support a much more efficient and responsive application process to address more rapidly in the future anticipated skills and labour shortages – an issue gaining greater attention at the provincial level.

Despite what had been British Columbia's natural advantage in attracting immigrants (along with Ontario), this provincial experience demonstrates the competitive trends among

provinces. In 2012 the Immigration Task Force of the Government of BC “found that the need for economic immigration is growing across the province. Over the next decade, more than one million job openings are forecast in BC; given the limited domestic supply, it is estimated that one third of these job openings will need to be filled by migrants from outside BC and Canada” (2012a: 2). Despite BC having “a more important role in driving national economic growth, immigration levels to the province” had “declined sharply over the last five years” (Ibid).

While critical of federal programs as miss-aligned with regional skills needs, a significant problem was that the BC government had not made an effort to nominate the yearly maximums allowed by the federal government under the Provincial Nominee Program. A call was made to “immediately increasing immigration levels to BC, with a focus on growth in the BC PNP as the most responsive program to fill regional labour needs across the skills spectrum”; ensure “that requirements, application procedures and processing times reflect business realities”; capitalize “on BC’s geographic attractiveness as a destination of choice for entrepreneurs and investors”; and “provide effective information and supports for clients, especially employers and newcomers” - with a strong emphasis on initiatives to retain international students (2-3).

A 2020 evaluation highlighted the successful turn around from the past, recognizing BC’s Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) as a “key tool for supporting the province’s labour market and economic development needs through immigration”. From “2015 to 2018, approximately 32,000 people immigrated to B.C. through the PNP”, and the “ministry had met its target to nominate the maximum number of workers allowed by the federal government every year” (Office of the Auditor, 2020). The Immigration Task Force would also advance several proposals to revise the eligibility criteria of provincial and federal programs, notably for international students, that would serve to bring international education more directly into the orbit of addressing larger immigration goals at the provincial level.

As provinces and economic sectors have expressed concerns over existing or anticipated skills and labour shortages, the federal government has been continuously innovative in revising eligibility criteria and developing niche programs to attract and expedite the entrance of qualified applicants, while easing the point requirements in long established programs in an effort to meet overall targets. More recently, regions within provinces and smaller communities have been granted a direct role in nominee programs through pilot programs, federal offices expanded to bring administrative functions closer to potential employers, more funding for local immigration and settlement providers, and increases in staffing and budgets, to fulfill targets (Conference, 2021a).

In response to the Covid Pandemic, which resulted in a drop from 341,000 invitations for permanent residency in 2019 to 184,500 in 2020, the federal government quickly revised targets upward for the 2021-23 period for all immigrant classes to compensate for this dramatic decline.

Table 1. Government of Canada - 2021-2023 Immigration Levels Plan

Immigration Class	2021	2022	2023
Economic	232,500	241,500	249,500
Family	103,500	103,500	104,500
Refugee	59,500	60,500	61,000
Humanitarian	5,500	5,500	6,000
Total	401,000	411,000	421,000

Government of Canada, 2020.

Despite a long track record of failing to meet predetermined targets, and thus skepticism regarding the ability of the federal government to then meet these higher targets, on December 23rd, 2021, the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, announced “that Canada has reached its target and welcomed more than 401,000 new permanent residents in 2021.

Surpassing the previous record from 1913, this is the most newcomers in a year in Canadian history. This historic achievement is particularly significant in the face of the pandemic’s many challenges.” Noteworthy in the announcement was the new level of resolve expressed, in which “the employees of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) rose to the occasion and processed a record half a million applications in 2021.

To achieve this, IRCC added resources, embraced new technology and brought more processes online” - emphasizing that “[T]hese changes are all permanent improvements to Canada’s immigration system” (Government of Canada, 2021b). Backed by a further commitment of \$85 million to address the current application backlog, this policy area has seen significant and rapid adjustments to meet, and potentially exceed, numerical targets over the next couple of years, in response to increasing demands by various provinces, such as Ontario’s request to double the number of skilled workers it receives (Saunders, 2022).

Of the 405,303 invitations, 48.9% (198,085) landed in Ontario, followed by British Columbia at 17.1% (69, 270). India had the highest representation (at 32%), followed by China (8%), and the Philippines (4.3%), with Iran, South Korea and Pakistan contributing another 7% of the top ten (El-Assal and Thevenot, 2022). This demonstrates our high dependence on the Indo-Pacific region in addressing critical demographic and labour force challenges at the domestic level (in marked contrast to our economic dependence on the United States).

International Education and International Students

Unlike the challenges in meeting targets among various immigration categories, federal-provincial initiatives for attracting more international students have been a smashing success – far exceeding goals and expectations established just ten years ago. Despite being considered an important component of Canada’s overall long-term immigration strategy (innovation, high value skills, attracting investment); the primary purpose of international students has been as a source of external revenue for the country.

As such, they are categorized and compared in value as an “export” (such as auto parts, forestry products), managed at the federal level as an important component of international trade – and an area that “has shifted from a policy issue on the margins of government interest and attention to receiving wide recognition as one of Canada’s most important

industries” (Tamtik et al., 2020: 407). They also occupy a unique policy space in serving immigration goals, as: a significant percentage (some 40%) do not intend to stay in Canada (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2021; Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2022) they do not incur direct settlement and integration costs; and there are no limits – provincially or federally – as to the overall numbers accepted on a yearly basis that may enter Canada (as by definition, the more we “export” the more we earn).

As the federal government’s most recent 2019 strategy document observed “[I]nternational students in Canada spent an estimated \$21.6 billion on tuition, accommodation, and other expenses in 2018” (versus \$7 billion in 2010), and “sustained close to 170,000 jobs for Canadians in 2016. Educational expenditures by international students have a greater impact on Canada’s economy than exports of auto parts, lumber or aircraft” (Government of Canada, 2019). As may be instantly grasped though – there is something quite different about an “international student” versus a piece of lumber as an export, particularly regarding how this “export” needs to be accommodated as a new member of our society.

This also raises serious questions as to the capacity of post-secondary institutions and related communities to sustain these “export” increases while retaining the necessary economic and social benefits of immigrants from other categories. However, due to the scale of the monetary returns, both immediate and long-term, federal and provincial initiatives in this area have become better coordinated, with a keen eye on competitors in the global “student market” as to the success of other nations and new players and comparing processes and incentives for attracting a greater percentage of this market. This more sophisticated approach to developing and adopting competitive policies and practices was rooted in a federal advisory panel that derived inspiration from the Government of British Columbia’s international education strategy in 2011 – both recognizing that this was an untapped export market with significant potential for growth.

In 2012, the Government of Canada Advisory Panel on Canada’s International Education Strategy responded to a variety of background research reports (overseas polling, capacity analyses, economic benefits, market analyses) to arrive at “Our value proposition: consistent quality at a reasonable cost. Canada’s brand is based on consistently high quality and a reputation for excellence across the entire education sector” (xi). Compared to other competitors, “Canada offers international students a safe and multicultural learning environment in which they can choose to study in English or French. Compared to other countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States, Canadian tuition fees and the cost of living are quite affordable. Further, international students have the option to work during their studies and can also apply to work in Canada upon completion of their studies” (xi). Given these competitive advantages the Advisory Panel established the goal “to double the number of full-time international students, from 239,131 in 2011 to more than 450,000 by 2022” which was considered a “realistic goal, given our assessment of the growth trends in international education and our ability to sustain quality”, and the “capacity to absorb new international students without displacing domestic students” (Government of Canada, 2012: xiii).

These assumptions and goals would be formalized in Canada’s International Education Strategy of 2014, emphasizing international education as a *Priority Sector* under Canada’s Global Markets Action Plan, focusing on *Priority Education Markets* (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, North Africa and the Middle East, Vietnam) and branding Canada to *Maximize*

Success which would result “in at least 86,500 net new jobs for a total of 173,100 new jobs in Canada sustained by international education” and student expenditures of over \$16.1 billion. (Government of Canada, 2014: 11). To achieve this goal, aggressive promotion overseas by federal, provincial, and education sector agents, such as universities, were encouraged, and administrative changes adopted. Notably, “study permit applications were given priority over other temporary lines of business (i.e. visitors and workers)” which as observed in a 2015 report “suggests the importance of the Program to Canada” (Government of Canada, 2015: 12).

For the Federal Advisory Panel, the approach to international education by the Government of British Columbia was seen as an inspirational model. The Government of BC International Education Strategy had recognized that in 2010, international students had spent \$1.8 billion in the province (tuition, housing, living expenses), contributed nearly \$70 million in provincial tax revenue, were responsible for 22,000 jobs in the province, and comprised 7% of the value of BC exports (2012b: 8). Not only did growth in this area represent significant revenues for the province, but “British Columbia’s emerging labour market challenges make international education even more important, as we anticipate significant shortages of skilled workers in certain fields”. Due to the retirement of “large numbers of aging “baby-boomers” and fewer young British Columbians entering the labour market it is estimated that there will be more than a million job openings in B.C. over the next decade, with just 650,000 students currently enrolled in our Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) education system — a clear gap that cannot be filled entirely by young British Columbians” (10). International education was to “play a big role” by increasing not just the number of international students but retaining them in the provincial job market and making BC their “permanent home” (10).

To this end the whole education system was to be geared towards “internationalization”, creating a system in which all aspects of education (K-12 public schools, English language schools, private and public post-secondary institutions) would play an active role in soliciting and accepting international students of all ages, with the public school system and English language schools encouraging their international students to further their education in BC’s post-secondary institutions (and where the monetary returns were the highest). The status of the BC Council for International Education was enhanced, becoming a Crown corporation to support the internationalization of all these education sectors, and Memoranda of Understanding were secured with various countries (China, Japan) – recognizing that “British Columbia is well positioned to serve as a “social gateway”, linking North America with the Asia-Pacific region and beyond” (Government of BC, 2012b: 8)².

Calculations suggested that “B.C. will gain an estimated 1,800 jobs and \$100 million in GDP for every ten per cent increase in the number of international students coming to the province” and that there was significant growth potential, as the number of “international students worldwide currently tops 3.3 million” (of which Canada was a “destination choice” of only about 4%) and “by 2025” this market was “expected to grow to 7.2 million” (10). For post-secondary institutions in the interior of BC, the strategy represents a redefining of their primary roles, away from a domestic education policy intended to reduce geographic barriers to access higher education for residents outside of the lower mainland. These institutions would instead have an important role to redistribute the benefits of international education as local *economic drivers* due to the spending by international

students at these institutions and on local services and housing in their respective communities (10)³.

At a national level, the outcomes of this strategy have been dramatic, the goal of doubling numbers by 2022 was achieved by 2017 (at 495,000) and reached 642,480 students by 2019. This moved Canada's global rank up to 3rd, behind the United States and Australia, though nearly matching Australia, and surpassing China and the United Kingdom (El-Assal, 2020). As with immigration intake, Ontario remained dominant at 48% of new international students (306,735), and BC second with 23% (144,675 – up from 65,160 in 2010). Students from India lead (at 34%), followed by China (22%), and Korea, Vietnam, Iran, Bangladesh, Philippines, Japan, Pakistan, Hong Kong and Taiwan together at about 15% - for a total of some 71% of international students from the Indo-Pacific region. Notable has been the dramatic upsurge in students from India, surpassing China as our main source of international students in a short period of time (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018c). Incentives to increase overall numbers, that have included the reduction on restrictions to employment both as a student and after graduation (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018b) and extra points towards Permanent Residency for study and work in more remote areas of the province, have proven successful to dramatically raising the appeal of all interior institutions. Recent "headcounts" demonstrate a consistent ability to realize year over year increases in international student numbers and percentages.

Table 2. Interactive Reporting Tool – B.C. Post-Secondary Education Institutions by Sector

Institution	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	% Change (from 2017)
New Caledonia (Prince George)	1445	1755	2000	38%
UNBC (Prince George)	380	455	470	24%
TRU (Kamloops)	5680	6400	6925	22%
UBCO (Kelowna)	1520	1885	2210	45%
Okanagan (Kelowna)	1715	1910	1980	15%
	10,740	12,405	13,585	26%

Government of British Columbia, 2022.

Prominent in the numbers has been the ability of the colleges (New Caledonia, Okanagan) to make up for declining numbers in domestic student enrollment with international students, while the universities were able to enjoy increases in both domestic and international student enrollments over this three-year period. Thompson Rivers University (TRU) stands out for being recognized provincially as one of the leaders in this area at just over 1500 international students in 2012, to more than quadrupling this amount by 2019. While these institutions have demonstrated an ability to attract international students, it is far less clear that they have been able to address the qualities identified as necessary to retain them in these communities.

Policy Drivers and Policy Challenges

Immigration is unique, as there is a shared consensus among the most powerful agents of policy making in Canada. All the major political parties support this goal, and this extends to

all provincial governments, backed at all levels by financial and business sectors. Over the last twenty years, immigration and citizenship has gradually moved in status from a minor and discrete policy area to a major (if not the dominant) policy instrument to address a wide variety of domestic employment and financial challenges that have become more acute over the past ten years. As the federal government has stressed “[I]mmigration accounts for almost 100% of Canada’s labour force growth. Roughly 75% of Canada’s population growth comes from immigration, mostly in the economic category. Immigration addresses labour shortages in key sectors such as health care. Immigrants make up 37% of pharmacists, 36% of physicians, 39% of dentists, 23% of registered nurses, and 35% of nurse aides and related occupations” (Government of Canada, 2021b).

The potential from immigration serves the needs of governments and political parties (federal and provincial) in precluding discussions with principals of having to use less palatable policy instruments, such as reductions in services or benefits, or having to implement tax increases to maintain these foundational programs. In addition, there is a powerful coalition (business, academic, press) who see the goal of “100 million by 2100” as important to Canada’s future to address a range of issues and to enhance Canada’s status and clout at a global level (Saunders, 2019; Century Initiative, 2021). Recent higher targets are seen as necessary, but the emphasis is on the need for expanded target increases each successive year, as to remain in line with this goal. Constant policy revision is evident around numbers, driven by an awareness of changing policies and practices of other global competitors for immigrants generally, and international students in particular (given the yearly export value of the latter).

While this has created a responsive federal and provincial collaboration in fashioning and revising policies to be “competitive”, this exceptional consensus on immigration and international students may be understood as an unpredictable and imprecise instrument in its present form to successfully address such heady challenge, largely related to the drive to secure short-term gains and the varied motives of policy agents. The benefits, short and long-term, of meeting and exceeding “targets” may be quite detrimental to the experience of various classes of immigrants and international students if they remain insufficiently supported and critical concerns are not addressed, while undermining longer-term opportunities with other nations, particularly across the Indo-Pacific region.

The immigration system has long been plagued by challenges and limitations related to the levels of financial support for settlement (amounts and lengths of time), for integration and employment services for both individuals and families, and for the local organizations in place to serve them, particularly outside of the largest urban centres. A combination of often unsuitable and costly housing, low pay and limited employment opportunities, and insufficient support services to address the diverse and differing needs of individuals and families, has been well-documented within the BC interior (Drolet and Robertson, 2011, Teixeira, 2011; Teixeira and Drolet, 2018). The generalized dramatic rise in the cost of housing (particularly to rent), pre-pandemic, beyond major urban centres has only exacerbated these issues.

Despite the emphasis on “skills” as a primary means of access to Canada, recognition or acceptance of credentials has been too slow, leaving qualified professionals in many sectors working in areas where they are undervalued, underpaid, and their skills are not fully utilized to benefit the economy or sectors they were meant to support. This has led to various concerns over the practices of employers, particularly surrounding issues such as

discrimination and “closed shops”, as well as the quality of the integration and employment services available (Feenan and Madhany, 2021; Conference, 2021a; Association for Canadian Studies, 2021a & b). The Covid-19 Pandemic further aggravated these issues as services became more difficult to provide and job losses increased in numerous areas. Thus, it is not surprising that while many regions may attract immigrants, retention is a major issue.

Not only do the largest urban centres offer superior services and more diverse employment opportunities, but often the social – cultural connections that may address limitations and barriers confronted elsewhere. In addition, in the drive to meet recent targets, the federal government not only better resourced the process but lowered the required points for language skills and employment to increase the number of applications. Referred to as the “Covid Cohort”, permanent residency was made considerably easier for temporary class workers (international students) to meet immigration targets, but has raised concerns that language, cultural literacy, and other integration skills may be considerably weaker and affect employment prospects long-term (Conference Board, 2021a & 2021b). More funding and supports are considered a requirement for this group of entrants, with the need to closely monitor and respond to barriers to ensure success. While more federal money has been committed to expediting the backlog of applications for all categories (some 1.8 million in the queue as of December 2021, and rising to 2.7 million before declining), federal-provincial resolve in addressing these other critical issues remains uncertain (Thevenot, 2022; Robitaille, 2022).

Despite considerable research on the challenges confronting immigrants in general within Canada, international students have received very little attention as to their specific challenges, changing character due to introducing competitive regulatory alterations, and how they specifically serve labour and skills needs across and within provinces. While the consensus is that “more is better”, there exists important issues given the unforeseen levels of numerical success in this policy area which raises serious questions regarding institutional capacity, maintaining levels of quality in education systems, and sufficient support for international students, both on-campus and within the larger community long-term.

In the B.C. context, the drive for more students has led to concerns over the reduction in standards for entrants (grades and English language scores) and limited class and instructor capacity at the expense of serving domestic students in certain programs (Wylie, 2020). Financial motives are seen as far too evident in this aggressive and competitive effort to bring in international students. Crucial concerns over the treatment of international students have arisen, such as being subject to unregulated and unfair tuition fee increases on a yearly basis with no access to financial support within Canada (Celeste). Much easier work allowances upon arrival to be competitive and to increase opportunities for integration have also attracted a new category of international student with far less secure financial support from their home countries resulting in them being at a high risk of anxiety and depression (Stirrett, 2022). This is made considerably more difficult by unpredictable tuition increases on rates three times (or more) of those of domestic students.

In addition, there is a lack of academic preparedness (leading to academic infractions), and insufficient physical and socio-cultural institutional support for a meaningful exchange with Canadian students (Celeste, 2019). These issues were only magnified with the Covid-19 Pandemic, as online learning formats (“purposeless assignments”), continuous challenges connecting with unresponsive service providers, and social isolation (Thomas, 2021), while

paying full-tuition and subject to tuition increases, all further raised questions regarding what students were getting for what they paid. Such practices reinforce Stein's observations that international students in B.C. are "not part of the public served, but rather sources of income, vectors of trade, or objects of learning for British Columbia residents" (Stein, 2020: 150), and not experiencing the "reciprocity and equity" that should define an "international education" (Patel, 2022; Stirrett, 2022) - despite being understood as a crucial element to addressing our significant labour needs through immigration.

Missing in these emerging critiques are discussions of "community capacity" and the potential conflict with attracting and retaining skilled immigrants and young families necessary in many other areas of the local economy, such as trades, professionals, services, retail, and caregivers, particularly in smaller urban centres where post-secondary institutions have an over-sized impact on the local economy. In addition to the sizable "permanent residency points" incentivized in locating to smaller centres, these communities offer a safe environment in which to adjust to the culture and language, which are considered an important quality for choosing to study in Canada (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018a & b, and 2022; Thomas, 2021). However, the limited public transportation systems, lack of diverse forms of entertainment, and few local opportunities within respective fields of study all but directly encourage leaving these communities, in favor of larger centres upon graduation (Thomas, 2021). Thus, the local international student impact is significant in the consumer, employment, and housing markets, but remains transitory.

The city of Kamloops and TRU offers a cautionary tale in this regard. Well before the upsurge in international students, there was a recognized shortage in affordable and/or appropriate housing to rent or own for domestic residents (Kading and Walmsley, 2018; Kading, 2018), a challenge that grew as the student body increased and local rents rose dramatically. Even with more building and many motels becoming long-term rentals, by the fall of 2021 numerous students, particularly international, were unable to find any housing at all. This led TRU to commit millions of dollars to the rapid creation of "temporary work camp" style housing, highlighting the extreme level of need even though there were some 712 fewer students at TRU than pre-pandemic levels (Brady, 2021a; Brady, 2021b)⁴.

Beyond just rental space, young families are finding it extremely difficult to purchase any form of housing, and inflated house prices are deterring or discouraging residency in the city for even professional positions (Swensrude, 2022; Carrick, 2022). Such a context suggests the need for a revised approach at all levels of government to ensure not only a supportive environment for all immigrant classes, permanent residents, citizens, and domestic and international students, but also recognition of a challenge that is only in its infancy in understanding the economic and social impact of both continuously high immigration and international student numbers (McGugan, 2022; Bula, 2022b; Conference, 2022).

Trajectory – Possible Strategies

As has been demonstrated in this overview of policies and policy changes in the areas of immigration and international students, the "machinery" of government, both federal and provincial, has been significantly enhanced in competitive capabilities and collaborative initiatives to meet or exceed numerical targets – made possible by emigrants largely from the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, earlier criticisms of the federal focus on favouring only the most highly skilled has been tempered by provincial selection processes and a

recognition of other needed skill sets, such as caregivers, support workers, temporary workers and international students with diverse educational backgrounds.

However, as further revealed, these policy areas are not mutually reinforced with respect to addressing the need for successful integration, varied skills and labour demands, and limitations at the local level, as this “target success” raises serious capacity issues on several other policy fronts. The federal government recognizes that the “agency” of local and regional governments needs to be increased to better understand the varied demand for skilled labour and professionals in developing immigration policies and initiatives (Conference Board, 2021a). Left unexplored is how communities with post-secondary institutions may be better resourced to address local and regional needs without affecting the retention of other necessary immigrant classes within these urban centres e.g. competition for housing, employment, services.

Far less visible has been the scale of the post-secondary dependence on international students as an ongoing source of revenue as provincial contributions decline (Celeste, 2019), making it easy to imagine the drive to significantly increase tuition and/or the number of international students as provinces confront debts and other financial pressures coming out of the pandemic. This risk suggests the need not just for established policy agents to adopt a more comprehensive approach, but also for the activation of other agents in this process. Longer term domestic considerations and investments to address capacity issues within post-secondary institutions and related communities must be adopted to not just attract but retain these students and improve the integration and employment outcomes for all immigrants in Canada.

The lack of affordable and appropriate housing stands out as the most significant policy failure, a result of little resolve – provincial and federal – in the face of increased shortages being recognized for decades by community organizations and local governments as a “crisis” across urban centres beyond just the largest cities (Federation, 2011; Federation, 2013a; Kading and Walmsley, 2018; Kading, 2018; Scotia Bank, 2021). Less recognized, but of equal significance, has been the fact that Canada has a much lower proportion of student housing than other countries popular with international students, with “only enough student beds in Canada for about three per cent of the total student population, compared to the 20 or 30 per cent in the United Kingdom and the United States” (Bula, 2022a).

Certainly, for smaller urban centres to be competitive in retaining both immigrants and international students, affordable housing to rent or own is a significant factor (Thomas, 2021; Teixeira and Drolet, 2018), in combination with introducing other cost-saving measures of convenience such as improved transit services (frequency and coverage), integration and employment support geared to securing permanent residency, and community engagement - qualities that would also support local residents and domestic students (Federation, 2011; Thomas, 2021).

The federal government recognizes that the cost of housing is a significant factor in potentially discouraging the retention of immigrants versus other competitors, notably the United States (Conference, 2021a & 2022), and this factor may be the powerful inducement to finally compel federal - provincial action, should more local agents frame their concerns around attracting and retaining permanent residents to address immediate and future employment needs. Local governments, immigration service providers, and representatives of local economic sectors and post-secondary institutions, operating in a more informed and coordinated fashion, would represent an important form of agency in this regard. Of note,

the entity best placed to lead such an initiative are the post-secondary institutions, due primarily to their critical role in an important export market.

Given the premium placed on the export value of international education, which is recognized at both the federal and provincial levels for substantial growth potential and its ability to equalize the benefits of trade and immigration across and within provinces, post-secondary institutions are well-placed to advocate for redress to multiple local constraints while expanding their local role to better serve the larger goals of retention within immigration through fostering deeper local connections and opportunities. This has been recognized as the most important quality in retaining international students (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018a).

Research by Thomas (2021) at Thompson Rivers University revealed that the one upside of the Covid-19 Pandemic, for some international students, was the change to online courses freed up more time to work with Canadian residents, often developing close friendships and the opportunity to experience Kamloops in ways they had not before. In addition to providing more flexibility in the availability of courses, and perhaps lower fees to accommodate this important integration feature, the identification of international students who intend to seek permanent residency status and need to work to maintain their enrolment status and / or cover living expenses is a critical first step.

By adjusting course loads and providing the direct services in cultural literacy to support success in meeting immigration requirements and expanding employment opportunities would demonstrate resolve and investment in our international students as future citizens, which could be done through adopting a personalized immigration consultation process. Expanding international services to address the complexity of needs and hiring in accordance with changes in the international student body are important initiatives (Thomas, 2021). These services could be delivered by drawing directly from within, utilizing work-study programs and the institutions' own international graduates. The attractiveness of local residency could be further increased by offering international graduates access to courses and programs at domestic student rates to support their career endeavours geared to local and regional employment demands before having achieved PR status and through support for PR applications after graduation.

Despite being recognized as having a low degree of influence in relation to federal and provincial policy agents (Tamtik, Trilokekar & Jones, 2020), post-secondary institutions have considerable discretion to broaden their terms of local engagement in enhancing the retention of all immigrant classes⁵. As "agents of immigration, screening and preparing Canada's future labour force" (p. 424) they are "are effectively playing a role in selecting the next generation of Canadians" (p. 419), requiring deeper considerations of the needs of international students and the local community to successfully fulfill this role.

At a provincial level, there is an understanding of impending labour and skills needed in general areas, but more information and projections are needed at the local and regional level, particularly related to the gaps created in employment and the needs of an aging population (Chartered Professional Accountants, 2021). Thus, collaborations with universities, colleges, and the local community are necessary to better understand needs in education, labour, professionals, housing and other services to enhance capacity. This would ensure a better balance among various immigrant classes and with international students to foster retention. Ultimately though, the appeal of our largest urban centres to new immigrants and international students is not the "diversity", but the community and contacts

offered by the large presence of members of the same cultural background (Edmonston, 2016; Texiera & Drulet, 2018), a feature which is difficult to replicate in smaller and remote urban centres.

Kamloops and TRU have noticeably benefitted from the small but established Punjabi-Sikh community in providing initial contacts for housing, employment, community and cultural support for both new immigrants and international students. Students from India increased from 272 in 2013, to 2,041 in 2019, versus 37 to 333 for the University of British Columbia - Okanagan, and 21 to 102 at the University of British Columbia (BCHeadset, 2022). Anecdotal evidence suggests significant numbers are attracted to the larger centres, such as the lower mainland near cities such as Vancouver or Toronto, after graduation, or after having met PR requirements⁶. Additionally, while some arrive with significant familial support, in which employment is for PR experience, many others require employment to cover some tuition, all living expenses, and even provide financial support for family back in India, resulting in quite varied abilities to fulfill program requirements and to have a positive university experience.

Given the significance of this community, and conceivably other local ethnic communities, in providing important contacts and security in attracting considerable numbers to the benefit of post-secondary institutions, engaging these communities as to how to better support economic, temporary, student and family class individuals appears to be a critical role these institutions could have in fostering retention at the local level. While perhaps it is only by altering federal policies to ease requirements and access into Canada by extended family and friends that a broader community will be fostered by the individuals who are here, it is evident there is much that could be achieved through post-secondary institutions and local agents to better secure “pathways to attract and permanently retain international students” and other immigrant classes “to increase the supply of workers, support innovation and allow for a better regional distribution of immigration” (Government of BC, 2012a).

A rare but important appeal by a Kamloops City councillor to the Government of Canada, to allow International Students more hours of work during their studies, suggests an increased and necessary local agency. “We’re a hub for international students,” stated Councillor Bill Sarai, and “[T]hey’re a major part of our workforce everywhere you go in Kamloops” - adding “It’s unfortunate the cost of living has gone up everywhere.” “Do you want to see our international students suffering and leaving, not fulfilling their education?” (Landry, 2022). And while the Government of Canada has lifted the cap on allowable hours of off-campus work “to address current labour needs”, there does not appear to be a concomitant provincial or post-secondary accommodation in course requirements, scheduling or tuition, even though this change provides “more opportunities for international students to gain valuable Canadian work experience” to fulfill our immigration goals (Government of Canada, 2022). As documented, a broader local collaboration (and provincial coordination) with a focus on several areas of direct support and advocacy is necessary to retaining these new residents.

Conclusion

Our aging demographic and serious workforce shortages (Yussuff & Wiseman, 2022; Trichur, 2022) have compelled a new level of engagement on an unprecedented scale with

millions, and potentially 10s of millions of individuals with a myriad of skills and life experiences from across the Indo-Pacific region. How we manage our domestic needs with the aspirations of those seeking long-term residency in Canada will depend on successful efforts to ensure equitable benefits for both our domestic population, across and within provinces, and for these new residents and citizens.

With the Indo-Pacific region set to become the dominant economic region of the 21st century, through the conflation and promotion of economic class immigration and international education Canada has established the bases for an enduring wealth of cultural, social, intellectual, trade, and investment exchanges that defy the nationalistic rhetoric more evident among major global players at this time⁷. Preventing or mitigating the inevitable domestic tensions that arise from this degree of policy success depends on federal and provincial agents to visibly and aggressively address broader policy challenges made evident by attracting high numbers of immigrants and international students.

Of these, the crisis in housing is the most immediate, as it has already generated a toxic “domestic” versus “foreign” narrative around housing investment and ownership in certain regional markets, with corresponding federal and provincial policies targeting the latter but offering little in direct relief to exorbitant and rising prices and rents experienced across the country – in which the “erosion of housing affordability grows as an economic threat” (Lundy, 2022). Such a context inhibits the mobility we desire in matching skills and education with opportunities, and place students, domestic and international, and recent immigrants in more precarious housing contexts (The High Cost, 2022) – all to the detriment of the image we have fostered abroad. Continuing increases in immigration and international students could easily foment a broader domestic backlash should these housing needs go unaddressed, which cannot be reduced to a “latent racism” given the legitimacy of the concerns and the long-standing failings at all three levels of government in ensuring a stock of affordable housing and other critical services (Conference Board, 2022; Yakabuski, 2022).

Ironically, it has now become evident that only through increased immigration we may be able to sufficiently ramp-up the scale of the home-building sector and complementary industries to address the labour needs of our country, a main rationale for the federal government announcing the following revised yearly targets of 465,000 for 2023, and 485,000 in 2024 and 500,000 in 2025 (Dickson, 2022; El-Assal and Robitaille, 2022). Given existing limitations in policy coordination and public financing, this suggests a protracted and difficult transition to accommodate these complex tensions while attempting to expand the benefits from our achievements in engaging on multiple levels with the Indo-Pacific region.

Notes

¹ Understanding of “agency” is that “[At] the heart of political agency models is the principal-agent relationship between citizens and government; the principals are the citizens/voters while the agents are the politicians/bureaucrats” (Besley et al., 2006, 98).

² This strategy evidently builds on the municipal twinning efforts supported and financed by the Government of British Columbia in this period. See Harrison and Huang (2023) in this collection.

³ “Universities and similar post-secondary institutions are major economic drivers for local economies”, “create jobs staffed by a wide range of workers with a wide range of skills”, and “a sizable student population creates indirect employment among the businesses to serve them”. Successful universities constantly grow and build

“that can have a huge positive effect on the wider communities”. Proposal statement by the City of Yellowknife using the example of UNBC where 1200 employees and 3592 students have a regional economic impact of over \$700 million annually. See City of Yellowknife (2021).

- ⁴ TRU statement observed that "The situation experienced today is the result of a number of factors that have strained the city's affordable housing supply, including the influx of out-of-town workers to support pipeline and other construction activity, wildfire evacuees, and the loss of spaces to social housing and future developments" (Brady, 2021a). TRU maintains 1370 units for rent for a student population of about 14-15,000 on-campus students.
- ⁵ Memorial University (Newfoundland & Labrador) offers important insights on retention as the university assumed this important mandate in “repopulating” the province via international education, which includes hosting a federal immigration office on campus. See Knutson (2020).
- ⁶ Observation based on conversations with many Punjabi students from on campus, as residents in our neighbourhood, and as homestay students.
- ⁷ As may be observed, this *immigration-international education dynamic* is comprised of a complex array of state (nations of the Indo-Pacific region and all other regions of the globe, federal-provincial Canadian governments) and non-state actors (families from across the Indo-Pacific region and other regions, immigration and international student recruiters, private sector organizations in Canada), agents (federal, provincial and local governments) and principals (local residents, property developers, renters), and those with unrealized but increasing status (universities and colleges, student organizations, local employers, diverse cultural and community organizations). On the complexity of the Indo-Pacific region regarding state and non-state actors, and in relation to Canada, see Ramraj (2023).

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