

Attracting and Retaining International Students in Canada

Published: [May 1, 2014](#)

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As is the case in most developed countries, Canadians are living longer and having fewer children. Currently, Canada's [fertility rate](#) is below the replacement rate of 2.1., which, if not addressed, could place a significant burden on Canada's social welfare system and make it difficult for Canada to maintain its current economic growth rate. This demographic change is happening as the economy is demanding new talent with advanced education to drive economic growth. In fact, Employment and Social Development Canada, the government agency responsible for administering Canada's social welfare programs and services, predicts that [two-thirds of job openings](#) in the coming years (through 2020) will require postsecondary education.

Encouraging skilled migration, particularly through the recruitment of international students, is gaining momentum as a means of addressing Canada's demographic challenges, especially as relates to advancing the national economy. The Canadian federal government has been working proactively on developing channels and initiatives designed to welcome skilled migrants, and first communicated this vision in a report released in August 2012 by an Advisory Panel on International Education. This report clearly identified [international education as a key driver of Canada's future prosperity](#).

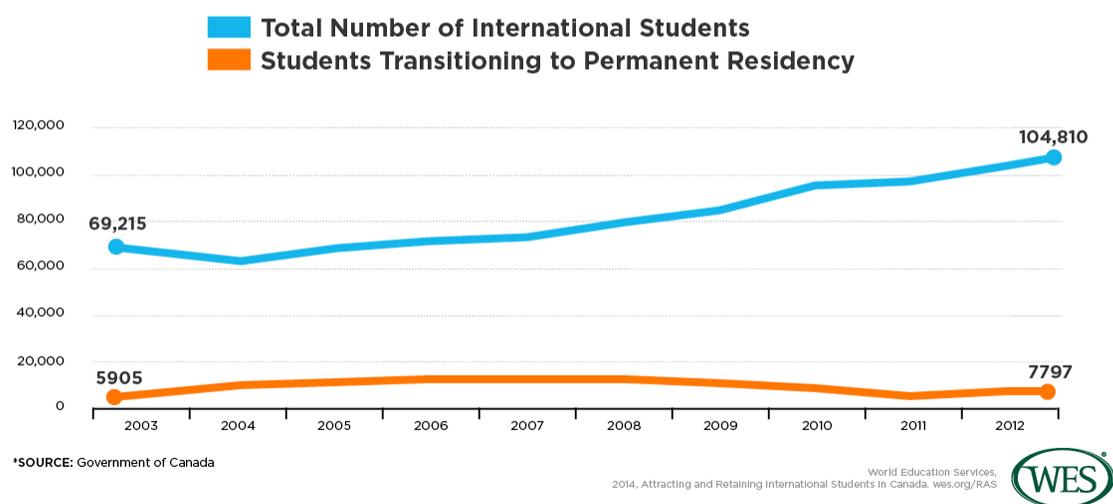
Consequently, Canada's government is aiming to double the number of international students at its institutions of higher education by 2022 through strengthening Canada's education brand as a leading destination for study and world-class research. Canada aims to attract more than [450,000 international students](#) from around the world.

Furthermore Canada's government has been modifying and [updating many recent initiatives](#) aimed at attracting and, perhaps more importantly, retaining international students after graduation. But federal initiatives alone are not enough; colleges and universities also need to join this effort and contribute to the retention of international students as future skilled migrants.

International Students are not Transitioning to Permanent Residency

Although the number of international students in Canada continues to increase, there has not been a corresponding growth in the number of international students transitioning to permanent residency status (see figure1). Over a 10-year span (1999-2009), only [5.3 percent of international students in Canada transitioned to permanent residency status](#). While this figure may not capture students who first change their status to temporary workers through [Provincial Nominee Programs](#), or by “[bridging](#)” from temporary work to permanent residency, Canada’s efforts indicate that the numbers of transitioning students remain low.

International Students in Canada



According to a 2013 [survey](#) of 1,509 international students conducted by The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), most international students arriving in Canada express the intention to remain after finishing their studies.

Almost half (46%) of those surveyed by CBIE plan to acquire permanent residency and to work indefinitely in Canada, while 25 percent plan to work in Canada for a period of up to three years and then return home. Given that the actual number of transitioning international students is significantly lower, the Canadian government has made a concerted effort to [ease the transition](#) to permanent residency, particularly through the recently established Canadian Experience Class Program (CEC).

Launched in 2008, the [CEC offers a pathway to permanent residency](#) – and eventually Canadian citizenship – for international students and temporary highly-skilled foreign workers with Canadian work experience. The CEC allows skilled foreign workers who have been working in Canada on a temporary basis and foreign graduates of Canadian postsecondary institutions with work experience to apply for permanent residency without leaving the country. Since the program’s inception five years ago, [more than 20,000 individuals have attained permanent residency in Canada through the CEC](#).

In addition to the benefits of the program related to expanded access and flexibility, the federal government has also revised rules governing temporary work permits for international students. The [Post-Graduation Work Permit](#) program allows students to work for up to three years after completing their studies with no restriction on the type of employment, thus making international student employability more feasible. The [number of work permits issued under this program has doubled](#) since the government revised it in 2008.

The recent international education strategy also aims “[to ‘brand’ Canada to maximum effect](#)” and strengthen the value proposition of studying in Canada for international students. However, delivering on the brand promise will require similar engagement at the institutional level through deeper understanding of international students and the provision of programs and services that enhance their experience and make longer-term employment options more viable.

International Student Retention Dependent on Delivering Positive Experiences

The [decision-making processes](#) of international students are complex, and branding plays an integral role in building trust for an intangible, experiential service. [Leonard Berry \(2000\)](#) notes “branding plays a special role in service companies because strong brands increase customers’ trust of the invisible purchase.” We also know that “...higher education is a professional service characterized by a high level of experience qualities which make the purchase risky and means that branding is important as a source of reassurance to students about the quality of what they will receive” ([Mourad et. al, 2010](#)).

Efforts to retain international students at the macro (policy) level need to translate into programs and services at the institutional level. Higher education institutions in Canada need to assess and adapt their programs and services in order to deliver positive experiences to international students.

International students come from diverse backgrounds and the transition to a new environment poses a range of challenges. For example, the [CBIE survey](#) cited earlier reported that in their interactions with other students, 23 percent of those surveyed experienced racial discrimination at school, while 25 percent experienced racial discrimination when interacting with members of the off-campus community.

It is important to realize that many international students are taking an “[investment](#)” approach to studying abroad and hence looking to measure their experiences and outcomes in terms of tangible and intangible payoffs. The difficulties that students often face in order to acquire a student visa to study abroad may elevate their expectations in terms of the returns on their investment. A mismatch in expectations and experiences can lead to dissatisfaction and poor retention, which in turn may lead to financial and reputational losses for higher education institutions.

As such, [universities play a key role](#) with respect to attracting, integrating and retaining international students. Student retention is highly dependent on delivering students positive experiences, i.e., bridging the student’s “[expectation-reality](#)” gap. The question of what is “good” about a particular institution should be framed within the broader framework of [what a](#)

[student is looking for in an institution](#). Therefore the ultimate goal of any retention effort should be [improved educational experiences](#).

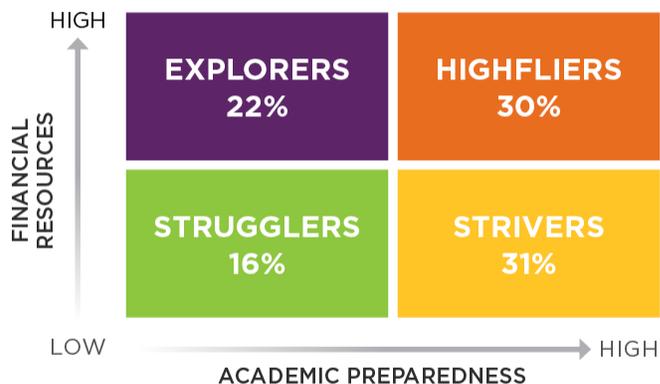
How Can Higher Education Institutions Improve Retention?

Positive educational experiences are dependent first and foremost on academic experiences; however, non-academic services also play a critical role in [improving retention](#). The first step for higher education institutions in working towards improving retention is to recognize that [“not all international students are the same.”](#) Differences in academic preparedness and financial resources, for example, can translate into differences in the expectations that international students set for their academic experiences.

Higher education institutions must put in place strategies that will help them identify and understand international student segments and how students’ expectations differ. By gaining a deeper understanding of how students diverge in profile and behavior, higher education institutions can apply an understanding of the diversity in expectations and experiences among international students to the design and development of programs and services, resource allocation, and their retention challenges.

At [WES](#) we have developed a [framework of international student segmentation](#), based on a survey of nearly 3,000 U.S.-bound international students. The research identifies four different types of students—Explorers, Strivers, Strugglers and Highfliers—based on their academic preparedness and financial resources. It highlights the differences in international student profiles and their corresponding needs.

International Student Segments



2013. Student Segmentation for an Effective International Enrollment Strategy. wes.org/RAS



We found that 21 percent of Explorers (those students with high financial resources, and low academic preparedness) do not plan to attend English language training programs as compared to 41 percent of Strivers (those with low financial resources, and high academic preparedness).

Likewise, 27 percent of Explorers rate location as one of their top-three areas as compared to 13 percent of Strivers. Although the research is in the context of the U.S. higher education system, the segmentation framework allows us to understand that international students have different needs and expectations. This in turn points to the need to differentiate recruitment- and retention-related practices.

International Student Retention Around the World

The importance of retention has been recognized in other countries including Australia, the U.S. and the UK. Consider the example of Australia's [Griffith University](#) which has developed a student-centered strategy for retention with a number of objectives related to improving student experiences. One of those objectives is targeted at enhancing compatibility between the expectations students have for their chosen program/institution and their actual experiences once enrolled. This is achieved, in part, by a data-driven approach, with systems in place that will monitor and evaluate international students' experiences.

Case studies from the U.K. suggest that [pre-entry information](#) and preparation for higher education should include the provision of information to incoming international students that helps guide choice, shape expectations and improve retention. This should include information on UK higher education in general, in addition to more specific details on the institution and program of choice.

The [University of Reading](#), for example, has developed a holistic model of student support comprised of two key elements: the one stop shop for student services and the university-wide system of personal tutoring. The findings of this project indicate that “monitoring progress, communicating expectations, effectively managing relationships bolstered by robust personal tutorial systems and a transparent network of support services will ensure student success”.

It is quite possible that some international students have unrealistic expectations due to a variety of reasons including insufficient or inaccurate information about country and/or institution. Therefore international students should be oriented on the ways in which their [studies abroad may differ](#) from their previous educational experiences in areas such as classroom culture, collaborative work, and expectations and criteria for success. Thus it is essential that higher education institutions improve the communication and relationship with students by actively discussing and [managing expectations](#).

Likewise in the U.S., the [importance of international student retention](#) has been recognized by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, which has commissioned research with [WES](#) to identify factors that inhibit and contribute to international undergraduate student retention and to offer recommendations of good practices. The [research report](#) will be released at the NAFSA annual conference in May.

In conclusion, the current discourse on student recruitment is moving towards complementing the goals of increasing enrollments with the actual [capacities](#) that institutions have to deliver positive experiences. Higher education institutions can [achieve significant competitive](#)

[advantages](#) by better understanding international students' expectations and delivering positive experiences.

Conclusions

Canada is attractive to international students, and government policy statements suggest that growth in the number of international students will continue and potentially accelerate in the coming years. However, sustainable growth is dependent on delivering the promise of positive student experiences. Policymakers and higher education institutions need to create pathways to facilitate the positive transition of international students into Canada. The existing framework of policies aimed at easing permanent residency is a step in the right direction.

Higher education institutions must also join in this effort in order to make this transition as successful as possible. One of the strategic priorities for higher education institutions, therefore, should be to understand diverse [international student segments](#), measure their expectations and experiences, and invest in high quality services.

Attracting international students is only half the story – the other half is to retain them through positive experiences. This will require a deeper understanding of international students so that institutions can provide proactive support, promote engagement and invest in creating positive experiences.

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