

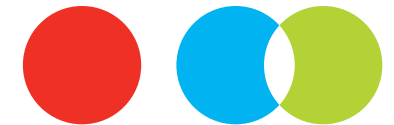
**The Conference  
Board of Canada**

# **From Student to Immigrant?**

Multi-step Pathways to Permanent Residence



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## Key Findings

- Study alone is rarely enough to make international students eligible for permanent residence. Of international students who gained permanent residence, 88 per cent had multiple temporary visas before transitioning to permanent residence.
- Multi-permit immigration pathways mean international students spend long periods in Canada without permanent residence, which can increase their vulnerability to exploitation by employers or losing their immigration status.
- International student enrolment in college/certificate programs is growing quickly, but students at this level of study have few purpose-built immigration opportunities.



## Our Recommendations

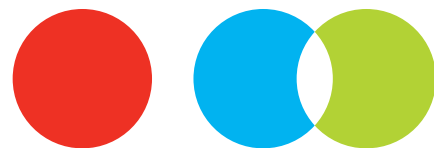
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and provincial/territorial governments can achieve greater coherence across the international student mobility program by developing an international student immigration and settlement strategy.
- Canada needs purpose-built immigration programs for international students, which will ensure faster and more predictable immigration journeys.
- IRCC can make immigration opportunities more transparent by creating an interactive platform that identifies pathways to permanent residence.
- To accelerate their success in the Canadian labour market, international students need robust settlement supports earlier in their immigration journeys.

# Introduction

**International students enrich education and campus life and contribute to the economy. International students who stay in Canada will be part of the skilled workforce of tomorrow.**

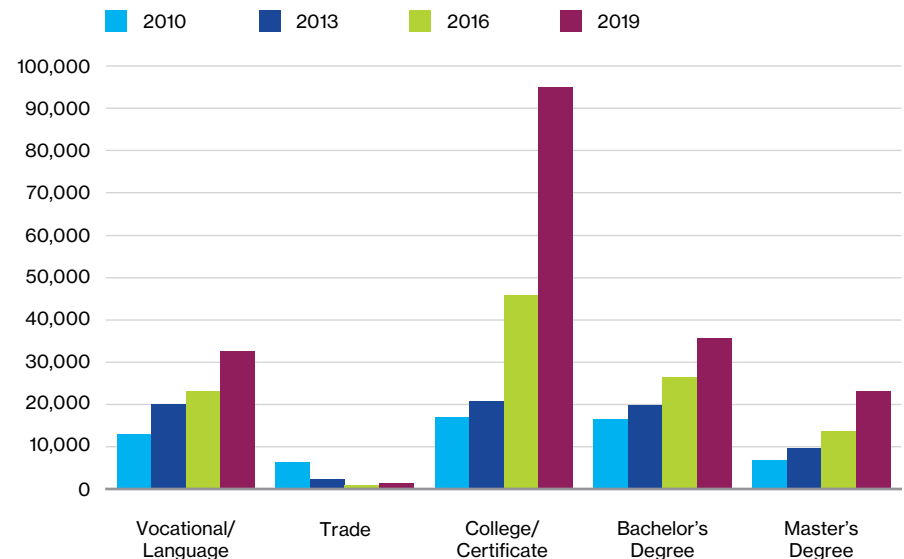
In Canada, international student enrolment is growing rapidly. In 2019, 199,500 study permits were issued to first-time permit holders, nearly three times the number in 2010. Growth is most pronounced in college/certificate programs, where the number of study permits increased fivefold from 2010 to 2019 (see Chart 1).

Between 2010 and 2019, 1,124,630 international students were granted a first study permit for six months or longer to study at a post-secondary institution in Canada.



**Chart 1**  
**Growth in First Study Permits Most Significant in College/Certificate Programs**

(number of international students issued a first study permit)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

# International Students Face Immigration Friction

## International students' lack a purpose-built pathway to permanent residence (PR). This is cause for concern.

The potential to work and immigrate after study informs prospective students' decisions about where to study.<sup>1</sup> Retaining international students after their studies is also a priority for Canadian stakeholders. Employers, as well as federal and provincial/territorial governments, often view international students as uniquely positioned to succeed in the labour market, in part because they don't face the same credential recognition barriers that many other new immigrants do. Many provinces and territories are interested in retaining international students in communities that aim to expand their population through immigration.

But Canada lacks a strategy to coordinate between granting study permits and selecting international students for immigration. As a result, international students face friction in the immigration system.

This friction could worsen because increases in international student enrolment outpace increases in planned levels of permanent immigration.

<sup>1</sup> Chew and Lovegrove, "UK and Canada Compete for Top Spot"; and Chew and Jacobs, "The South Asian Market Is Thinking Long-Term."

## Definitions

Unless otherwise specified, findings in this data briefing refer to the cohort of international students who were issued a study permit between 2010 and 2019. Subsequent permits include permits obtained before December 2020.

**Vocational/language level:** PTC/TCST/DVS/AVS in Quebec, as well as ESL/FSL, ESL/FSL and College, ESL/FSL and University.

**College/certificate level:** CAAT, CEGEP, or other post-secondary, pre-university CEGEP or certificate, diploma, or applied degrees granted by colleges.

**Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) permit:** a type of open work permit issued to students from eligible Canadian designated learning institutions.

**Other work permit types:** all work permits other than the PGWPP permit. For example, international students may get a work permit through the International Mobility Program (IMP).

**Cohort:** a group of international students who got their first study permit in the same year or range of years.

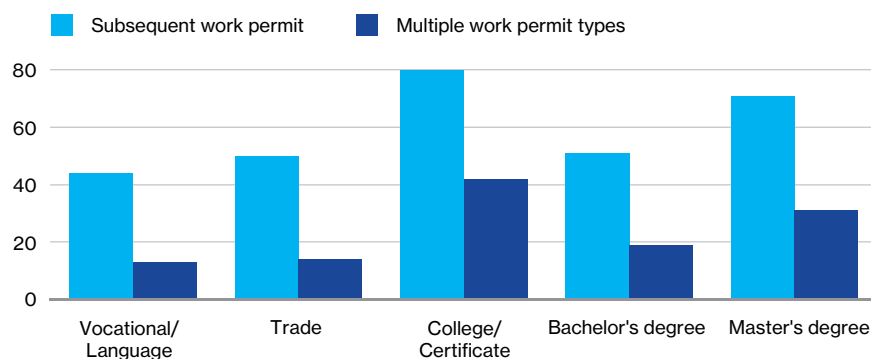


# Most International Students Hold Subsequent Temporary Permits

By December 2020, approximately 640,000 international students in the 2010–19 cohort had gotten a work permit after study, and 220,000 had gotten more than one work permit type (a Post-Graduation Work Permit Program permit and another work permit type). Both numbers will continue to grow as more international students in the cohort complete their studies and apply for work permits.

In the 2010–16 cohort, 61 per cent of international students held a work permit after study, and 26 per cent got multiple work permit types (see Chart 2).

**Chart 2**  
**Many International Students Acquire a Subsequent Work Permit**  
 (international students in 2010–16 cohort, per cent)



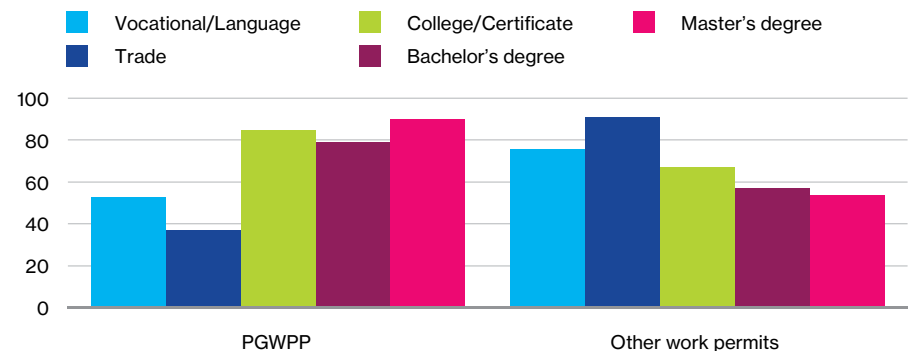
Source: Statistics Canada.

## Types of Work Permit After Study

International students used both the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) and other work permit types to work in Canada.

Overall, more international students get a PGWPP permit than other work permit types (see Chart 3). However, the rate of acquisition of work permit types varies depending on level of study. A previous study by Statistics Canada shows that among the 2010–14 cohort, students who got a PGWPP permit had a higher rate of transition to PR than those with a work permit through the International Mobility Program (IMP).<sup>2</sup>

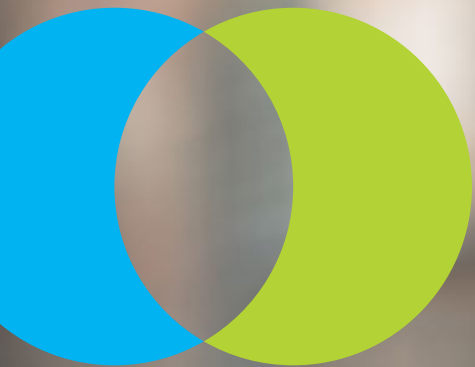
**Chart 3**  
**International Students Get the PGWPP Permit More Often Than Other Work Permits**  
 (international students in 2010–16 cohort who got a work permit after study, per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.

2 Choi, Crossman, and Hou, "International Students as a Source of Labour Supply," 7.

**88 per cent of international students who gained PR became permanent residents after holding multiple temporary permits. But multi-permit immigration increases vulnerability.**



# From Student to Immigrant

## International students use the full diversity of immigration programs to become permanent residents.

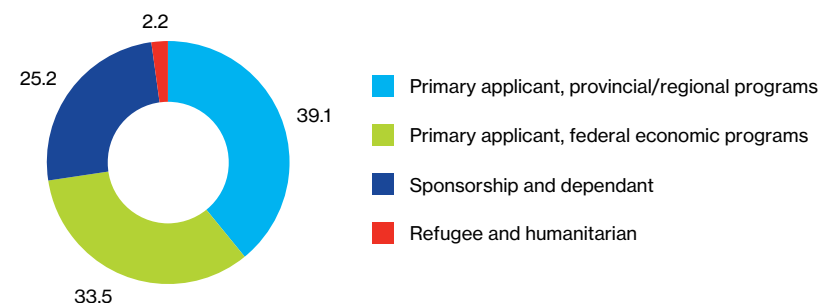
Some Canadian immigration programs include advantages for people with a Canadian degree. But Canada lacks a purpose-built federal economic immigration program for international students and has few at the provincial level. This shortcoming makes it difficult for prospective or current international students to assess their likelihood of getting PR.

For most international students, connections in Canada play an important role in determining their eligibility for PR. A quarter of international students become permanent residents through sponsorship or as dependants (see Chart 4 and Table 1). Many of those who became permanent residents through economic immigration programs also had to show connections beyond study in Canada, such as connections to a province or a particular employer.

**Chart 4**

### International Students Use a Variety of Immigration Streams

(international students in 2010–19 cohort granted PR by December 2020, per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.

**Table 1**

### International Students Use a Variety of Immigration Streams

(international students in 2010–19 cohort granted PR by December 2020)

	Number	Per cent
<b>Total</b>	<b>186,690</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Primary applicant, provincial/regional</b>	<b>72,935</b>	<b>39</b>
Provincial nominee	55,635	30
Quebec Skilled Worker	16,220	9
<b>Primary applicant, federal economic</b>	<b>62,565</b>	<b>34</b>
Canadian Experience	50,170	27
Federal Skilled Worker	11,540	6
<b>Family Immigration</b>	<b>47,185</b>	<b>25</b>
Sponsored spouse or partner	25,470	14
Dependant	21,405	11
<b>Primary applicant, refugee and humanitarian</b>	<b>4,050</b>	<b>2</b>
Protected person in Canada	3,355	2

Source: Statistics Canada.

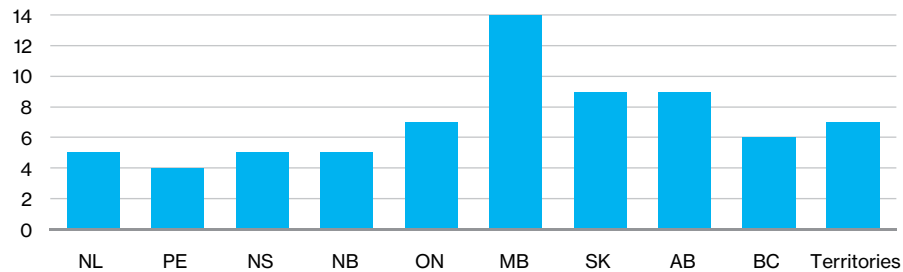


## The Provincial Nominee Program Is the Most-Used Immigration Program

The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) accounted for 34 per cent of international students who transitioned to PR, making it the most common way international students become permanent residents (see Chart 5).

**Chart 5**  
**International Students in Manitoba Most Likely to Get PNP**

(international students in 2010–19 cohort granted PR by December 2020, per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.

Each province operates multiple programs to select people for nomination, each with its own criteria to meet distinct policy objectives. Most provinces allocate some nomination slots to international students. But overall, provinces tend to nominate people with skills in high demand or people with connections to the province that could lead to long-term retention.

International students aren't necessarily nominated for the PNP in their province of study. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba each nominated several thousand people who studied out of province. More than half of international students who studied in Ontario and were nominated for the PNP were selected by another province. Inter-provincial mobility for the PNP was especially common among students at the college/certificate level.

## Immigration Outcomes Vary by Level of Study

The rate of transition to PR varies across level of study (see Chart 6). Two factors affect an international student's acquisition of PR: intent and opportunity.

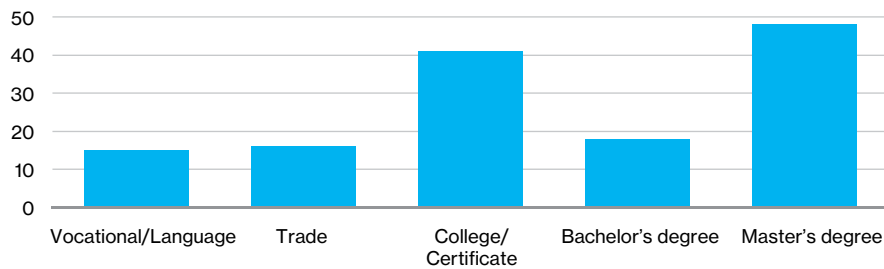
Some international students study in Canada but want to settle in another country. But surveys show that most international students who study in Canada hope to settle permanently here.<sup>3</sup>

Opportunities to transition to PR depend on international students' characteristics. Federal economic immigration programs tend to select people who have high educational attainment and work experience in a professional job. People without a university degree are typically not eligible for immigration unless they also have work experience in an in-demand profession, family in Canada, or strong ties to a particular province.

3 Canadian Bureau for International Education, *The Student's Voice: National Results of the 2018 CBIE International Student Survey* and *The Student Voice: National Results of the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey*.

**Chart 6**  
**International Students With Master's Degrees More Often Transition to PR**

(international students in 2010–16 cohort granted PR by December 2020, per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.

**Mismatch Between Intent and Opportunity**

Immigration data suggests a particularly large gap between intent and opportunity among students at the college/certificate level, the level with the most significant increase in international student enrolment since 2010.

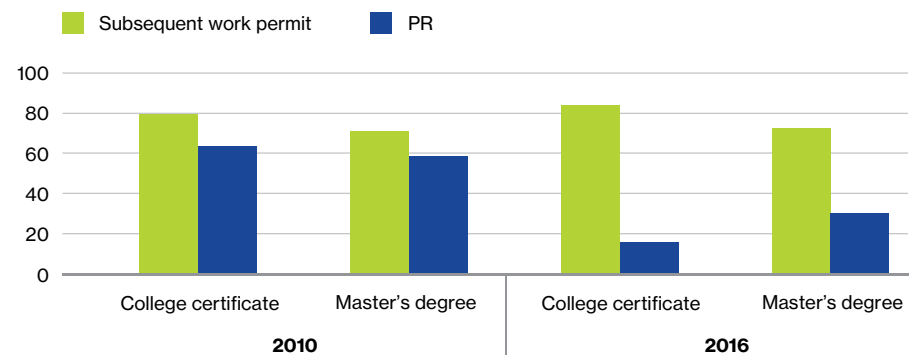
College/certificate students were most likely to get a work permit after study and most likely to have more than one work permit type (see Chart 2), both of which signal intent to settle in Canada. Surveys of international students similarly show that college students are more likely than university students to plan to stay in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

But the gap between the number of people who get a work permit and the number of people who get PR is growing. We illustrate this gap by comparing outcomes between students in the 2010 and 2016 cohorts in college/certificate and master's degree programs, which have a similar duration and a similarly high rate of international students seeking a work permit (see Chart 7).

The growing gap suggests that international students in college/certificate programs either take longer to become permanent residents or are less likely than master's degree students to be eligible for PR. Lack of alignment between study permit policy, international student intent, and opportunities to get PR underscore incoherence in the international education system.

**Chart 7**  
**Growing Gap Between Those Who Get a Work Permit and Those Who Get PR**

(per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Esses and others, *Retaining International Students in Canada Post-graduation*; and Canadian Bureau for International Education, *The Student Voice: National Results of the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey*.



## Study Alone Is Rarely Enough for International Students to Qualify for Permanent Residence

### Most international students work in Canada before becoming permanent residents.

Only 16,595 people—9 per cent of international students who were granted PR—became permanent residents after study at one level in Canada and no subsequent work permit. An additional 3 per cent of international students became permanent residents after two or more levels of study and no subsequent work permit. The remaining 88 per cent became permanent residents after a combination of study and post-study work.

The most common pathway to PR, accounting for 35 per cent of international students who became permanent residents, is one level of study followed by a PGWPP permit (see Chart 8). Nearly 15,000 people—8 per cent of international students granted PR by December 2020—became permanent residents after two levels of study, a PGWPP permit, and another type of work permit.

### Multi-permit Immigration Increases Vulnerability

Longer periods spent with temporary status in Canada and higher numbers of temporary permits increase international students' vulnerability to exploitative employment and stress about immigration.

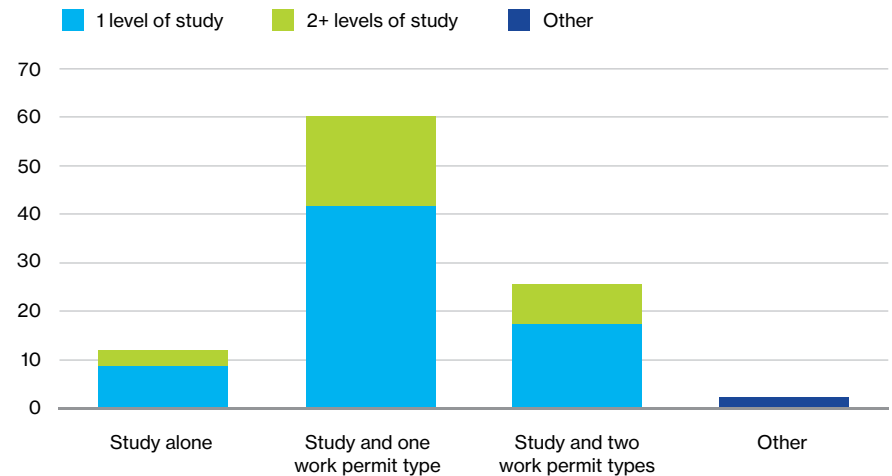
International students who want to stay in Canada are under more pressure than their domestic student peers to find a good job quickly because their employment affects their immigration prospects.<sup>5</sup> International students also face additional stressors because, like other newcomers, they may face racism and negative perceptions about their language ability, accent, or cultural fit.<sup>6</sup>

During this period before they're granted PR, international students navigate Canada's immigration system and the labour market with limited support. They're ineligible for settlement services funded by IRCC. Only some post-secondary institutions provide immigration and career support to international students after study. An error, an unexpected life event, a period of unemployment, or an unscrupulous legal representative can lead an international student to lose their immigration status.<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 8**

### Most Common Pathway Is One Level of Study Followed by Work Permit

(international students in 2010–19 cohort granted PR by December 2020, per cent)



Source: Statistics Canada.



5 Al-Haque, "University Internationalization, Immigration, and the Canadian Dream"; and Choi, Crossman, and Hou, "International Students as a Source of Labour Supply."  
 6 Arthur and Flynn, "International Students' Views of Transition to Employment and Immigration"; Scott and others, "International Students as 'Ideal Immigrants' in Canada"; and El Masri and Khan, "International Students' Lived Experiences."  
 7 Goldring and Landolt, *Producing and Negotiating Non-citizenship*.

# Recommendations

**The international student mobility program will benefit if IRCC and provincial/territorial governments take a greater leadership role.** Increased international student enrolment in post-secondary institutions has implications for the post-secondary sector and the immigration system. IRCC and provincial/territorial governments have an opportunity to take on a greater role in steering policies that relate to international students. We strongly recommend that IRCC, in cooperation with provincial/territorial governments, develop an international student immigration and settlement strategy. The strategy can create an intentional relationship among the number of study permits issued, pathways to PR for international students, and Canada's immigration objectives.

**Canada needs purpose-built immigration programs for international students. International students are seen by many stakeholders as ideal potential immigrants.** For example, international students' connections to their community of study can increase retention in places that are looking to boost immigration. But few international students can transition from study directly to PR, and immigration programs change over time. Immigration friction may make prospective students less likely to study, stay, and thrive in Canada. IRCC and provinces/territories can create faster, more predictable pathways to PR for international students, which will help Canada achieve its immigration objectives.

**IRCC can increase transparency by creating an interactive platform that identifies pathways to PR.** Canada has a complex immigration system, with over 60 different immigration programs. This complexity is a strength, allowing immigration to meet economic, family, and humanitarian goals while being sensitive to geographic variations in labour market needs. But its complexity also makes the system difficult to navigate. Clearer immigration pathways for students coupled with a platform that helps students understand their immigration options will ease the process of navigating Canada's immigration system and reduce the chances that people are recruited to study in Canada under false pretenses.

**To accelerate their success, international students need robust settlement supports earlier in their immigration journeys.**

Transition to PR can take years, and the period between study and PR is critical to longer-term success. The career opportunities that international students access during this interim period inform their eventual eligibility to apply for PR. Currently, international students navigate this period with limited or no support. By the time they're eligible for federally funded settlement services, international students have likely already faced the most significant barriers associated with settling in Canada. Greater post-secondary institution and government investment in supports early on will pay off as international students enjoy labour market success sooner.



## Appendix A

# Methodology

This study uses data from the 2020 Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) that were integrated with T4 tax files. The analysis relates to international students who were issued a first study permit between 2010 and 2019 that is valid for six months or longer for post-secondary study. The people in the cohort may have had a previous visitor visa to Canada, but they have not had a previous study or work permit. Data about acquisition of subsequent permits (work permits and PR) capture those who got subsequent permits by December 2020.

The data do not include transitions to PR using the temporary immigration measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as this program opened after December 2020.

The number of people granted subsequent permits will continue to rise over the coming years as more people in the 2010–19 cohort complete their studies and apply for subsequent permits. Therefore, data on immigration programs and pathways to permanent residence over-represent the experiences of three groups: international students from the earlier years of the cohort; international students who studied for a shorter periods of time; and international students who have shorter pathways to permanent residence. To reduce distortion due to people still on their immigration journey, several charts display data from the 2010–16 cohort.

Data from the IMDB have some limitations. The data show who applied successfully for subsequent permits. The data do not show how many people left Canada or stayed in Canada without a valid permit or how many people applied for a permit and were refused.



## Appendix B

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