Y4Y Québec

Navigating New Immigration Realities: Impacts on International Students

Policy Brief

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Date published
June 2025

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CONTEXT

In late 2024, the Canadian federal government introduced reforms to its immigration policy, mainly aimed at addressing pressures on housing, healthcare, and other services. This brief will introduce and address the three main elements of the reform that most affect international students. These are the new cap on study permits, the narrowing of academic fields eligible for Post-Graduation Work Permits (PGWP), and the requirement to demonstrate a minimum language proficiency. These three changes started applying to those who enrolled after 1 November 2024.

The national cap on study permits will reduce the number of new international students admitted to 437 000 in 2025, a significant drop from over 650 000 in 2023. This cap is part of a broader goal to scale back the number of temporary residents, including international students, from 6.5% to 5% of the population by 2027 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024; Lorne, 2025).

Eligibility criteria of the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program were adjusted to further reduce the volume of temporary residents. Graduates from programs in fields that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has designated as priority, based on an assessment of labour market needs, will now be favoured for PGWP eligibility. Certain private institutions in Québec, particularly unsubsidized institutions, have been excluded from Designated Learning Institution (DLI) status (IRCC, n.d.-a).

International students must now demonstrate to the federal government that their language levels are at least CLB level 7 in English, or NCLC level 7 in French (in reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Graduate students from colleges, polytechnics, or non-university programs, instead, must achieve a minimum of CLB level 5, or NCLC level 5. Approved language tests can be booked on the Government of Canada's website, with the option of writing them in-person or at a designated centre (IRCC, n.d.-b).

While the intent behind these policies is to manage immigration levels and reduce pressure on public resources, they have also led to various repercussions on international students.

INTERVIEWS WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

For international students who enrolled after 1 November 2024, these policy changes have introduced stress and ambiguity surrounding their post-graduation pathways. For example, does their institution still hold DLI status? Some schools may no longer, yet still offer programs that qualify for the PGWP based on factors such as program duration, type of certification, and other federal eligibility criteria (IRCC, n.d.-c). Even if the international student's programs still qualify them for a PGWP, and is run by an institution with DLI status, might the new study permit cap still block the student?

We interviewed two international students for this brief; one who applied before 1 November 2024, and one afterwards. Their identities have been kept confidential.

Our first interviewee enrolled as an international student after the November cutoff. They shared that they learned about these policy changes indirectly, during a meeting with an academic advisor. The reform was not the original purpose of their meeting, but the advisor mentioned it briefly, prompting the student to seek out more details on their own. The student is relatively confident they have complied with all requirements. The new language exam requirement, however, concerns them. While international students can take the exam in either English or French, the student expressed that the test would cause financial strain, as it must be paid for by the participant, and stress, not knowing whether taking the test in English in Québec would be an inferior option from an employment perspective. When asked whether they would seek clarity, the student admitted they do not know who to approach.

Our second interviewee enrolled as an international student months before the November cutoff. They did research into whether they were in compliance with all requirements, consulting the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) website, as well as various insightful social media posts from other international students. Successfully admitted, the international student's partner then intended on following the same process for the fall 2025 semester, until the new policies came into effect. This disruption introduced new stress and uncertainty for the young couple, as our interviewee is uncertain that their partner's program qualifies anymore for a study permit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While IRCC has committed itself to discretionary evaluation and stakeholder engagement of its International Student Program (ISP), this brief recommends the federal government legislate a formal assessment mechanism to assess whether these reforms have led to their desired outcomes, and whether there are any unintended consequences. A formal mechanism would help ensure that policy evaluation continues regardless of changes in government, shifting political priorities, or internal restructuring at IRCC.

2. This brief recommends that information transparency be improved. IRCC, along with Canadian academic institutions, ought to provide timely, multilingual, and student-friendly updates that clearly outline policy changes, PGWP eligibility criteria, and implementation timelines. This would help ensure that international students can access accurate information, enabling them to make informed decisions about their education and immigration pathways.

3. Institutional accountability should be strengthened. This brief recommends that Designated Learning Institutions (DLI) be required to offer more proactive and consistent support to international students navigating immigration-related transitions. This support should include providing clear guidance on how recent policy changes may affect students' eligibility for programs such as the PGWP, ensuring access to advisors, and maintaining open channels of communication. By taking a more active role in supporting students through these changes, institutions can help mitigate confusion, reduce stress, and improve outcomes from those pursuing education and long-term opportunities in Canada.

CONCLUSION

Canada's evolving immigration policies, including the cap on study permits, adjustments to the PGWP program, and the introduction of new language requirements, have introduced substantial uncertainty into the lives of international students. While the reforms aim to alleviate pressure on public services, their implementation have demonstrated gaps in communication, transparency, and institutional support. The perspectives shared by affected students underscore the urgency of addressing these gaps — not only to safeguard individual wellbeing, but to preserve Canada's reputation as a welcoming and reliable destination for global talent. Without a formal, legislated mechanism to assess these reforms, there is a risk that their long-term impacts will go unmeasured and uncorrected. We recommend a transparent, student-informed approach to ensure that immigration policy continues to serve both the Canadian interest, and the individuals who contribute to its academic and economic vitality.

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