Attracting and Retaining International Students in Québec: Setting an Ambitious Target

Brief Submitted by McGill University to the Committee on Citizen Relations Regarding Québec Immigration Planning

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on Québec immigration planning for the 2017-2019 period. This issue will have a significant impact on Québec's economy, as well as its social and cultural vitality. For Quebec to achieve its immigration, innovation, and economic development objectives, the government must adopt an ambitious, well-funded strategy to attract and retain more international students. This strategy must include a retention target that should be tracked as a performance indicator.

In recent years, Québec and the key ministries concerned have worked to improve the immigration process to attract and retain international students, in particular with the creation of the Programme de l’expérience québécoise (Québec experience program) in 2010. However, we must intensify our efforts in order to make Montreal and Québec the North American centre for young international talent. We have what it takes to attract and retain the best of this talent.

Problems Facing Québec and Montreal

As the consultation papers indicated, Québec needs more highly skilled immigrants to meet imminent demographic and economic challenges. With the exception of the Atlantic provinces, Québec is the Canadian region with the highest percentage of people over 65 years of age and shows a population growth of only 5.91 people per 1000 inhabitants, which is well below the Canadian average of 8.63 people per 1000 inhabitants.

Despite pressing needs, Montreal, the main centre of attraction in Québec, lags behind Canada’s other major urban centres. Immigrants make up 22.6% of its population, which is slightly above the Canadian average of 20.6%, but well below

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1 Statistics Canada. CANSIM, Table 051-0001
Strategic immigration will play a major role in the economic revitalization of Montreal. The "Montreal paradox" is well documented in numerous reports: despite Montreal's many attractions and assets, its economic performance remains stubbornly weak.

- **Comparer Montréal**, a report published by the Institut du Québec in 2015, compares Montreal to 15 other cities. Montreal ranked 15th in real GDP per capita, 15th for productivity, 15th for disposable income per capita, 15th for the integration of immigrants into the workforce, 14th for the percentage of the population with bachelor's degrees or higher (aged 25 to 64 years) and 11th for the percentage of young people with bachelor's degrees or higher (aged 25 to 34 years).

- **Montréal : Métropole de talent**, a new report by the OECD, ranks Montreal 18th among 19 comparable cities in terms of gross domestic product per capita and labour productivity.4

- Innovation and entrepreneurship: Montreal's SMEs engage in fewer innovation-related activities than those in other Canadian cities. More than two thirds of Montreal's SMEs do not feel that their company needs to innovate, compared with 40% in Toronto and somewhat less than 50% in Vancouver.5 Quebec also ranked last among Canadian provinces in business start-ups according to the Conference Board of Canada report, *How Canada Performs* (2015).

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that university graduates generally earn high wages, are more productive, healthier, and more successful in starting and developing businesses. Therefore, an increase in the proportion of university graduates in the population would spur economic growth in Montreal and across Québec.

### Why Focus on International Students?

Accepting international students as immigrants is the best strategic choice for Québec's future and its economic prosperity:

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4 OECD. *Montréal : Métropole de talent*, 2016. P. 31-33

Montreal must significantly increase the percentage of university graduates in the population to meet the labour market's current and future needs. The rate of university enrolment among native Quebecers has been steadily rising. However, it will take decades for that percentage to reach the level needed to be competitive if we rely solely on strategies focused on young Quebecers. Attracting and retaining a greater number of international students will quickly increase the number of skilled young talent.

International students have been educated in Québec universities and can join the labour market without additional training or the need to re-evaluate their skills, as would be the case for immigrants educated elsewhere. Furthermore, during the course of their studies they have already been immersed in Québec culture and values.

According to the OECD and Statistics Canada, owners of the most innovative small enterprises have certain characteristics in common: those headed by a person under 30 years of age are usually more innovative, as are those whose manager has a university degree (undergraduate). Moreover, companies headed by a person born abroad tend engage in innovation-related activities more than those headed by a person born in Canada.

**Attracting International Students**

Montreal ranks 7th in the 2016 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Best Student Cities index. The city and its universities have a tremendous, though largely untapped, power of attraction for international students. Montreal's beauty combined with the recruiting efforts of the various universities and organizations, such as Montréal International, attract a large number of students. However, Québec and Montreal have neither a defined, coordinated strategy involving all stakeholders, nor the necessary funding for implementation.
Although Québec has experienced considerable growth in the number of international students coming to study here, lack of coordination and strategic focus means it ranks last in Canada for growth in the number of international students since 2000. The leader, British Columbia, has experienced a growth rate five times higher than that of Québec.

Moreover, Québec is now in third place, after Ontario and British Columbia, for absolute numbers of international post-secondary students. In 1999, Québec ranked first in Canada.

Other governments have implemented recruitment strategies because they know that having international students brings economic benefits. In 2010, international students had an economic impact of more than a billion dollars on the Québec economy. However, Australia’s example demonstrates just how successful deliberate recruitment of international students can be. In 2014, international education had an economic impact of $17 billion and was that country’s most important service export and the fourth largest export sector after iron ore, coal, and natural gas.

Students from around the world are attracted to colleges and universities because of the quality of their programs and their reputations, which, of course, depend on the excellence of their professors. Often, professors from outside the country, in particular academic stars with well-established careers, do not fit the typical immigrant profile that Québec wants, mainly due to their age and language skills. However, given these professors’ significant contribution to Québec and their power to attract young talent, a more flexible immigration process is necessary to ensure their retention. We suggest that adjustments continue to be made to the selection grid so that these professors are not put at a disadvantage.

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6 Roslyn Kunin & Associates. *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada – An Update*. 2012. The economic benefit of international students to the Canadian economy amounted to 8 billion dollars in 2010. Unfortunately, we do not have more recent data.
Retaining International Students

International students are very open to the idea of a career in a city that most of them have learned to love. A recent study by the Conseil emploi métropole (CEM) and Montréal International (MI) showed that only 20% of international students said they do not want to stay in Montreal after completing their studies. More than half wanted to stay and 29% were undecided.⁷

There are, however, significant barriers to permanent immigration. The study conducted by the CEM and MI revealed that difficulty entering the workforce, the immigration process, and the challenges associated with learning French complicate the retention of international students. With sufficient will, coordination, and investment, these obstacles can be overcome. To give international students an opportunity to establish themselves successfully in Québec, efforts to retain them must start when they begin their studies and not after their studies are completed.

Thus, MI wants Québec to set itself the objective of increasing the number of international students receiving a Certificat de sélection du Québec from 2,800 new graduates in 2015 to 10,000 in 2019. According to the Montreal organization, these additional 7,200 international students would mean an annual increase of 143 million dollars in Québec's GDP and 51 million dollars a year in taxes for the Québec Government.⁸

McGill University embraces this idea that Québec should adopt an ambitious objective for the retention of international students as a performance indicator and target to be achieved as part of the province's overall immigration planning. The Government of Québec can rely on the full support of McGill University and a large number of other socio-economic and institutional partners as it moves toward this objective.

Recommendations

1. As part of Québec's overall immigration planning, set an ambitious goal to attract more international students and to retain them after graduation:

⁷ The Conseil emploi métropole and Montréal International. Étude des facteurs associés à la rétention des immigrants temporaires dans le Grand Montréal, 2015.

⁸ Figures provided by MI
o Become the Canadian leader in terms of the growth of international students over the next decade

o For example, Québec could follow Montréal International's recommendation to target the retention of 10,000 international students each year, starting in 2019

2. In partnership with the ministries responsible for finance, economic development, and higher education, create and implement a well-funded strategy for the attraction and retention of international students, which includes:

   o An evaluation of the best practices of governments that have been successful in attracting international students (Australia, Switzerland, British Columbia), identification of performance indicators, and implementation of a data collection system that can track progress as regards objectives and key performance indicators

   o A revision of the rules and the funding formula for universities and colleges to encourage institutions to attract more international talent and to measure their performance in this regard

   o A comprehensive program to fund internships in Québec organizations (private, public, and NGOs) for all students (regardless of origin) enrolled in universities and colleges in Québec

       ▪ This program would give international students the opportunity to gain work experience and develop a professional network in Québec, while allowing Québec employers to discover the benefits that international students can bring to their businesses

       ▪ A special regional program could offer combined internships and language immersion for international students in the regions of Québec in partnership with universities, colleges and local employers

   o Free, flexible French language courses that combine state-of-the-art online and in-person training

   o Placing immigration officers on university campuses, in the international student services offices, in order to provide information to candidates for immigration and help with permanent residency and to guide students through the process

3. Continue to streamline the immigration process and to be responsive to the special needs of international students, for example:

   o Allow for concurrent CAQ and study permit applications
o Eliminate the requirement for students to apply for a new CAQ whenever their level of study changes

o Lower the age at which a custodian is required to 16 years and under, as is the case in other Canadian provinces

4. Continue to adjust the selection grid to encourage university professors and top researchers to settle in Québec