Federal government looking to international students to help address Canada's labour shortage

October 17, 2022

In light of Canada's post-pandemic labour shortage and unprecedented interest from immigration applicants around the world, the federal government has introduced various initiatives to strengthen the country's immigration systems. Most recently, Canada has focused on giving international students more opportunities to work and remain in the country during periods of study.

Canada temporarily lifts off-campus work week cap

In a temporary measure of note, the government has cancelled its 20-hour-per-week limit on the number of hours that eligible post-secondary international students can work *off campus* during their Canadian studies. This change is prescribed for a specific period, from Nov. 15, 2022, to Dec. 31, 2023. Additionally, provided their application is approved, foreign nationals who submitted a study permit application by Oct. 7, 2022, will also benefit from this temporary change to the rules governing their work in Canada.

The temporary removal of the working hours cap for eligible students is designed to help international students gain valuable work experience during their time here. Given that most post-secondary international students are allowed to work on or off campus, and the fact that nearly half of them have reported earning income during their studies in Canada, this change also provides a significant boost in the labour force available to Canadian employers.

However, study permit holders will not be allowed to compromise their full-time study schedule as a result of the temporary removal of the hours cap. To avoid misuse of this temporary legislative change, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has announced that any study permit holder who stops studying or reduces their course load from full- to part-time study will not be eligible to work off campus. However, it remains the case that students eligible to work on campus are not subject to a cap on hours for *on-campus* work.

Pilot project to automate study permit extensions

IRCC is also looking at other ways of processing study permit extensions and, as such, is exploring the concept of automating these types of extension applications through a pilot project. This project will be limited to the types of applications that have a consistently high approval rate. For example, in 2021, IRCC processed nearly 119,000 study permit extension applications, with an approval rate of 97%.

This pilot project will involve a reduced group of applicants and expedite the extension of their study permits. However, the automated process will neither refuse applications nor recommend refusals: any decision to refuse an application will continue to be made by an officer. As with any automation process, should the project be met with success, it would free up government resources and allow for more complex applications to be assessed and processed on a more efficient timeline.

The federal government also enabled the following measures to speed up the immigration application process:

- a transition period for international online students; and
- an 18-month extension for students whose work permit has expired, such as post-graduation work permits (PGWPs).

These new initiatives represent an acknowledgement by the Canadian government that immigration, and in particular the work provided by international students, will be crucial to addressing Canada's labour shortage.

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