**Lack of federal resources fails international student strategy**

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The Globe and Mail

Published Monday, Jun. 01, 2015 3:00AM EDT

Last updated Monday, Jun. 01, 2015 12:15PM EDT

Canadian officials are finding it difficult to keep up with the increasing demand from international students, leading to waiting times for visas that are weeks longer than those in Britain or the United States, and reducing the program’s competitiveness.

The lengthy timelines are contained in a report from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), obtained by The Globe and Mail through freedom of information legislation. While the federal government wants to double the number of students from abroad by 2022, it has not provided sufficient resources to process the increased numbers, the report says. CIC blames this “lack of coordination” between federal departments for an increase of 30 per cent in processing times for study permits and a doubling of the time for temporary resident visas.

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**Explainer**

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Colleges and universities say the government must address the gaps in its international student strategy.

“The question of visa processing times is a critical one in terms of attracting top students. If our competitors are able to turn around visas faster, all the marketing efforts, all the recruitment efforts, all the offers of scholarships fail,” said Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada.

The report also recommends clarifying what role international students play in Canada’s overall immigration strategy. The goal of doubling student numbers was set by a 2012 panel as a way to fill labour-market shortages and increase global economic links. But those economic needs can’t be met without government co-ordination, said the panel’s chair.

“Our biggest challenge on this file is a structural one: It’s not having a department in Ottawa that champions education. As a result, there is nobody from my point of view that has responsibility for it, and the departments that are involved, it’s not a major issue for them,” said Amit Chakma, president of the University of Western Ontario, who led the 2012 panel.

Much of how international student policy is decided depends on winning over key politicians, he added. “Jim Flaherty championed the panel. That was more of an accident than anything else, he took a personal interest in it. And that gave us momentum in Ottawa. With his [death], we lost that.”

Released at the end of April, the CIC report comes only months after the government introduced its new Express Entry immigration system. Express Entry ranks potential immigrants based on their age, education and skills, and has been promoted by the government as a way to expedite the entry of highly qualified immigrants.

Every few weeks, those with top scores receive an invitation to apply for permanent status. But some international students have said they are concerned they lack the number of points that have led to invitations.

Before the introduction of Express Entry, students who had graduated from Canadian postsecondary institutions and had Canadian work experience were almost certain to be able to stay in Canada.

One graduate of George Brown College, who wanted to remain anonymous because she is afraid she could lose her job, does not think she will have enough points to stay in Canada under the new system. She may continue working after her work permit expires this summer.

“I can’t stay here if I’m not working. … I came here as a visitor for 15 days seven years ago and decided this is the place I want to live. Going home is my last option,” she said.

The CIC report cautions that some within the department are uncertain of the labour-market impact of increasing the number of international students.

Doubling the number of students and “providing some applicants with the ability to work off campus without a work permit may impact Canadians’ access to employment and study opportunities,” the report says.

At the same time, the report stresses the positive impact of international students, including billions in GDP annually.

Dr. Chakma said the report shows that in spite of the lack of sufficient resources, the international student strategy is succeeding. Last year, CIC issued more than 120,000 study permits, the highest number on record.

“We’ve had double-digit growth,” Dr. Chakma said. “I would say this is a growing pain.”