

# Want to be an international student? Bring hope, and nerves of steel

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## Barriers to permanent residency are formidable, but can be overcome

Prajwala Dixit · CBC News · Posted: Apr 14, 2018 9:00 AM NT | Last Updated: April 14



Precious Familusi says more international students would make Newfoundland and Labrador their permanent home if there was a clear system. (Prajwala Dixit/CBC)

A few weeks ago, I saw a poster in St. John's that piqued my interest: "Fairness for International Students," it said.

As a former international student who made the decision to stay in this country and start a family, I was elated to see a one-of-a-kind forum focused on the needs of international students at Canadian universities.

Headed by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), this forum — held a couple of weekends ago at Memorial University's main campus in St. John's — was part of a larger national campaign aiming to equalize the status of international students. The campaign addresses several issues faced by foreign students in Canada including differential tuition fees, a need for clearer pathways for permanent residency and better support programs, including ones addressing mental health.

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- **Province spending \$392K on work placements for international students**
- **Atlantic provinces adopting program to keep foreign students after graduation**

Young people might not anticipate these issues when they decide to study abroad. Like many other international students, I chose Canada for my post-secondary education not only for the prestige of a North American education but also due to its acceptance of immigrants.

Excited to begin a new chapter in my life, I arrived here with hope-filled eyes.

But like others before me, I soon realized that the life of an immigrant and international student requires nerves of steel.

## Culture shock, social isolation

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One major issue that is seldom discussed — but was addressed during the forum — was the mental health of international students.

Along with juggling academic and financial pressures, many international students silently battle culture shock, social isolation, the lack of a reliable social network, abusive supervisors, xenophobic experiences and language barriers — every day.



Precious Familusi, Mary Asekome and Sofia Descalzi discuss problems that international students face. (Prajwala Dixit/CBC)

The Student Wellness and Counselling Centre (SWCC) on the St. John's campus and the Counselling and Psychological Services (CPS) on the Grenfell campus offer students quality mental health supports at MUN.

Although both offer a variety of group counselling sessions, neither has a program addressing the specific needs of international students. Long wait-times for both walk-ins and appointments, combined with the social stigma associated with mental health, often deter international students from seeking the help they need.

And that need is there. I was struck by what Charlotte Kiddell, the deputy chairperson of CFS, said in a series of tweets during the forum.

"International students face many systemic barriers — such as financial insecurity, lack of healthcare, lack of access to jobs — that are burdens on their mental health & wellbeing," she wrote.

"If universities have aggressive strategies to recruit international students, they should have aggressive strategies to support international students as well."

## Drawing, then keeping, global talent

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Post-secondary institutions like MUN are excellent gateways to global talent.

Between 2010 and 2013, Canada welcomed 385,000 international students, according to Statistics Canada.

This large influx has provided the country with a large pool of well-educated people with Canadian experience — professionally and personally — from which it often chooses its future permanent residents and citizens.

However, this same study also found that only 20 to 27 per cent of international students went on to become permanent residents within 10 years of acquiring their first study permit.





Rizza Umali, the racialized student representative for CFS-NL and recently elected executive director of communications for GSU. (Prajwala Dixit/CBC)

Although many of these students would like to make Canada their permanent home, an extremely cumbersome and expensive permanent residency process is a major barrier.

Currently, the Provincial Nominee Program, the Express Entry Program and, most recently, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot are all different routes with one destination: permanent residency.

But the process weighs heavy on the pocket, costing more than \$1,000 per person. That doesn't include the cost of any medical and background checks, should they be required.

Conveying her frustration with the process, Mary Asekome — international student commissioner with CFS — noted that the website for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) talks about express entry.

"But the [immigration] consultants have their own ways of telling you to apply [for permanent residency]," she said. "When you go to your lawyer, there's another way to apply. There is not one clear pathway for international students to apply."

Precious Familusi, who will become executive director of student life at MUNSU in May, said that a clear system for permanent residency would encourage international students to make Newfoundland and Labrador their home.

A lack of clarity on the best possible route to permanent residency, difficulty accessing the financial means to go through the residency process, and relatively long wait times have often translated into low retention rates of international graduates.

This is a grave problem for Newfoundland and Labrador, which is looking to attract approximately 1,700 immigrants annually by the year 2022.

## Not cash cows

The Canada-India Centre for Excellence at Carleton University determined that in 2014 international students spent \$11.4 billion on things like tuition fees and accommodations, working out to the equivalent of \$9.3 billion to Canada's gross domestic product.

Despite this, foreign students continue to be treated merely like cash cows by universities.

This fall, incoming international students at MUN will pay almost 4.5 times more than local residents.

"Differential fees are colonial," Rizza Umali, racialized student representative for the CFS-NL, told the forum, mirroring the sentiment in the room.

"Systemic institutional neglect of international students is colonial. [This] promotes colonialism on a global scale."

## What I have learned

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The life of an international student and an immigrant tests one's courage, strength and patience.

But, having tread this path — as a graduate engineering student who decided to stay — I can safely say that it is worth the wait to call Canada your home.



The Canadian Federation of Students forum was held at at the University Centre at Memorial University in St. John's. (Prajwala Dixit/CBC)

Yes, it comes with twists and turns, but here are a few pointers to help navigate this journey.

Volunteer: It builds your social network, makes meaningful friendships, translates into gainful employment and is great for your mental health. It also looks great on your resumé.

Get a part-time job: While it is hard to balance a full-course load with work, gaining some Canadian experience will help financially, socially, professionally and personally.

Learn french: Find the time to learn french. Being fluent in both official languages of Canada is a huge advantage, for permanent residency and for employment.

Know the process: With changing governments come changes in rules and laws. Always ensure that you are up-to-date with changes IRCC makes to the existing rules. This can impact your permanent residency process.

Prepare financially: Save from the minute you arrive for your permanent residency process. Invest it into a low-risk GIC for future use. Even \$10 a week (for two years) will alleviate permanent residency costs in the future.

## About the Author

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Prajwala Dixit is a freelance writer living in St. John's. She is an engineer by education, a full-time mother by profession and a writer by passion.

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