

Report from the 2017 Atlantic Leaders' Summit: The International Student Experience

Monday, July 10, 2017



Atlantic Canada has started to gain traction in retaining international students as immigrants, and their contributions are already driving economic growth. That message was clearly delivered at the July 10th Atlantic Leaders' Summit, alongside a clarion call to action from Federal Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Minister Ahmed Hussen. In a keynote address that opened the Halifax event, which was presented by the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), Minister Hussen called on business, academic and political leaders to welcome international students and help them become contributors inside a region they are proud to call home. "International students must play a key role" in the success of the Atlantic Growth Strategy, a federal policy designed to turbo-boost the regional economy. "At stake is the continued growth and vibrancy of this region," Minister Hussen told the Leaders' Summit, an event that attracted more than 100 business, government, community, student, academic and political leaders.

Margaret Brigley, President and COO of Corporate Research Associates (CRA), said the 14,000 international students attending post-secondary institutions in the region represent a potentially valuable resource in Atlantic Canada. "With declining population and youth outmigration facing the region, these students could present one solution for Atlantic Canada," Ms. Brigley told delegates. The results of [CRA's 2017 International Graduate Study](#) show a majority of international students would like to stay in the region if they can find suitable employment:

- 77% agreed Atlantic Canada "is a place I would like to work and live after graduation."
- 94% agreed they felt welcomed in Atlantic Canada as new arrivals.
- 84% said they made close friends in their communities.
- 79% agreed there were "people of my culture in the community."

Despite the affinity for the region among international students, a majority also believe employment prospects are better outside Atlantic Canada. International graduates also felt the region has relatively high taxes and a less than robust business environment.

The Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP), under which an additional 2,000 immigrants per year could be welcomed to the Atlantic region, is clearly designed to address some of these issues. Minister Hussen described the pilot as the first employer-driven immigration stream in Canada. So far, more than 600 employers have expressed interest in the new program; 400 companies have received provincial designation allowing them to attract skilled immigrants; and 250 skilled workers have been recruited to the region under the AIP.

Flexible, innovative immigration policies are certainly essential for large employers like J.D. Irving, Limited, which owns the Halifax shipyards and extensive forestry-industry holdings in the region. Coleen Baxter, the company's Vice President of Human Resources, said the company expects to hire 8,600 new employees over the next few years, 400 of them new graduates. "We realized to fulfill these needs we

can't do it in Atlantic Canada alone. Our hiring continues to grow as we face an aging demographic in Atlantic Canada." Ms. Baxter said her firm is working closely with universities and other partners to recruit talented immigrants. J.D. Irving is also active in co-op programs which bring students into the organization as soon as possible, opening the door to "conversion to full-time employment."

Shannon MacDonald, a Partner with Deloitte, said her firm's leadership is actively recruiting a diverse workforce as a key part of its business strategy. "Diversity is not a numbers game. Diversity is being innovative because we have different mindsets around the room," Ms. MacDonald said. "If you're sitting around the table and everyone is thinking the same thing, you're at the wrong table." Both Ms. MacDonald and Ms. Baxter said governments have moved this year to expedite the processing stream for talented newcomers.

Speaking on the same Employers' Panel, Jordi Morgan said governments still have a long way to go to help member companies in the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB). Mr. Morgan, the CFIB's Vice President for Atlantic Canada, said the federal government is "tone deaf" to the needs of the organization's 109,000 member companies. While the labour needs of small- and medium-sized businesses will "escalate exponentially" in the region, companies are reticent to get involved despite the deepening necessity to do so." Why? Mr. Morgan said business is frustrated by the misalignment of immigration policies and processes. "Policy objectives do not seem clear. Processes are not supportive of the objectives that are there." The CFIB thinks business should "demand better from our federal government" with regard to public policy clarity and expedited immigration processes.

Saeed El-Darahali, the President and CEO of the Dartmouth-based communication software company SimplyCast, said he understood the frustrations that Mr. Morgan described. His solution to finding talented staff, at SimplyCast, was to develop a recruitment process that attracted people who would support business success rather than reflect cultural norms. The region's sometimes negative attitude to so-called CFAs – come-from-aways – is "causing us a problem." At his own firm, for instance, Mr. El-Darahali realized his middle managers were screening applicants on the basis of whether they drank the same beer or supported the same hockey team. "They were looking for friends to hire."

The solution was recruiting employees who were a "good fit" for the business, and retaining them through a profit-sharing scheme and a creative workplace environment. Cultural background and ethnic origin simply shouldn't matter. Mr. El-Darahali said Atlantic firms have to stop talking about diversity and inclusiveness and start building global businesses. "A population tsunami is coming," he said, and many businesses could fail. "We're going to be begging for people to come" to the region.

A panel of recent international students graduates showed that if we attract the right young people to the region, they will indeed want to stay and contribute. Christine Qin Yang made her way from China to Atlantic Canada as a student at Mount Saint Vincent University, and now works as an International Relations Officer for the Nova Scotia Department of Intergovernmental Affairs. She succeeded in part, she said, by taking jobs that were available, including part-time work at McDonald's, and networking as much as possible. "Don't think of yourself as an outsider. Think of what kind of value you bring to the community."

Freya Qi also made the long trip from China to attend a post-secondary educational institution in Atlantic Canada, the University of Prince Edward Island. Ms. Qi, who now works as a Student Recruiter and Advisor at her alma mater, said one barrier to her success in Canada was the fact that she had “never worked in her life.” In China, she explained, high school students devote 16 hours per day to their education and don’t take jobs. In Charlottetown, she adapted by volunteering at a soup kitchen, working as a housekeeper, and gradually building a resume. Her advice to students who want to stay in the region: “Start working when you can, (and) start volunteering.”

South African native Mischka Jacobs made her way to Canada by way of Dubai and France. Jacobs enrolled in a translation degree program at Université de Moncton after googling “Canada, French university, (and) translation.” While Ms. Yang and Ms. Qi said Canadians were surprisingly open and helpful, Ms. Jacobs said she found Canadians “friendly but reserved. I never found it difficult to integrate until I came here.” Jacobs eventually built a support network, and found employment as a Communications and Event Coordinator with VENN Innovation Network. Today, she says Canada is “where I belong” and she intends to build a career here.

Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) Mayor Mike Savage, who delivered the second keynote address at the Leaders’ Summit, said it’s essential that the city and the region retain young people like Mischka Jacobs. HRM itself has stepped up by introducing a paid internship program for new graduates from colleges and universities. “If young graduates get their first job in Canada, there’s a good chance they’ll get their second job here too.”

Mayor Savage said the city’s recent economic strength – its growth outpaced that of Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver last year – is driven to some degree by young people taking jobs in emerging sectors like Information Technology. Halifax is now one of the top five Canadian tech hubs, and ranks second for tech diversity, he said. Bike lanes, affordable housing, and brew pubs are all making Halifax a more attractive place to live, said the mayor, who outlined plans to grow the city’s annual GDP to \$30-billion in 2031 from \$18-billion today.

Halifax also reversed the region’s demographic trend over the last two years by attracting more young people than it was losing. “We were seeing big gains in the 25-39 demographic, with 3,800 more coming to Halifax than leaving it. . . Cities that aren’t growing are slowly dying. Young people quickly recognize it. Once you fail to be a centre for young people, the economy will start folding in on itself.”

For the AAU, presenters of the Atlantic Leaders’ Summit, the event achieved its objective: an open discussion among all the key players focussed on the absolute need for greater collaboration and cooperation across the region.

Robert Summerby-Murray, President and Vice-Chancellor of Saint Mary’s University praised the level of discussion as well. He wrapped up the day by offering thanks to participants and issuing a warning about Canada’s ability to compete for international talent. He paid particular tribute to the panel of international students, all of whom have shown the drive and the initiative to make Atlantic Canada their home: “The most persuasive argument we will ever hear for international student recruitment and retention were the presentations made by Freya, Christine and Mischka. Thanks for your stories and your incredible energy.”

Dr. Summerby-Murray's warning focused on Canada's need to meet global competition in attracting great international talent. "We are not as competitive as we could be. Australia and the United Kingdom advertise processing time for immigrants and students in days. Canada lists it in months. It's important to think about that." These remarks echoed the concerns expressed by other presenters. Speaking on behalf of Deloitte and J.D. Irving respectively, Shannon MacDonald and Coleen Baxter said Ottawa at least started to streamline its immigration processes in 2017. Jordi Morgan, who represents smaller businesses with less in-house capacity to recruit international talent, was less patient with government. He described government processes that are too time-consuming and cumbersome for small- and medium-sized firms desperate to attract the right employees through Canada's immigration streams.

So, while Minister Hussen opened the Leaders' Summit by asking Atlantic Canadians to do more to welcome immigrants to Atlantic Canada, the conference itself offered him a challenge as well: The federal government must do more to expedite the arrival of the talented newcomers this region needs. In short, the Leaders' Summit heard compelling evidence that we've collectively come a long way in welcoming immigration to Atlantic Canada, while concluding that we still have some work to do in carrying out this essential task.

