

University of Calgary Graduate Students' Association (UCGSA) Brief on International Student Study Permits and Post-Graduation Work Permits

Background:

Last month, the University of Calgary Graduate Students' Association (UCGSA) ran a comprehensive advocacy survey that received about 500 responses from graduate students across all faculties. Several questions were targeted towards international students, including questions asking whether Study Permit (SP) extension times, and Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) processing times, were a "significant problem."

For SP processing times, **85% of respondents** answered that lengthy extension times were a moderate, major, or severe problem, with **70%** stating it was a major or severe problem (**Fig.1.**). For PGWP processing times, **84% of respondents** answered that lengthy extension times were a moderate, major, or severe problem, with **73%** stating it was a major or severe problem (**Fig.2.**).

Fig.1. Lengthy SP Processing Times

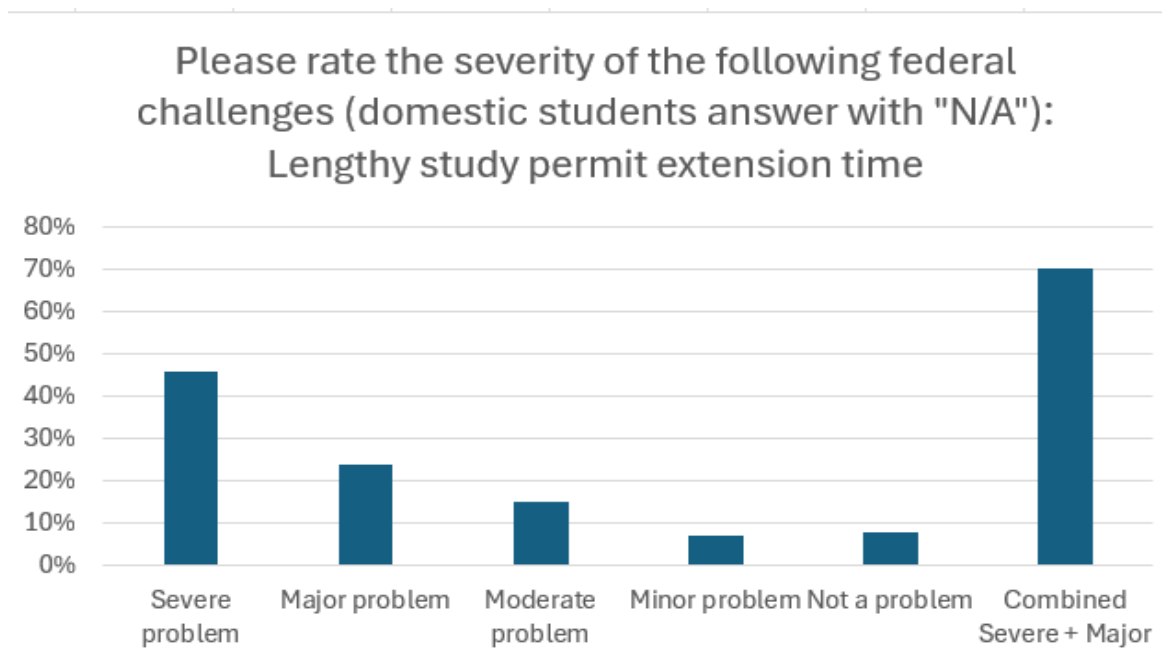
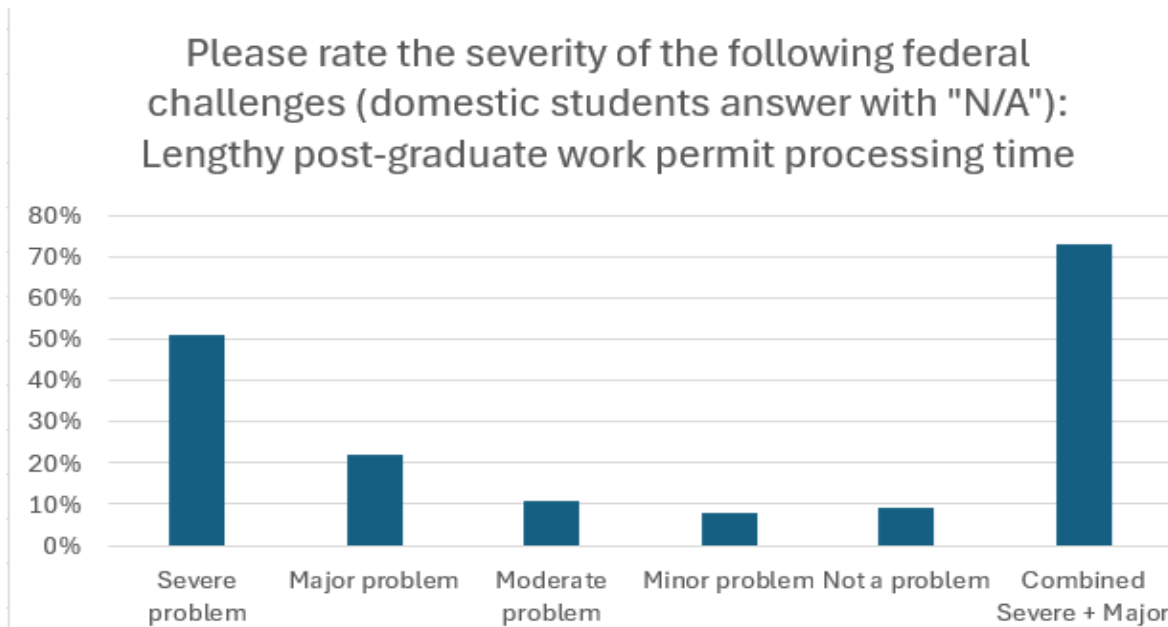


Fig.2. Lengthy PGWP Processing Times



Advocacy for international students comes at a tense moment. According to the latest polling from Abacus Data, 28% of Canadians would select immigration as one of their top 3 priorities.¹

As can be ascertained from other polls, such as from Nanos,² the long-standing consensus that immigration is a good thing has collapsed. Other countries have noticed, too: as U15 has highlighted, the percentage of prospective international students who see Canada as an attractive destination has cratered since March of 2023 (**Fig.3.**).

Concerns:

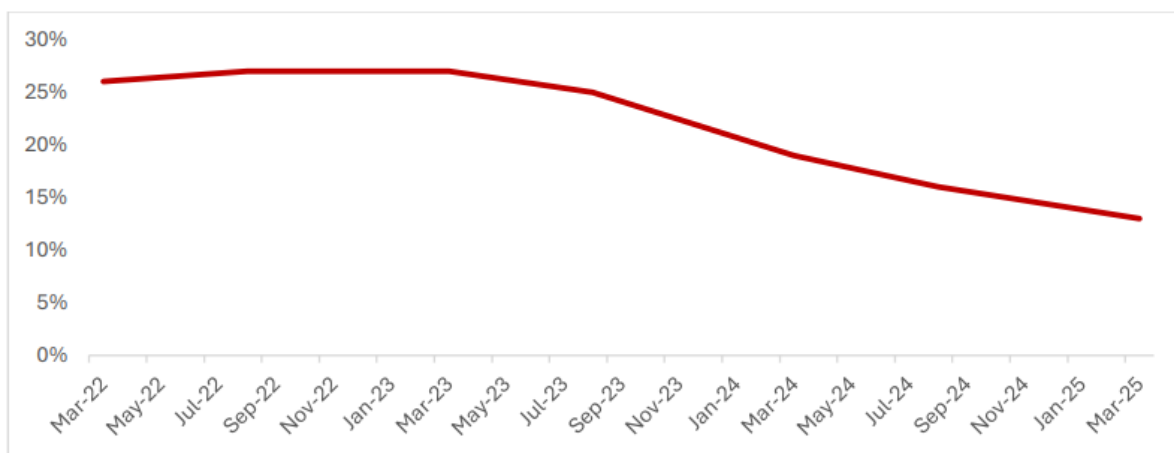
Delays in SP and PGWP processing create challenges not just for graduate students themselves, but for post-secondary institutions more broadly. Without timely and accurate legal documentation, graduate student research projects and teaching contracts are caught in limbo. Given that graduate students perform such a substantial portion of both the research (either through solo projects or as Research Assistants) and teaching (as Teaching Assistants or Sessional Instructors), the result is a substantially

¹ <https://abacusdata.ca/abacus-data-poll-tight-race-continues-as-trumps-trade-talk-cancellation-adds-tension-ahead-of-budget/>

² <https://nanos.co/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-2893-Globe-August-Populated-Report-Immigration.pdf>

less responsive and efficient university. Additionally, graduate students cannot commercialize their research or start their own businesses if their SP's or PGWP's are delayed. As we will highlight below, that will have a major impact on Canada's economic dynamism and competitiveness.

Fig.3. Share of Prospective International Students Identifying Canada as the Preferred Destination, 2022-2025 (IDP, Emerging Futures Survey, taken from U15)



When international students arrive in Canada, their Study Permits (SPs) often contain administrative errors. Common issues include missing work conditions—essential for graduate students employed as teaching or research assistants—and permit durations that do not cover the full length of academic programs. These errors require time-consuming revisions or extensions, creating additional administrative burden for both students and IRCC staff. Reducing such errors would improve efficiency and student experience.

Lengthy processing times for SPs and PGWPs have significant impacts on graduate students. Delays often cause lapses in health-care coverage and restrict students' ability to travel for research or family reasons, leading to stress and disruptions in academic progress. As Canada seeks to attract top international researchers—including those from the U.S. on H1-B visas—streamlined and timely immigration processes are critical to maintaining the country's competitiveness and reputation as a welcoming destination for global talent.

Since a supermajority of our international members state that lengthy SP and PGWP processing times are a problem—and nearly a quarter believe SP processing delays to be *the* most important challenge they face—addressing these issues would immediately improve the graduate school experience for

tens of thousands of students. It would also likely improve Canada's standing amongst prospective international graduate students, thus making it more likely that our institutions will attract international talent. While we recognize that support for immigration has declined across Canada, international graduate students bring with them substantial economic benefits. The recruitment of more international graduate students also aligns with the government's priorities for building a stronger, more resilient, and more sovereign economy.

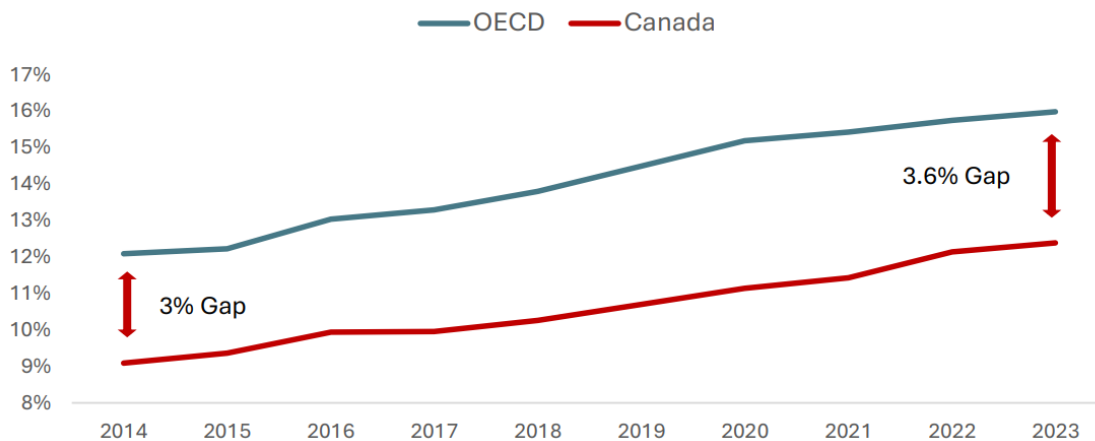
For instance, one of the core priorities Prime Minister Mark Carney has highlighted is attracting top talent to help build our economy while keeping immigration levels sustainable.³ Graduate students play an outsized role in the teaching and research functions of universities, the two core operations that allow universities to give back to Canada's economy and its communities. This is remarkable given that graduate students represent a far smaller portion of the post-secondary population than undergraduates and, especially, polytechnic students. Indeed, data from StatCan, the OECD, and U15 shows that Canada has substantially fewer graduate students than comparable countries (**Fig.4.**), meaning that we have substantial room to grow our master's and doctoral students before we draw even with other highly developed nations.

Domestic students alone will not get us to the level of the OECD. A significant portion of the graduate student population is already made up of international students: according to StatCan data from 2015, nearly 40% of all international students were master's students (compared to 17% for domestic) and nearly 6% were doctoral students (compared to 2.5% for domestic).⁴ This means we will need international students to draw eve with comparator nations *and* that such an increase will be significantly smaller than the increase in international students seen in Ontario and British Columbia colleges. Addressing lengthy processing times for SP and PGWP will make Canada more attractive to international graduate students, thus ensuring we sustainably attract the best talent from around the world.

³ <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2025/05/21/mandate-letter>

⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171207/cg-c001-eng.htm>

Fig.4. Share of the 25-64 Population with a Master's/Doctoral Degree or Equivalent (Taken from U15).⁵



A key government strategy—particularly with regards to infrastructure projects—is utilizing private-public partnerships to catalyze further private investment. A comparable concern in the post-secondary sector is utilizing universities, and public funding to these institutions, to stimulate additional private investment in research and development. Indeed, this is the subject of an ongoing study by the Standing Committee on Science and Research.⁶ As we have mentioned in submissions to SRSR,⁷ the Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness,⁸ and the leaders of each of the major federal parties,⁹ graduate students are *the* key linkage between universities and private industry. Studies from the United States,¹⁰ United Kingdom,¹¹ and Portugal¹² have found that graduate students are essential for commercializing research and connecting academics with entrepreneurs. Business testimony in the House of Commons¹³ has additionally noted that recent graduates are a key source of intellectual property and technology transfers between universities and private business.

⁵ <https://u15.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/U15-Canada-PBS-Budget-2025-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/committees/en/SRSR/StudyActivity?studyActivityId=13162601>

⁷ <https://gsa.ucalgary.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/UCGSA-Brief-to-the-Standing-Committee-on-Science-and-Research-Capstone-Project-1-1.pdf>

⁸ <https://gsa.ucalgary.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/A-Meritorious-Alberta-Advantage-UCGSAs-Plan-to-Enhance-the-Competitiveness-of-Albertas-Post-Secondary-Education-System-PDF-FINAL-DRAFT.pdf>

⁹ <https://gsa.ucalgary.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/UCGSA-Open-Letter-to-Federal-Party-Leaders-PDF.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0166497208000527>

¹¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10961-022-09926-0>

¹² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2020.1814702#abstract>

¹³ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/INDU/Reports/RP9261888/indurp08/indurp08-e.pdf>

Because of graduate students' role in connecting universities and industry together, we are a prime catalyst for brining additional private funding into the research and innovation ecosystem. As already stated, a significant portion of the graduate student population is already made up of international students, so further supporting the international graduate student population is supporting the pipeline by which university research becomes sources of private investment. Increasing the graduate student population by making us more attractive to prospective international students will therefore also increase our ability to better support the private sector's role in research and development.

Finally, there are benefits to allowing more skilled immigrants into Canada that cannot be forgotten, especially as we try to solve our laggard productivity growth. Recent Canadian research shows that economic class immigrants are more likely to own technology-based companies than Canadian-born business owners, possibly because they are considerably more likely to have a science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) university degree.¹⁴ There are more than 1.1 million small and mid-sized businesses in Canada, according to an October 2019 study from the Business Development Bank of Canada,¹⁵ and they account for 90 per cent of all private-sector jobs in the country. This employs about 10.7 million Canadians and contribute almost \$1 trillion to Canada's annual gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁶ Immigrants account for 33 per cent of all business owners with paid staff, too.¹⁷ From an American perspective, in 2022, 143 of the billion-dollar startups in the US had a founder that first came to the country as an international student.¹⁸ For comparison, this number was just 21 in 2018. This incredible growth helped drive local economies, with these billion-dollar startups **creating an average of 860 jobs each** in 2022.¹⁹

Given this track record of innovation, it's not surprising to see international students leading the charge in advanced AI in the US. As previously highlighted, 42% of the top US-based AI companies had a founder who was a former international student in the US.²⁰ And this figure will likely grow: 71% of full-time graduate students at U.S. universities in computer and information sciences—the most common

¹⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2021009/article/00003-eng.htm#r18>

¹⁵ https://www.bdc.ca/en/documents/analysis_research/bdc-etude-sbw-nation-entrepreneurs.pdf

¹⁶ <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2023/05/immigrant-entrepreneurs-need-targeted-support/>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ <https://www.applyboard.com/applyinsights-article/the-impact-of-international-students-on-destination-economies-in-2024#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20entrepreneurship%20and%20innovation%20go,we%20work%2C%20including%20artificial%20intelligence>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

field for AI researchers—are international students.²¹ Given the government’s stated intentions to both utilize AI for efficiency gains *and* turn Canada into an AI superpower,²² attracting this talent would go a long way to accomplishing both goals.

Recommendations:

Therefore, the University of Calgary Graduate Students’ Association recommends that the federal government:

- **Recommendation 1:** Reduce errors in Study Permits to minimize the need for revisions and extensions;
- **Recommendation 2:** Simplify the Study Permit extension process;
- **Recommendation 3:** Simplify the Post-Graduation Work Permit approval process;
- **Recommendation 4:** Expedite the SP and PGWP process to make Canada more attractive for international graduate students and researchers.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2025/05/21/mandate-letter>