

Experiences of international students in Atlantic Canada: Findings from a survey

Ather H. Akbari (Saint Mary's University)

Presentation prepared for Research Matters (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada)



**Sobey School
of Business**
Saint Mary's University

Acknowledgements

Partners and supporters



Atlantic Canada
Opportunities
Agency

Agence de
promotion économique
du Canada atlantique

Canada 



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada



Sobey School
of Business
Saint Mary's University

Acknowledgements (contd.)

PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

Stephen Coyle – Group ATN

- Lauren Cullen – Saint Mary's University
- Peter Halpin – Association of Atlantic Universities
- Sarah McRae – Government of New Brunswick
- Lisa O'Connell – Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission
- Jennifer Porter – Memorial University of Newfoundland
- Jerry Wang – University of Prince Edward Island

Research Team

- Ather H. Akbari
- Stephen Coyle
- Adou Kouakou

Research Assistants

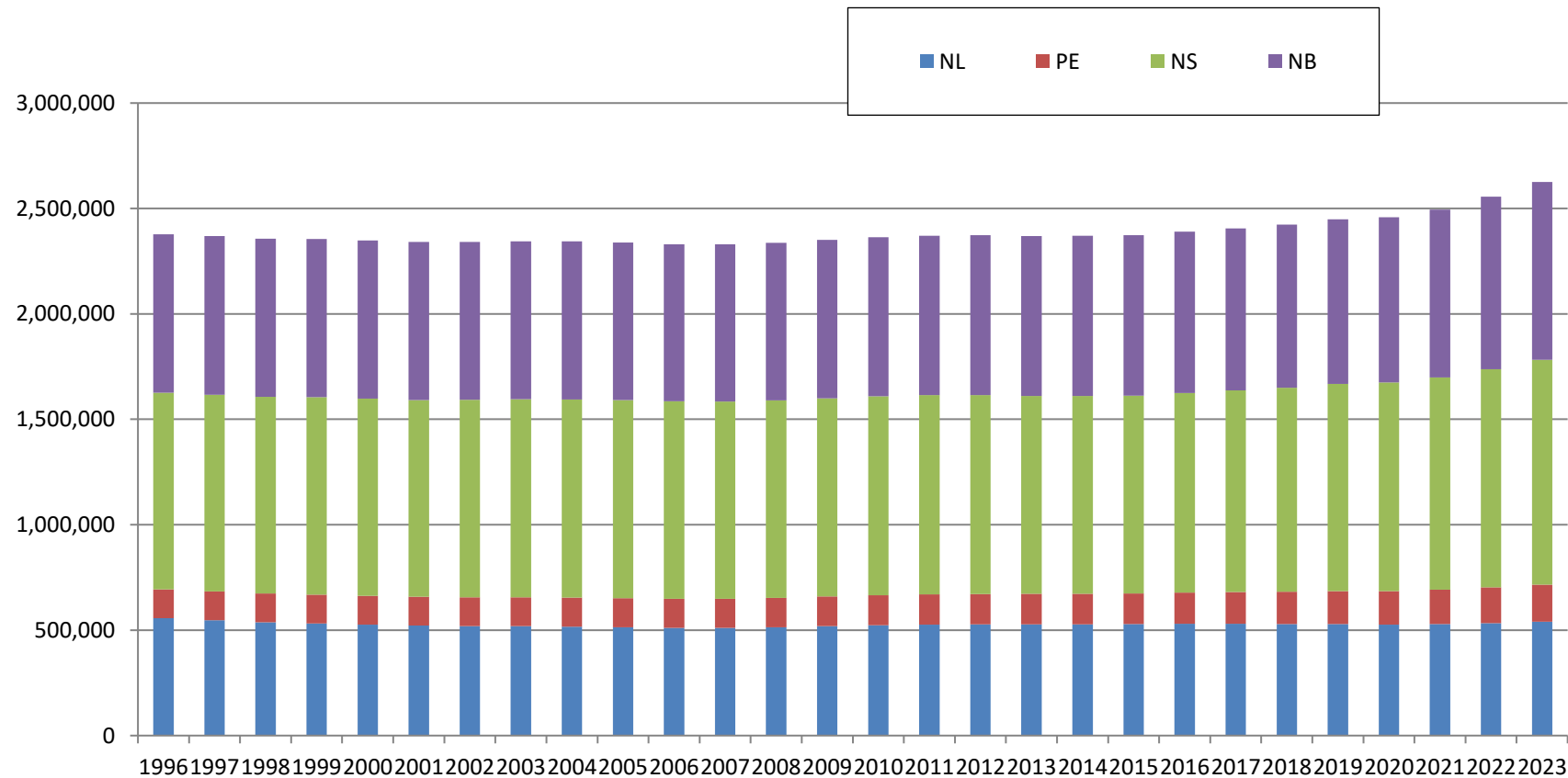
- Mohshinul Karim (MAE program)
- Maya Saradammal (MAE program)
- Ambreen Tabassum (MAE program)



**Sobey School
of Business**

Saint Mary's University

Population in Atlantic Canada, 1996-2023



Statistics Canada. Year-end data.



**Sobey School
of Business**

Saint Mary's University

Key source of economic growth

Growth in capital stock:

Physical capital: investment in machinery, equipment, infrastructure

Human capital: growth in knowledge, productivity and innovation through investment in education

Challenge: Natural decline of population causing fall in Canadian students enrolling in post-secondary institutions

One solution: Increase international student enrolments

Objective of the survey

To assess the satisfaction of international students at universities and colleges in Atlantic Canada. The project addressed:

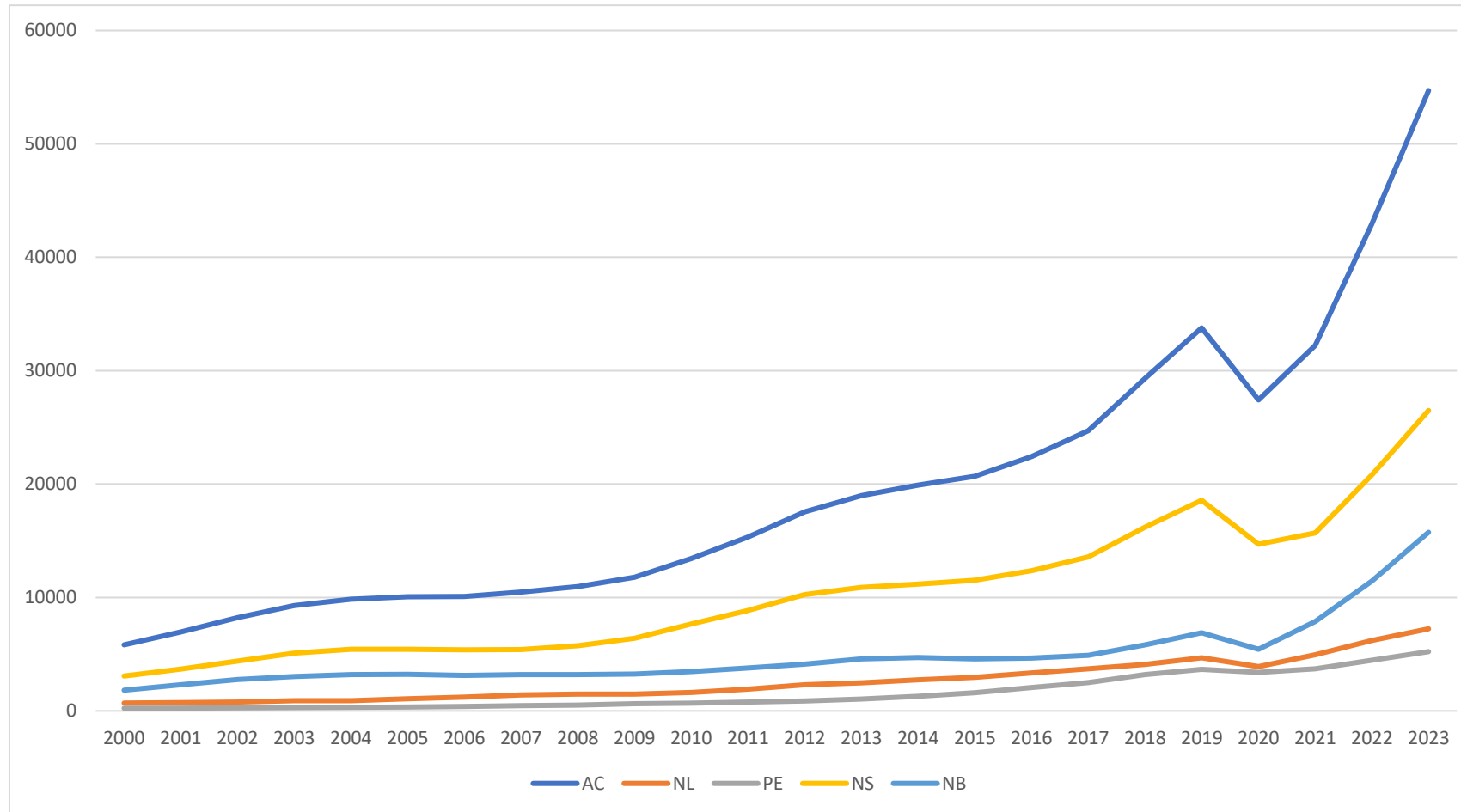
- The education they receive, campus services, social interactions, employment, and the immigration process.
- An in-depth analysis of their experiences is imperative to their retention in the region after finishing their studies.

Who was the survey administered to?

The target population for the survey was 68,845 post-secondary students who enrolled at Atlantic institutions between 2017 and 2023.

- There were 3,584 valid responses to the questionnaire, roughly equally split between males and females and over a wide range of ages.
- About 60% had received their study permit within three months of application, and few had delays on starting programs as a result.
- The Canadian application process is generally comparable to, if not rather easier than, those in other countries.

Study permit holders in Atlantic Provinces on December 31



Findings of the survey

Atlantic Canada as a place to study

- About half of respondents said they learned about Atlantic Canada as a place to study through family and friends. Only one fifth cited a recruitment agency or social media, suggesting a greater role for personal relationships in increasing recruitment, through alumni, for example.
- Top reasons for choice of the region for study: Cost of living, tuition fees, academic reputation, value of qualification, and flexibility and duration of programs. Some said they faced unexpected hikes in tuition and accommodation costs during the course of study.
- Choice of institution: Financial (mainly). Advance information provided by institutions was generally less than satisfactory. Only about one fifth found it was accurate, although there was a wide range of reasons for dissatisfaction.

Immigration experience

- About a quarter of international students encountered delays in their studies due to processing delays of their visas.
- A quarter of those who experienced student visa application process of other countries found Canadian application process to be more complex and stressful.
- Given that Atlantic Canada receives fewer international students than rest of Canada, and that it strives to attract more, visa delays and complexity of process should be addressed at the policy level.

Working while studying

- Almost 90% of students worked while they were studying, mostly part-time. Some had expected their incomes would cover living and tuition costs, not realizing that available employment is mostly low-paid jobs.
- More than 70% expressed satisfaction (“extremely” or “somewhat”) with their work experience. Most of those not working said they had no time on top of their studies for work.

Social interaction

- More than 70% were satisfied with their interactions with domestic students, although some admitted it was easier to make friends with other international students.
- About one-third reported social isolation on campus.
- About one quarter reported interaction with families off-campus, with most describing this experience as warm and welcoming.

Experience with accommodation

- About half were satisfied with their accommodation experiences.
- About two-thirds had difficulty actually finding accommodation.
- Did not expect finding accommodation to be so challenging.

Satisfaction with campus services

- Almost three-quarters of international students accessed some kind of settlement service on-campus, mostly for academic or employment counselling.
- Only about one quarter used mental health services.
 - Financial concerns were a major source of mental stress, which affected academic performance.
- Most respondents were satisfied with the academic counselling they received.
- In rating their teachers, passion for teaching was high as a source of satisfaction, although other reasons also ranked highly.

Academic performance

- More than 90% of students had good to excellent grades, with over half of these as excellent. None had below “satisfactory” grades.
- Financial stress was the main factor affecting academic performance negatively.
- Adjusting to a colder climate, adjusting to a new academic structure, difficulty of finding accommodation were all challenges, and high-quality teaching was a positive effect

Work post-study

- Almost two-thirds found their first job in their province of study. More than 10% were unemployed.
- Over half were working in their field of study, and nearly two-thirds were permanently employed.
- Almost two-thirds found a job within three months of completing their studies.
- More than four in five found their employers to be flexible and supportive.
- One in five thought they had suffered from discrimination or unfair treatment from their employers.

Retention after graduation

- Some 70% said they would like to stay in the province where they studied, with NS being particularly prominent in this regard.
- However, the survey data analysis suggests only about 44% chance that an international student will stay in an Atlantic Province. This chance is:
 - Higher for males than for females.
 - Improved if more cultural acceptance and easiness in making friends.
 - Reduced due to finance-related mental stress and accommodation experience.
 - Similar across Atlantic Canada.
 - unaffected by their interactions with domestic students, faculty and staff and general community.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The overall results of the survey are positive for Atlantic Canada.
- Concerns to be addressed by institutions and governments: informing students of conditions before they arrive (“managing expectations”), especially with regards to academic requirements, financial concerns, finding accommodation, cultural acceptance and weather conditions.
- Alumni connections and financial aid can be good sources of attracting students.

Thank you all!

