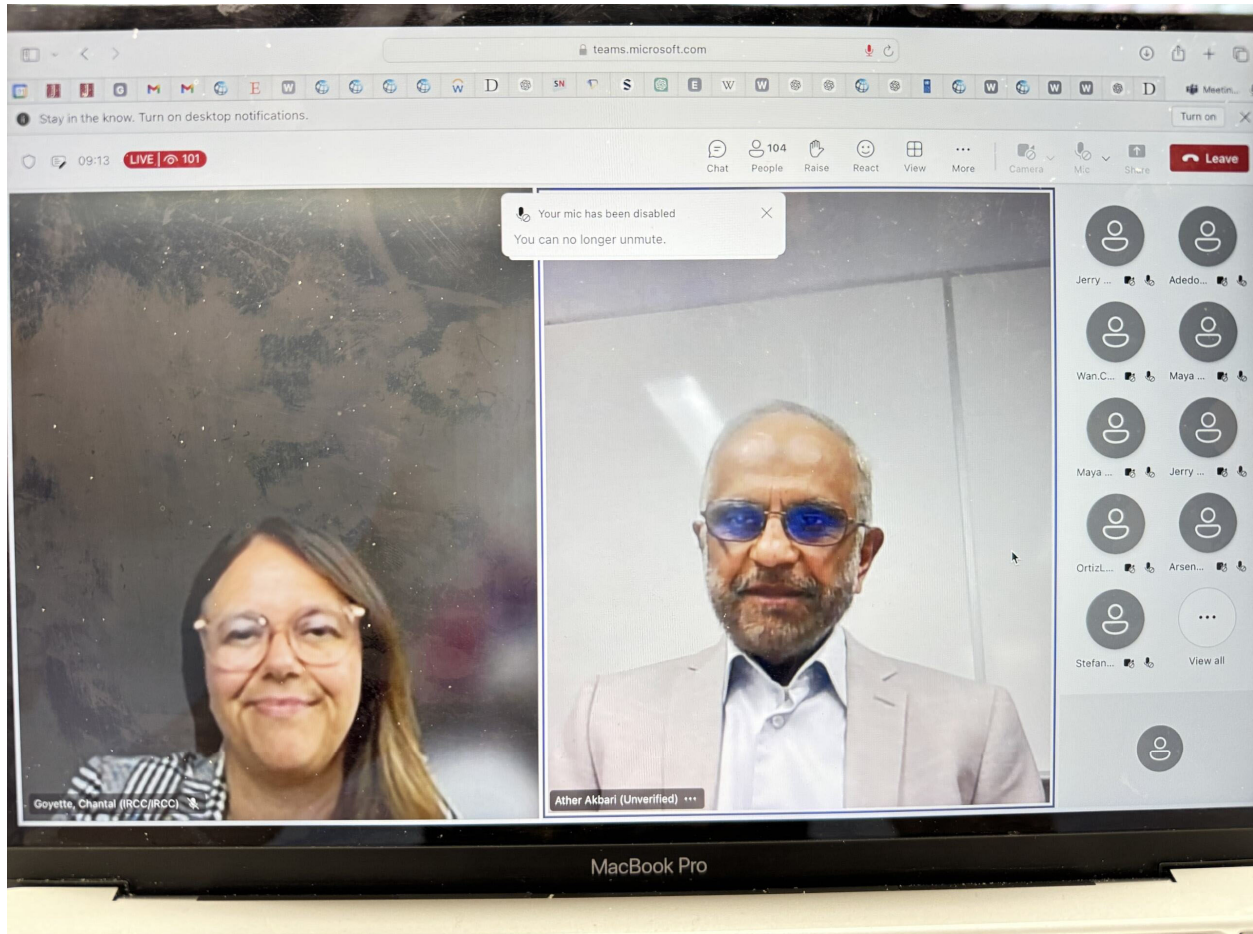


## Research Matters Event: International students in Atlantic Canada

A meeting was conducted by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) on the MS Teams platform on June 19, 2024, from 2:30 to 4:00 p.m. (Halifax time), as part of their Research Matters Event focusing on international students in Atlantic Canada. (Research Matters Events is a series organized by the Research and Data Branch where experts and scholars from different fields and from a variety of institutions present their research results)



### Speaker:

**Dr. Ather H. Akbari**

Professor of Economics, **Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Dr. Ather H. Akbari's research interest lies primarily in labour economics with a focus on the economics of immigration, discrimination and education. He holds a

doctoral degree in economics from Simon Fraser University. He wrote his dissertation on some of the economic impacts of the immigrant population in Canada and conducted several research projects for national and provincial governments. Dr. Akbari has an extensive publication record, with some of his research covered in popular media like the Economist, New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Globe and Mail.

**Discussion Topic:** International students in Atlantic Canada – A look at their academic and socioeconomic experiences

**Summary of the Discussion Topic:** Atlantic Research Group on Economics of Immigration, Aging and Diversity (ARGEIAD) conducted a survey of international students about their academic, social, cultural and employment experiences in Atlantic Canada. ARGEIAD acknowledges financial support provided by Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency to conduct this research. It also thanks IRCC for its collaboration in identifying the target population and approaching them on its behalf. This survey allowed us to learn more about their journey, and answered important questions like the following:

- Are they satisfied with the education they received?
- How would they describe their interactions with faculty, staff and other students?
- Are they satisfied with campus services, such as mental health support?

The portrait that emerges contributes to a better understanding of their motivations and decision to stay or leave, and helps to:

- Develop institutional strategies and regional policies to attract and retain international students.
- Provide insights on future talent pools in the Atlantic region and across Canada.

**Content of the discussion about the survey analysis:**

### **Population Trends in Atlantic Canada**

After decades of stagnation or decline, population in Atlantic region increased remarkably over the past few years. However, there are still concerns in an aging population resulting from declining natural growth of population happening in Atlantic Canada at a faster rate and this has economic implications for the region. The median age across Canada is 40.6 years. In Atlantic Canada it ranges from a

low of 41.9 in Prince Edward Island to 48 in Newfoundland and Labrador. And, despite good population growth in recent years, other parts of Canada have seen a faster increase. The Atlantic share of national population in 1996 was 8%; in 2023 it was 6.5%. An aging population has an impact on economic development. Strategies for growth in the region embody demand for a well educated and skilled labor force to encourage the right kind of development. This demographic mix is more difficult to sustain with an aging population. Some economic impacts include shrinking markets and a declining labour force.

One key source of productivity is growth in capital stock. There are two types of capital stock. Physical capital refers to investment in machinery, equipment and infrastructure. Another source is human capital, which refers to growth in knowledge, productivity and innovation through investment in education. The challenge here is that the natural decline of population has resulted in less Canadian students enrolling in post secondary institutions. One solution to this issue is to increase international student enrolment.

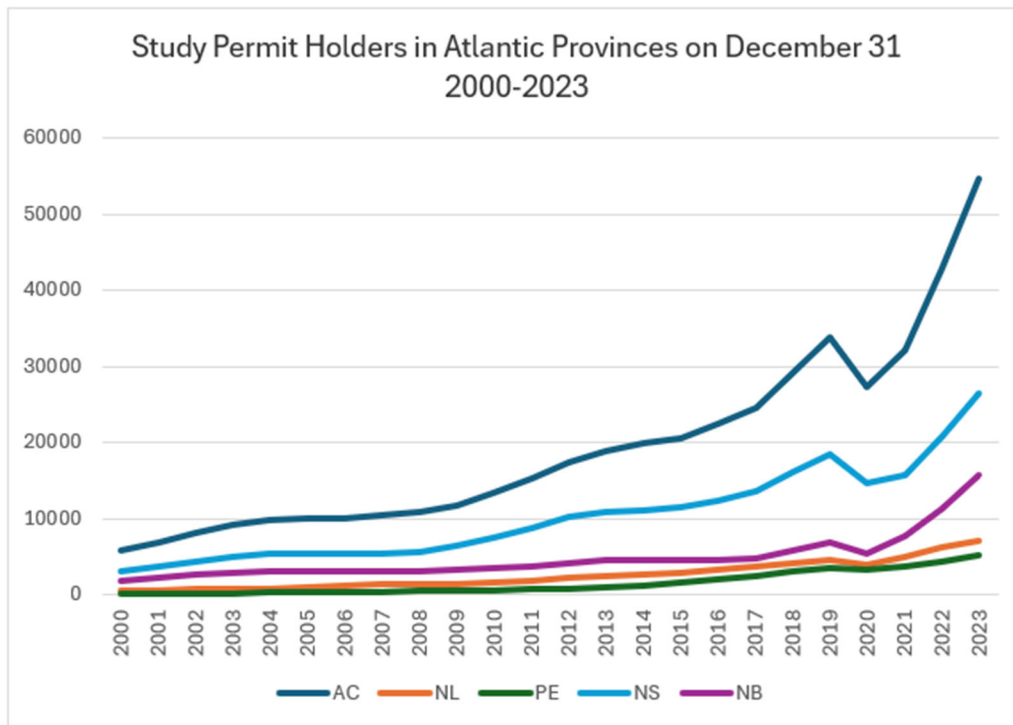
The objective of the survey is to assess the satisfaction of international students at universities and colleges in Atlantic Canada. In this regard, the project addressed the education they received, campus services, social interactions, employment, and the immigration process. An in-depth analysis of their experiences is imperative to their retention in the region. Every province in the region wants to retain international students after they finish their studies, given the region's demographic situation.

### **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. These institutions include universities, colleges and private training institutions. The IRCC research team carefully investigated the survey population, sent the survey invites and several reminders. IRCC also garnered feedback on the survey questionnaire. The survey was administered on-line between December 13, 2023, and February 4, 2024. In all, there were 3,584 valid responses to the questionnaire. Survey responses were roughly equally split between males and females and over a wide range of ages.

### **Snapshot on Trends: 2000-2023**

In 2023, there were about 55,000 international students studying in Atlantic Canada.



Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

## Findings of the Survey

The survey was divided into different themes. These themes included why people choose Atlantic Canada and the institution that they went to. It also looked at the immigration experience, their experience working while studying, and their social interactions. In addition, the survey examined their experience with accommodations, satisfaction with campus services, and their academic performance. Finally, the survey considered their experience with post-graduate employment, and retention after graduation.

### Atlantic Canada as a place to study

Respondents were asked: How did you first become aware of Atlantic Canada as a place of 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, for example through alumni. This brings into question the role of agents overseas because people learn more from word of mouth or personal relationships.

- Top reasons for choosing the region for study: Cost of living, tuition fees, academic reputation, value of qualification, and flexibility and duration of programs.
- Some respondents said they faced unexpected hikes in tuition and accommodation costs during their studies. This suggests applicants should be provided with more information for decision-making purposes prior to their arrival.

Respondents were asked: What was their main reason for choice of institution they are studying at?

- Mainly financial reasons were stated for choice of institution.
- 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:**

Respondents were asked: Have they encountered delays in their studies due to the processing delays of their visas? How was the Canadian experience compared to other countries, if they had applied to other countries as well?

- About 60% of the survey respondents received their study permit within three months of application.
- 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.
- Atlantic Canada receives fewer international students than the rest of Canada. Visa delays and complexity of process should be addressed at the policy level, if this region strives to attract more international students.
- Overall, these responses appear positive with regards to the Canadian application process. The Canadian application process is generally comparable to, if not rather easier than, those in other countries.
- However, because of selection bias, these numbers may overstate satisfaction with Canadian visa application process. Prospective students who find the application process difficult may self-select themselves out of studying in Canada.

- Such students may either study in their home country or head to other destinations such as Australia or the United States.

### **Working while studying**

Respondents were asked: Whether they worked while studying and what was their experience.

- 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. This suggests there is an issue with the pre-arrival information that is provided to them.
- 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**

Respondents were asked: About their interaction with the fellow domestic students. If they had study group while studying, what was the composition of the group and if they interacted socially with members of their study group? They were also asked if they were hosted by a family off-campus and if they felt social isolation on-campus.

- 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 and in their written responses they had mentioned reasons like language and cultural barriers while interacting with other students.
- About one quarter reported interaction with families off-campus, with most of them describing this experience as warm and welcoming.

### **Experience with accommodation**

Respondents were asked: How was the level of satisfaction with accommodation experience and what was their experience in finding the accommodation.

- About half were satisfied with their accommodation experiences.

- About two-thirds had difficulty finding accommodations and mentioned in their written responses that they did not expect finding accommodations to be so challenging. This issue is not unique to this region. This is another issue with the pre-arrival information that is provided to the students.

### **Satisfaction with campus services**

Respondents were asked: If they accessed any settlement service on campus during their studies.

- 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 also affected their 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.

### **Academic performance**

Respondents were asked: Questions on their grades and factors affecting academic performance.

- More than 90% of students had good to excellent grades, with over half of these as excellent. None had below “satisfactory” grades. All these grades are self reported. Another research study could look at the actual data which could be obtained from the institutions to compare the grades of international students with domestic students.
- Financial stress was the main factor affecting academic performance negatively.
- Adjusting to a colder climate, adjusting to a new academic structure, and difficulty finding accommodation were all challenges impacting grades. High-quality teaching had a positive effect on academic performance.

### **Work post-study**

Respondents were asked: If they found a job after their graduation in their province of study (as this can be an important basis for their retention). Were they were working in their field of study and were they permanently employed? How long it took them to find their first job and how was their employer's attitude towards them?

- 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.
- 20% thought they had suffered from discrimination or unfair treatment from their employers.

### **Retention after graduation in the province.**

Respondents were asked: If they would have liked to stay in the province where they studied and asked them to rank the province which they liked to study in?

- About 70% said they would like to stay in the province where they studied, with NS being particularly prominent in this regard.
- However, a probability analysis of the survey data responses using econometric techniques suggests only about a 44% chance that an international student will stay in the Atlantic region.
  1. The chance of staying is higher for males than for females.
  2. An improved chance of staying if more cultural acceptance and easier to make friends.
  3. A reduced chance of staying due to finance-related mental stress and challenging accommodation experience.
  4. Similar results were displayed across Atlantic Canada.
  5. Results are unaffected by their interactions with domestic students, faculty and staff and general community.

Previous studies have suggested that universities and college students tend to stay in the province where they got their education/degrees. It is very important that students have a good experience while they are on campus. They need to feel good about their acceptance in the community to improve their retention, after their



studies are completed. They tend to stay in the province/location of their study because they have developed familiarity there and they are aware of the social and cultural environment there.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

- The overall results of the survey are positive for Atlantic Canada.
- Main concern to be addressed by institutions and governments is informing students of conditions before they arrive (“managing expectations”). Better pre-arrival information will reduce the amount they are hit by surprises, especially with regards to academic requirements, financial concerns, finding accommodations, cultural acceptance and weather conditions.
- Most students found out about Atlantic Canada through word of mouth from friends and relatives. Thus, alumni connections play an important role in attracting students.
- The probit (probability) analysis showed financial concerns during studies play a negative role in retaining the students in the region. Thus, financial aid can be another way to attract students.

*Notes prepared by Maya Saradammal – MAE program.*