

Submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration
Impact of Recent Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) Reforms on Selkirk College
and the West Kootenay and Boundary Regions

1. Selkirk College Overview

Selkirk College is a public postsecondary institution in the southeast interior of British Columbia, serving the rural West Kootenay and Boundary regions.

Key facts:

- The college serves a catchment area of 95,000 people distributed across 8,200 square kilometres
- 2200 full-time equivalent students attend programs at 10 campuses and learning centres in Castlegar, Nelson, Trail, Grand Forks, Kaslo and Nakusp.
- It offers programs in nursing, trades, early childhood education, tourism and hospitality, environmental studies and business among others.

For over 50 years, Selkirk College has played a vital role in the region's education system, supporting training and labour market needs, economic growth and community development.

Selkirk College is an economic engine for the area, contributing over \$417M annually¹ to the regional economy. It offers a wide range of programs to learners across multiple campuses and learning centres. In addition to upgrading and university transfer programs, the college provides training directly linked to regional labour market needs, including health, trades, business, tourism and forestry.

2. Benefits of Bringing International Students to Selkirk College and the Region

The ability to attract and retain international students to our region has generated two key benefits: diversification of the college student body; and ability to better address labour market needs. ²

BC's southeastern interior is facing significant labour force challenges due to its aging population. The Government of Canada estimates that without immigration, the population of this area will drop by 6% overall, with a 7.8% drop in working age adults (currently, 27% of the population is aged 65 or over)³.

¹ EMSI Economic Impact Analysis of Selkirk College, 2019.

² NewtoBC (2023). Immigrant Demographics Castlegar, Nelson and Trail, BC. <https://newtobc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023-NewToBC-WestKootenay-DemoProfile-WEB-FINAL-1.pdf>

³ Government of Canada (2022). Immigration Matters. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/immigration-matters/local-economies/west-kootenay.html>

2.1 Diversification of the college student body and the region

We know that the cultural enrichment brought by immigrants enhances community vibrancy, leading to broader perspectives and global connections. Moreover, immigrants often bring new ideas, diverse skill sets, and international networks, fostering innovation and skill development in local industries. By embracing diversity and immigration, rural communities position themselves for long-term growth and sustainability, adapting to changing economic conditions and creating more resilient local economies.

In 2021, the newcomer population of the three largest cities in the area –Castlegar, Nelson and Trail – was 11.4%, a smaller proportion of the population than in most B.C. municipalities. It is a significantly lower proportion than in Greater Vancouver (41.8%), and less than half the average for Canada (23%). Between 2016 and 2021, the region’s three major centres experienced relatively slow growth (3.8%) in their immigrant numbers.⁴

To support diversification and attraction of newcomers over the past decade, Selkirk College has attracted thousands of students from India, China, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana and Peru, among other countries. Many of the students who graduate from the college stay in the region, contributing their energy, passion and unique global perspectives to our businesses, organizations and communities.

2.2 Labour market needs

International enrolment at Selkirk College has increased over the past decade, reaching 25-30% of Selkirk College’s full-time equivalent students. At the same time, the number of domestic students attending the college has dropped, a development partly influenced by changes in the region’s population structure. These changes are driven by low birthrates and longer life expectancies, exacerbated by rural-specific issues like the out-migration of youth and in-migration of retirees.⁵

These rural and regional conditions have made the attraction and retention of newcomers –including students– crucial for community economic sustainability. The majority of international students who attend Selkirk College are interested in pursuing permanent residency, and many remain in the region after graduation.

Selkirk graduates play indispensable roles in building homes, staffing healthcare facilities, supporting the tourism industry, fostering business growth, and driving innovation in the region. Students who study at Selkirk College are more likely to stay and contribute to the local economy, which is vital for the region's sustainability.

⁴ NewtoBC (2023). Immigrant Demographics Castlegar, Nelson and Trail, BC. <https://newtobc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023-NewToBC-WestKootenay-DemoProfile-WEB-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁵ Breen, S., Gibson, R., Markey, S., Lauzon, A. (Eds.). (2015). [State of rural Canada report](#). Canada Rural Revitalization Foundation.

3. Adherence to Provincial Guidelines for Accepting International Students

Unlike private, for-profit colleges, public post-secondary institutions like Selkirk College follow the provincial government's Education Quality Assurance (EQA) designation requirements. The college offers a range of student supports, activities and services that facilitate international learners' personal, social and academic development.

4. Impact of Recent PGWP Policy Changes

Recent changes to the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program will negatively impact our region's ability to meet labour market needs and address aging population challenges. For example, the new policy restricts access to PGWP to only those who graduate from college programs identified in *national* labour market forecasts; no such restrictions have been placed on university graduates. Yet college graduates provide essential skills in sectors vital to the region's economy – many of which are not included in the national forecasts. If international students are unable to remain here, it will exacerbate labour shortages in critical regional sectors such as tourism, hospitality and early childhood education. The policy funnels international students toward universities in larger cities, leaving smaller communities—and the employers that rely on immigration to fuel growth—behind.

Due to the uncertain and evolving policy landscape, Selkirk College is facing a drop in international student applications by up to 80%. This will result in suspended programs and fewer options for domestic students, since without international learners, many programs and courses will lack sufficient enrolment to be viable.

The policy also lessens the value of college education relative to a university degree, setting back the parity of esteem that colleges have worked so hard to establish by graduating job-ready learners with applied skills. Moreover, the national discourse around this issue has damaged Canada's brand as a welcoming destination for international students, a development that may take years to recover from.

Many students come to Selkirk College for university transfer, i.e. they take one or two years of college courses that can then be transferred to university and applied to a degree program. Starting in college allows many students to start their postsecondary journey while living in smaller, less expensive communities, and they benefit from smaller class sizes and lower tuition. International learners who choose this path will now have to apply not only for the study permit they needed to start at Selkirk College, but also an additional study permit to transfer to university, or indeed, even to another college. The resulting uncertainty, processing time and expense creates additional barriers for international students, making a Canadian educational experience less attractive.

5. Conclusion

Respectfully, we request that Standing Committee members consider the following recommendations to the Government of Canada:

1. Align PGWP policies such that they support regional labour market needs, not just national needs. This will ensure that colleges can continue to meet the demand for skilled workers in rural economies and communities like those in the southeastern interior of BC.
2. Recognize the value of college degrees and diplomas from institutions like Selkirk College for post-graduate work permits, ensuring equitable treatment for both college and university graduates.
3. Exempt international students from having to apply for new study permits when transferring between BC-approved institutions.

Selkirk College is a public institution committed to providing students with exceptional learning experiences that prepare them to be changemakers in their communities. Our values include Care, Access, Respect and Excellence, and we practice those every day. We are not one of the “bad actors” or “diploma mills” that have exploited international students and created negative public perceptions of international enrolment.

We look forward to working with all levels of government to meet the needs of students – both domestic and international– as well as employers and communities in our region.

Selkirk College is a community college serving the West Kootenay and Boundary regions of southeastern BC. Its vision is to become Canada’s destination for learning and inquiry grounded in a sense of land and place.

The college acknowledges the traditional territories of the Sinixt (Lakes), the Syilx (Okanagan), the Ktunaxa and the Secwépemc (Shuswap) Peoples.