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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.)): Good afternoon. I call this meeting to order.

I want to give a warm welcome to Ms. Goodridge who is joining us today. Welcome as well to Mr. Dhaliwal. Obviously, the committee missed you a lot, and we've decided that we wanted to have you back for a visit, so thank you for joining us.

Welcome to meeting number 14 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and for our members.

For those who are participating on Zoom, please click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone. Please mute your microphone when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

I want to remind everyone to please not speak over each other, as it will be hard for our translators to translate. It will make their job difficult. Of course, ensure that all your comments are addressed through the chair.

Members in the room, please raise your hand if you wish to speak. The clerk and I will manage the order as best we can.

I'll also give everybody a one-minute warning when you're about a minute away from the end of your time. That's for the members as well as for our witnesses. Thank you in advance for your co-operation.

With that, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 16, 2025, the committee is resuming its study on Canada's immigration system.

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses, who will be participating in our round table by video conference. From Accueil francophone du Manitoba, we have the executive director, Bintou Sako. From International Education, we have Lysiane van der Knaap, who is also the executive director. From the Centre de services scolaire du Lac-Saint-Jean, we have Jérôme Carette, director of educational services, adult sector. Finally, from International Education,

we have Odile René, regulated immigration consultant for international students.

Ms. Sacko, we'll start with you. You have the floor for five minutes.

Bintou Sacko (Executive Director, Accueil francophone du Manitoba): Thank you.

Madam Chair, honourable members of the committee, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a presentation this morning on behalf of Accueil francophone du Manitoba.

My name is Bintou Sacko and I have been the director of Accueil francophone since it was created in December 2003.

While we have come a long way in more than 20 years, we are now facing a kind of paradox. On the one hand, the federal government has sent a clear and positive signal by increasing the immigration target for the coming years to 10% by 2027. On the other hand, the objective comes at a time of declining overall immigration levels to Canada. This raises a crucial question: How can we sustainably welcome more francophones if the means to do so aren't there? We welcome the commitment to increasing the target, but it must be accompanied by investments to support the intake, integration and retention of people who are at the heart of our communities. Without it, the objective will remain a paradox, an empty promise.

To illustrate these issues, I will address four themes: immigration levels, the asylum system, the immigration process and the strategies we need to put in place.

First, with regard to immigration levels, the FCFA, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, is right to note that the federal government is following through on its commitment. Increasing the percentage targets helps stabilize the number of French-speaking immigrants at approximately 30,000 per year, despite the decrease in the overall target. This is an essential protection to reverse the demographic decline of our communities.

However, make no mistake: Stabilizing the number of francophone newcomers is not enough. An FCFA study showed that we needed a minimum of 12% to get there. With two years to reach the 10% target and several years of delay, we are a long way from achieving our goal.

What's more, the challenge is twofold. Critical programs are already underfunded and geographically limited. Increasing the percentage of the target without increasing resources for recruitment is like expanding a front door without expanding the vestibule. We invite people here without increasing integration capacity.

Second, there is the issue of the asylum system. Adding to the pressure is a new reality: the sharp increase in the number of francophone asylum seekers in our communities, particularly in Manitoba. This is a direct result of recent policy changes elsewhere in the country.

These people often arrive in a state of extreme vulnerability and turn to our organizations, which are on the front line. However, no additional or dedicated funding has been set aside to meet this specific, growing demand. Our intake structures are overwhelmed and forced to do more with the same resources. This jeopardizes the quality of reception services for newcomers.

Third is the immigration process. The journey of immigrants in minority communities, once they are here, is fraught with obstacles. They're facing a dual challenge. First, there is the language challenge. Even though they are francophones, many of them have to do a language upgrade to adapt to our environment. These courses must be funded, not only for learning English, but also for adapting their French to the Canadian professional setting.

Then there's the challenge of integration. If settlement services managed by and for francophones are not better funded, integration takes longer, which leads to discouragement and prolonged dependence. The risk is huge: When newcomers don't find the necessary support within francophone communities, they run the risk of being assimilated and separated from the community, often without realizing it. We do all the preliminary recruitment work and then lose them. It's a failure for them and it's a failure for us.

Fourth, we are proposing strategies and recommendations. In the face of these challenges, urgent, concrete solutions are needed. Programs like Destination Canada need to be fully funded and expanded to reach the vast pool of francophone talent in the world. The target will only be met if we put measures in place to do so.

It is also imperative to allocate direct, stable and adequate funding for francophone settlement services by allocating a specific envelope to respond to the influx of asylum seekers. We are asking that these services be managed by francophone organizations to help francophone immigrants specifically.

Finally, we need to ensure that programs that work well and that give extra points to francophones, such as the express entry system, are protected and made permanent.

• (1540)

In conclusion, the government's commitment is a first step, but to turn numbers into people who integrate and into our communities and thrive, we need to move from ambition to action. Let's put measures in place to achieve our ambitions. Let's invest in our intake structures to ensure not only the future of newcomers, but also the vitality and sustainability of the Canadian francophone community.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sacko.

Ms. van der Knaap, you have the floor.

Lysiane van der Knaap (Executive Director, Éducation internationale): Good afternoon.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for having us. I'm going to speak on behalf of the three people who represent Éducation internationale.

Éducation internationale is a co-operative that represents Quebec's school service centres and school boards, public institutions that offer vocational training in their respective jurisdictions. Our co-operative works with these institutions to attract international students for vocational training.

Our objective today is twofold. On the one hand, we want to make parliamentarians here today aware of vocational training in Quebec, a system that is unique in the country. On the other hand, we have been advocating for greater fairness and consistency in the choices made by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, for a little over a year now when it comes to foreign students in Canada.

The Quebec public network of vocational training consists of 174 training centres that offer more than 200 programs in 21 sectors to approximately 130,000 students across Quebec. Vocational training is a pillar of Quebec's education system. It exists to meet the needs of the skilled trades workforce. It consists of short, practical training tailored to labour market needs. We try to match training with employment.

According to data published by Quebec's employment department, 80% of vocational training programs are geared toward trades with a labour shortage. A significant proportion of the occupations most impacted by persistent shortages are directly related to vocational training, including PSWs, machinists and welders, as well as construction trades and cooks.

Over the past few years, vocational training in Quebec has taken in no more than 1% of Canada's foreign students. In 2024, there was a total of 10,000 international students in the public system, which made it a record year. Approximately 3,000 to 4,000 of these students were spread across 138 institutions outside Montreal, representing an average of about 25 students per institution. Compared to other training institutions, such as the University of Toronto, which had 27,000 international students in a single year, these are very small numbers. Although very few of them attend our institutions, international students help us make up cohorts and maintain the training offer for Quebecers who want to take courses.

After their training, Quebec and international students get jobs that are in high demand in their communities. The placement rate for a number of programs is 100%.

Despite these facts, current immigration rules are stifling the ability of training centres to attract international students. Since November 1, 2024, when an eligibility criterion based on the field of study was imposed, only 55 programs have been eligible for the post-graduation work permit, or PGWP. Before that, there were 142. According to information provided by IRCC, the list could be reduced to 35 programs in early 2026. Of the ineligible programs, more than 40 are geared toward trades with documented labour needs.

IRCC indicates that the restrictive measure for the post-graduation work permit was decided based on available labour market data. However, all university degrees are eligible for the PGWP. It's hard to believe that all university programs have higher placement rates than vocational training programs for professions such as personal support workers and mechanics.

Increased spending on defence and the shipbuilding industry, combined with the three major projects announced by the Carney government for Quebec, is creating significant demand for skilled trades. Without adjustments to immigration policies for vocational training, Canada will have trouble carrying out its strategic projects.

The proof is that, at the end of September 2024, Éducation internationale conducted a survey of vocational training centres to determine the impact of the post-graduation work permit measure on their ability to attract international candidates. Of those surveyed, 44% saw a 50% or more drop in attendance in the 2025 school year compared to the same date the previous year. Twenty training institutions reported having to cancel or postpone 77 cohorts over the course of the school year. In Quebec as a whole, that number is even higher. Respondents told us that a number of programs are weakened by the declining attendance of international students. Some are directly related to investments by the current federal government, such as the surveying and heavy-duty road vehicle mechanics programs.

We are here today to advocate for full recognition of vocational training by the Government of Canada in its immigration choices. We ask that IRCC restore access to post-graduation work permits for vocational training programs that meet actual labour market needs.

● (1545)

A small number of international students arrive and are distributed across more than 150 institutions all over the province. They are essential to maintaining a training offer throughout Quebec. They also meet significant labour needs, particularly to carry out major nation-building projects.

If this is not fixed, thousands of positions will remain vacant.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. van der Knaap.

We'll now go to the first round of questions.

Mr. Davies, please go ahead for six minutes.

[English]

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I was particularly interested in Ms. van der Knaap's comments. I want to pick up on that, but if you don't mind, I'd like to give you a bit of a picture of what's happening in my neck of the woods, in the Niagara area.

As you may know, Niagara College is one of Canada's most well-recognized colleges. One thing I've been hearing over the last couple of months with the changes in the program is that for somebody coming into Canada as an international student, in the past, if they were on a three-year program, for example, they would generally have the ability to get a work permit for a postgrad placement in Canada.

Ms. van der Knaap, I want you to correct me if I am incorrect here, but on the changes the government put in place, let's say you go to university and get a general arts degree in philosophy or anthropology. You have a better chance of getting a work permit coming out of a university than you do out of a trade school. At Niagara College, for example, we have a world-class culinary program, a distillery program, a brewery program and a hotel and hospitality program that services a good portion of the Niagara region. You mentioned that the acceptance of students must also be based on labour market analysis or regional analysis. However, the changes that have taken place, and perhaps you would comment on this, have disproportionately impacted those who are going into trades. Canada really needs these workers, but we're now not giving them an opportunity to work here. Would you agree with that?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: That is exactly what we presented.

Arts programs are all eligible for a post-graduation work permit, or PGWP, if sanctioned by a degree. Meanwhile, students who come from vocational or trade schools are at a disadvantage and have more trouble getting a PGWP.

● (1550)

[English]

Fred Davies: Ms. van der Knaap, when these changes were initiated by the government, how did you or your colleagues respond to that? It was a severe blow to the training programs, including the Blue Seal and Red Seal programs. Canada sorely needs people in certain disciplines in trades, particularly in construction, framing, electrical and plumbing work, and anything in Blue Seal trades. It seems to me that unless changes are made, we're going to lose opportunities with students that we might otherwise bring to Canada for these programs and training. We may not attract them at all. Would you agree with that?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: We are seeing a significant decline in the attractiveness of vocational training programs, as revealed by the data from our survey. More than 50% of training centres tell us that they have experienced a 50% or more drop in admissions. The impact is real.

Mr. Carette, who comes from a regional vocational training centre in Alma, could perhaps comment on what he sees in his region.

Jérôme Carette (Director of Education Services, Adult Sector, Centre de services scolaire du Lac-Saint-Jean, Éducation internationale): The Centre de services scolaire du Lac-Saint-Jean is located in Alma, in Lac-Saint-Jean, about 200 kilometres north of Quebec City. Our vocational training centre offers exactly 15 vocational training programs.

Over the last two years, we've seen a decline in international student admissions. In 2023-24, we had 70 new registrations, whereas in 2024-25, we had 55. This year, we're at 29.

As Ms. van der Knaap mentioned, these aren't astronomical numbers. We are not a very large school services centre, but our reality is the same as everyone else's. Earlier, we were talking about the 174 vocational training centres in the province. This situation affects the entire province.

However, if we look at all 15 of our programs, the placement rates are almost 100%. The decrease in the number of students means that we are simply no longer able to provide the graduates needed to meet labour market needs.

[English]

Fred Davies: Thank you for that.

How many students have been affected by the drop in the number of programs that you now provide?

Ms. van der Knaap, do you have those numbers?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: We don't have the data for this year because we haven't yet been able to record the exact numbers for the entire province. That data will be available later this year.

That said, at Éducation internationale, for example, we have noted a nearly 50% drop in the number of admissions, but the data for this school year is not available for the entire province.

Mr. Carette gave the example of his vocational training centre, where admissions dropped by more than 50%.

[English]

Fred Davies: Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: That's perfect timing. You have zero seconds.

Next we go to Mr. Zuberi for six minutes.

[Translation]

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start with you, Ms. Sacko.

You recently testified before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. You also mentioned a number of challenges that students face, including the low capacity of consultants and visa officers in francophone Africa, which leads to high numbers of arbitrary refusals.

What do you recommend to remove those barriers, particularly systemic barriers?

• (1555)

Bintou Sacko: When it comes to student visas, you talked about “high numbers” and “systemic barriers”. I think there are some—

Sameer Zuberi: I think you testified at another committee about those challenges.

Bintou Sacko: Yes, that was a few years ago.

I recommend that the government conduct checks at embassies, because they process applications from a number of countries, particularly francophone African ones. We should work with the embassies to see if it is possible to provide visas rather than processing visa applications for a number of countries.

In addition, the pool is large enough for recruitment. The most stable francophone countries should be given the power or authority to issue visas to increase the percentage slightly.

Sameer Zuberi: These problems still exist, even though you pointed them out a few years ago. Is that correct?

Bintou Sacko: Yes, but there has been a change. The number of visas granted to francophone African countries has increased, but I think there's still work to be done. Some refusals have not been justified so far. Even if the applications are good and well prepared, there are still refusals.

That said, there has been a change since the last time.

Sameer Zuberi: One of the largest investments that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is making is in organizations that provide services to newcomers to help them settle.

Can you explain the importance of these services for newcomers, especially francophones?

Bintou Sacko: There is a difference between immigration and general recruitment.

Settlement services for francophone communities are part of a very specific vision. Not taking this vision into account means that it gets lost in the overall vision of immigration. Francophones have a responsibility to establish a connection with the community. We're talking about expanding the francophone space. The existing isolation of francophone communities is a factor that increases linguistic insecurity. When a community makes extreme efforts to recruit people in francophone countries to expand the francophone space, sufficient resources must be invested. They are already in the minority, so we need them to help newcomers integrate, overcome language barriers, find a job, quickly get to work and have their credentials recognized. In that respect, there is a major shortfall. The purpose of settlement services is precisely to support these people so that there are fewer mistakes and they are integrated as quickly as possible.

Sameer Zuberi: I imagine that francophones outside Quebec face many more obstacles than anglophone immigrants outside Quebec.

Bintou Sacko: Exactly. That's the reality.

Sameer Zuberi: Investments by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, are crucial to integrating francophones outside Quebec.

Bintou Sacko: Exactly. Investments need to be made. We're asking the government to invest in that vision. There is already a plan for francophone immigration. However, it would be even better to fund a francophone immigration program for minority communities.

• (1600)

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are with us today. Let me say that it's a pleasure to welcome someone from my hometown of Alma.

We spoke at length about the drastically lower numbers at vocational training centres across Quebec.

Ms. van der Knaap, could you tell us to what extent the decline in the number of foreign students is affecting the sustainability of some programs?

Lysiane van der Knaap: As I outlined, 20 institutions told us that they cancelled or postponed the programs for 77 cohorts. Some have told us about programs offered in vocational training centres that are now vulnerable, including those in mechanics, health, secretarial studies and accounting.

This absolutely has real-world consequences for the centres and their ability to create cohorts or even offer programs.

Mr. Carette can no doubt attest to the vulnerability of some of his programs.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Go ahead, Mr. Carette.

Jérôme Carette: As I mentioned earlier, the number of foreign students has decreased by more than 50% over two years. Last year, they represented barely 14% of all our organization's registered students. These are not entire cohorts of foreign students, but they are crucial. Not only does the decrease limit the number of graduates we can train to provide a workforce to our regional businesses, but it also, in some cases, limits our ability to offer certain programs. I wouldn't say these programs are compromised, but they're about to be. I'm thinking in particular of our machining program. Last year, almost a quarter of the students in the program were from overseas.

Having these students in our programs allows us to issue diplomas and provide a workforce. However, without them, we might not be able to offer some programs to our cohorts for financial reasons. This year, as a result of the decline in the number of international students, some of our programs, including machining, pharmacy technical assistance and graphic design, are on shakier ground.

Sometimes the ninth or tenth international student is the tipping point for a program. Otherwise, because of the funding criteria, we would be running the program at a loss. We could do it for a year, but not in the long term. It's not a viable model.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I think it's great that you're at the committee. In Quebec, when we talk about foreign students, we often talk about university or college students. We rarely talk about vocational students.

I would like you to tell the committee to what extent your training programs are connected to the regional economic ecosystem. That would help the analyst fully understand the connection you have with your community and the regional economy.

Jérôme Carette: I could give you some overall statistics, but I could also give you some concrete regional examples.

Based on recent studies by the Institut de la statistique du Québec, nearly 80% of job vacancies in the labour market relate to vocational training. As I mentioned earlier, placement rates are virtually 100% in all our programs. We are struggling to meet the needs of businesses, regardless of the program.

I'll give you a few concrete examples. Among the 15 training programs we offer, there is one that leads to becoming a personal support worker. At the last meetings we had with representatives of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, the CIUSS, we were told flat-out that if, tomorrow morning, we were able to provide them all our graduates at once, they would need twice as many. That's a very concrete example.

PSW training lasts 705 hours and leads to a diploma of vocational studies, or DVS. However, since the training lasts less than 900 hours, the program does not lead to a post-graduation work permit. As a result, international students who want to continue their education by working at an organization have to go through a very long bureaucratic process to get a closed work permit. That's also a very concrete example. The 900-hour cut-off has a direct impact on our ability to provide labour to service businesses in our region.

I could switch sectors and talk to you about welding. Proco, a regional flagship with sales of \$170 million, employs about 100 welders. There again, our capacity to provide labour is insufficient.

In recent years, restrictions have been imposed on post-graduation work permits. In welding, open work permits for spouses were impacted. The option still exists for the spouses of master's and doctoral students, but not for the spouses of DVS students.

Again, this is a hurdle, and it explains the decline in the number of foreign students enrolled in our programs. It also greatly reduces our ability to supply qualified welders to regional companies like Proco.

• (1605)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Those decisions were made based on reception capacity.

How do you welcome these international students? Are they accepted in the community? Is it easy for you to integrate them, and to properly welcome them? Just a short answer, please.

Jérôme Carette: As Ms. Sacko said—

The Chair: Just a short answer, please.

Jérôme Carette: If you want it to work, for international students, organizations and the community, you have to offer services.

That's the choice we made as an organization. We're a small school service centre, so we worked with the neighbouring school service centre, Pays-des-Bleuets, to set up a support structure.

We don't just enrol international students. We support them before they arrive. Sometimes we greet them at the airport. We also help them find housing, successfully integrate into their community and feel included in our organization.

It really makes a difference. I say this because we're not talking about huge numbers for small school service centres.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carette.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now begin the second round.

We'll start with Mr. Ma for five minutes.

[English]

Michael Ma (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions will be addressed to Ms. van der Knaap.

You gave testimony to Quebec's Committee on Citizen Relations in October. You were advocating for the full recognition of vocational training as a core driver of economic, regional and linguistic development.

Can you walk me through your recommendation on how to tie international student admissions to the needs of regions and specific skilled trades?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: Actually, we'd like to make the same recommendation today that we did to the Commission des relations avec les citoyens, in Quebec. We want vocational training to be recognized as an education sector that is just as valuable as higher education. It is true that we need engineers and doctors in Quebec and in Canada, but a hospital can't operate without practical nurses and orderlies. You can't operate a plant or build icebreakers without mechanics, machinists and welders. Vocational training is an essential level of education and training.

Vocational training also helps the labour market meet its needs. As I said, we're trying to create a perfect match between training and employment. If the need isn't there for certain sectors, we don't offer programs in those sectors. In other words, we teach the skills needed. We want to train enough people to meet the needs in the regions.

The 174 vocational training centres in Quebec offer programs, based on a card system that match the labour needs in their respective regions. There's no training in mining trades offered in Montreal, for example, but there is in Abitibi, in the Côte-Nord region and in Chibougamau, because that's where the mines are.

Furthermore, vocational training centres use international students to fill cohorts. Depending on the year, there can be around 130,000 vocational students in Quebec, and between 6,000 and 7,000 of them come from abroad. However, that's not enough to meet labour market needs. Targets were set to significantly increase the number of students in vocational training, but they were very hard to meet without international students. Given the insufficient efforts from the Quebec government to attract Quebec students to professional training programs, we turned to international students to fill the cohorts. Also, as my colleague Mr. Carette said, placement rates are very high. That's true in Lac-Saint-Jean, and it's also true in other regions.

I'd like to highlight a few labour market needs related to skills training. The construction industry will need 16,000 new workers a year until 2030 to reach 80,000 workers. In the shipbuilding industry, located along the St. Lawrence River, 2,000 jobs will be created to build icebreakers. We're talking about welders and industrial mechanics, among others. For large-scale projects, Hydro-Québec, will need 35,000 workers by 2035. Those are a lot of trades that fall under vocational training.

Mr. Carrette also talked about orderlies. In Quebec, there is a shortage of 6,000 orderlies. We need to allow international students to come train and work here. There's also the aerospace sector, around Montreal, where 40,000 positions will need to be filled over the next 10 years. I could go on.

Vocational training is necessary. What we are asking today, just as we did before the parliamentary committee in Quebec City, is for the strategic role of vocational training to be recognized. We are also concerned about the capacity of immigrants to work in French, but once they've completed their training, they learn French and are able to work anywhere in French.

• (1610)

[English]

Michael Ma: Thank you.

To follow that line, in your testimony, you also noted the discrepancy of postgraduate work permit allocations with all university degrees, which you also just mentioned you wanted to equalize.

Do you believe our immigration system, especially as it relates to international student permit allocations, should be more closely tied with our national and provincial labour market needs?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: That's what we think, and the data supports it. You just have to look at the government-documented labour market needs to see that they're in skills training sectors.

The Chair: Ms. Zahid, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

My first question is for Madam Sacko.

The federal government has set ambitious targets for francophone immigration outside of Quebec. Last year, we exceeded our targets. As a result, we have now set even more ambitious targets for the years to come.

Can you tell us how your organization views the importance of focusing on francophone immigration outside of Quebec and what these targets mean for protecting the francophone communities across Canada?

[Translation]

Bintou Sacko: Thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, these targets are significant, because it's about the vitality of the francophone community outside Quebec.

I talked earlier about linguistic insecurity, and the fact that these targets were set precisely to address this declining demographic. The community is coming together, building a lot of capacity to ensure those joining our communities are very welcome and supported, so they can integrate and stay. When they don't stay, it feels like a waste of efforts.

Obviously, we believe that if targets are increased, resources also need to be increased. It's important for the government to have an overview of francophone immigration, including francophone international students, economic immigrants, francophone refugees, asylum seekers, as I mentioned earlier, and temporary workers outside Quebec. Enough money has to be invested to ensure these immigrants are well supported and integrated into the community. It's important. The targets won't be enough for the francophone community to reach the 12% ratio, but it's still a significant step forward for the francophone communities outside Quebec.

• (1615)

[English]

Salma Zahid: Thank you, Madam Sacko.

The next question is also for you.

In your view, what are the most significant barriers that the francophone newcomers face when they arrive in Canada, whether it is the credential recognition, the language instruction or the pathway navigation? How do you think federal policies should be aligned to address the barriers the francophone community faces?

[Translation]

Bintou Sacko: Regarding the barriers you just talked about, I think there needs to be some consultations. Many can be held with the community itself, given that the francophone immigration program is part of a strategy, which means we should look at that strategy. A lot of studies have been done, and advisory committees have worked on this issue. The government could invest in language training, which is very important for our minority communities.

As you said, prior learning recognition is also consequential. That means we have to work with provinces and trades, so people can join the workforce or get a job as quickly as possible. We also need to look at the studies done on this issue and see where they recommend to invest the most to help francophone immigrants in those communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

Next, we have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. van der Knaap, I'll do you a favour.

Let's say tomorrow morning, I appoint you Minister of Immigration for the federal government with all the powers that come with that position. What would be the first changes you would make? What measures would you change to ensure Éducation internationale is better off tomorrow morning? You only have 24 hours to make changes.

Lysiane van der Knaap: We don't really worry about the well-being of Éducation internationale. We worry about the well-being of the skills training network and the employment sector.

I'd start by holding consultations, but 24 hours probably wouldn't be enough. Actually, we need to restore a balance by analyzing labour market needs, and what's going on in educational institutions.

I can't speak to the education system in other provinces, but I can speak to the Quebec education system. Both innovation and labour needs have to be assessed. There's an imbalance that favours post-secondary institutions, especially universities. There needs to be a more targeted approach, like changing the eligibility criteria for a postgraduation work permit so people have more freedom to follow vocational training, and getting rid of the 900-hour criterion, which we find very subjective.

Personal support worker training, for example, takes less than 900 hours, yet it's one of the trades where needs are critical. There are also a lot of construction trades that require less than 900 hours of training, and there is a huge shortage of workers in construction. These criteria should be reviewed, so that they are less subjective and based on labour market data.

Moreover, there are other inconsistencies in the choices made. Let me give you an example. There are more open work permits awarded to master and doctoral level students over trades students. Why is that?

Also, I'd want Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, officers to be familiar with professional training. Because it's offered at the high school level, and a little different from the rest of the Canadian ecosystem, a lot of administrative errors are being made. Although they meet all the eligibility criteria, some international candidates see their study permit applications denied, simply because the officers processing their applications don't understand what vocational training is.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When you say open permit, do you mean the open permit for spouses?

Lysiane van der Knaap: Yes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I wanted to clarify that for the analysts, because right now, graduate students are eligible, but not individuals....

I see the chair is giving me the eye, so I imagine my time is up.

Thank you very much for that information.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Ma, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Michael Ma: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions will continue with Ms. van der Knaap.

Given your focus on protecting programs that lead in demand and high-skilled professions, I want to build on that focus. Should our international student admissions be further tied to housing considerations?

[*Translation*]

Lysiane van der Knaap: Probably, yes. There's a lot of talk about international students putting a strain on housing availability in Canada. We know that many regions are experiencing a housing shortage. At the same time, we need workers to build these housing units, and most construction site workers are vocational training graduates, which means they can help solve the problem. Unfortunately, they face some hurdles, because not all training lasts 900 hours and gives them access to a postgraduate work permit.

Again, in Quebec, the number of international students is smaller. The most we've seen in a year is 10,000. Otherwise, we're talking about 6,000 or 7,000 international students, and the vast majority attends one of the 138 institutions outside of Montreal. As Mr. Carrette pointed out, in Alma, we can support the 70 or 100 students we get and find them housing. That's a very small number compared to much larger institutions that take in thousands of students. That can put a strain on some communities. It doesn't compare to the number of international students we welcome.

Of course, we have to take reception capacity into consideration, but we have to look at the forest, not just the tree, to know where the problem really lies.

[*English*]

Michael Ma: Are there particular regions within Quebec where you think international students would struggle to find affordable housing at current rent prices? I heard what you said about the demand they would be addressing, but let's focus on their housing problem at this point. Again, my question is, do international students struggle in any particular parts of Quebec where there are high costs of living?

[*Translation*]

Lysiane van der Knaap: I'll let my colleague, Ms. René, add further details. She has more contact with students and vocational training centres than I do. However, I know that, when it isn't possible to house students locally, vocational training centres don't create places for foreign students. The idea is to avoid having to send students home because they can't find accommodation.

[English]

Michael Ma: How would you connect the two, then? Are you constantly monitoring the housing situation for students before you do admissions?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: I'll let you respond, Ms. René.

Odile René (Regulated Immigration Consultant for International Students, Éducation internationale): As Ms. van der Knaap said, the vocational training centres, or CFPs, are in the best position. They're directly involved on the ground. They analyze whether there's enough capacity to recruit foreign students. Since they don't recruit a large number of students, they can provide services to welcome students, help them find accommodation, get them settled in, and so on.

The monitoring is carried out more directly in each area.

[English]

Michael Ma: I'll tie this back to an earlier response you gave when you indicated that you're not getting enough international students to fill the classrooms. Then you said that you're only allocating small amounts, just in case there are housing issues.

Can you elaborate on your answers to give us a better perspective of how this program is being managed?

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: I can let Mr. Carette explain how things work at the Alma CFP in terms of targets, the number of students accepted and the impact on the community.

Jérôme Carette: I can't speak for the whole province, but I can give a concrete example from the Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean region.

We implemented mechanisms to ensure that we could properly accommodate international students and foster their inclusion. A first step involved setting ourselves targets. We set ourselves a rate of around 20% of international students in our programs. We felt that we wanted to make sure that the intake process went smoothly and that we could guide students towards obtaining diplomas. We wanted to be able to provide support for the immigration process, but also for the arrival at the airport, the search for accommodation and the cultural adaptation difficulties that may arise along the way.

Two years ago, we set ourselves a limit of 20%. However, last year, 14% of our students were foreign nationals, and this year the figure will fall below 10%. This falls well short of the theoretical capacity that we set for ourselves.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carette.

[English]

The time is up.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Ma.

[English]

Our last questioner for this session is Ms. Sodhi for five minutes.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

My first question is for Ms. Sacko.

Canada currently has two programs specifically for francophones, with the first one being the francophone community immigration pilot and the second one being the francophone minority communities student pilot.

Are you able to tell us about your experiences with these programs? What needs do they respond to, and what impact have you observed them to have within the community?

[Translation]

Bintou Sacko: I'll start with the francophone minority communities student pilot. I might add that most francophone universities have signed agreements with IRCC so that incoming international students can enrol in the universities and, upon completion of their studies, follow a pathway to permanent residency. This also contributes to the vitality of francophone communities. After spending four years in a francophone community, the international students have learned quite a bit and they have been given a good education. They can then easily opt for permanent residency.

The rural and francophone immigration pilot also seeks to bring in temporary workers who can later gain access to permanent residency. These workers, along with international students, are also eligible for immigrant settlement services in the community. Most international students aren't eligible for this program, except for students who immigrate under this specific pilot project and who attend universities that signed agreements with IRCC.

They can access settlement services, and so can temporary workers who come under the rural and francophone immigration pilot.

[English]

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you for your answer.

Are you able to tell us how federal support programs contributed to settlement success in smaller francophone communities like those in Manitoba? Also, what recommendations do you have to help improve outreach and retention in these regions?

[Translation]

Bintou Sacko: In Manitoba, a number of francophone service providers receive funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to support francophone immigrants. To this end, a specific pathway has been developed.

The Réseau en immigration francophone du Manitoba also works with the organizations that receive funding from the federal government to better support francophone immigrants who move into the francophone community.

Manitoba is one of the official language minority communities. If we can make one recommendation, we would like to see the increase in targets matched by an increase in financial resources. This will have a real impact on how well these organizations can provide proper service to everyone who comes in. The more we can add resources, the more we can ensure stability and provide the right services for immigrants who come to our communities.

• (1630)

[English]

Amandeep Sodhi: That's perfect.

I'll be quick, because I know we're a little short on time.

We know that the government has invested in newcomer women's support, entrepreneurship and language training.

Are you able to tell us what kinds of federal support for immigrant women in particular have been the most impactful?

[Translation]

The Chair: Please give a brief answer.

Bintou Sacko: On a national level, a strategy was developed with the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne. This strategy was launched just last year. Immigrant women are part of this strategy. It's having an impact on the provinces.

To this end, partnerships have been established with centres that provide services to immigrant women who come here. The strategy addresses the isolation of immigrant women and their employability, for example. It also covers training so that these women can go to school and upgrade their skills. Lastly, it includes all the support that these women need to enter the job market and participate in the economy.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sacko.

[English]

Thank you very much, Ms. Sacko.

Thank you, Ms. Sodhi.

I'll go to Mr. Menegakis in a minute, but I would like to follow up on a question that Mr. Ma asked.

Ms. van der Knaap, there was a question around whether we should ensure we are meeting the labour needs of the provinces. You have said that you absolutely agree with that.

Do you feel that we have sufficient local and regional skill and labour data, not only in Quebec but across our country? Do you feel that we have sufficient data that is readily available?

[Translation]

Lysiane van der Knaap: I can't answer your question for provinces other than Quebec. Since the education system falls under provincial jurisdiction, we don't make observations outside Quebec.

In Quebec, the labour market partners commission identifies labour needs. The document entitled "State of balance in the labour market" provides diagnostics for 516 professions. This document looks at whether the professions have a labour shortage, surplus or balance. This tool, which is updated on a regular basis, makes it easy to decide how much labour these 516 professions need.

For Quebec, the answer to your question is yes.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. That's excellent information. I appreciate it.

Thanks, everyone, for your questions.

Before we finish up, Mr. Menegakis would like to propose something.

Costas Menegakis (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

With the consent of the committee, I would suggest that we consider the evidence we heard today as part of the international student study. All three parties brought up some really good information today. It would be a shame for that to go to waste, so I wonder if we can get consent from everyone here to include the testimony that we heard today as part of the international student study.

The Chair: Do we have agreement?

It looks like it's unanimous.

That's an excellent suggestion, Mr. Menegakis. Thank you.

I want to finish off by saying thanks to the witnesses for the excellent testimony.

I want to thank all of my colleagues for their excellent questions.

We're going to suspend for about five minutes or so to formally say goodbye to our witnesses and then go in camera for committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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