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• (1530)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Colleagues, welcome to meeting number seven of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those who are on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Thank you for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 16, the committee is resuming its study of the international student program and study permits.

I would like to welcome our witnesses for today's meeting. Today we have, as an individual, Roopa Desai Trilokekar.

We have Dr. John Tibbits, president of Conestoga College, as well as the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, as represented by Dr. Rob Kristofferson.

You will each have up to five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions. I will intervene if you are approaching overtime with your remarks.

Dr. Trilokekar, I'll start with you for five minutes.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar (Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, York University, As an Individual): Thank you so much for this opportunity—

Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): On a point of order, we don't have any video in the room.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): I'm so sorry. We have a quick point of order. We don't have video in the room. We'll pause momentarily while that is rectified. It is an auspicious start.

I think we're good there.

I apologize. Please resume for five minutes.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: Thank you so much for this opportunity.

My comments are my own and do not represent those of my institution.

I want to reiterate what previous witnesses have stated to this committee: Let's focus on our joint future and not expend our energies and time on assigning blame for our past mistakes or failures.

In the spirit of looking ahead, I focus on three recommendations. The first is that international education and immigration need to be delinked as policy files. The purpose of international education—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Point of order, Madam Chair.

It's hard to understand what the witness is saying.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): To our witness, we're having some difficulty with your Internet connection. We'll get you to back up maybe two sentences and start again, and we'll see if it persists.

Please go ahead.

• (1535)

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: In the spirit of looking ahead, I focus on three recommendations.

Number one is that international education and immigration need to be delinked as policy files.

The purpose of international education and recruitment of international students should not be to meet our immigration or labour market targets and objectives. Certainly, our immigration assessment can value and provide special recognition for Canadian credentials, but we have created issues in the system by linking what should be two distinct—connected, but distinct—policy objectives. By intertwining these policy objectives, we have sent conflicting messages as to why international students should come to study in Canada and why we are interested in hosting them.

We began going down this path with our first international education strategy in 2014, when we welcomed international students to study and stay in Canada as our ideal immigrants. However, their own experiences in the Canadian labour market were far from ideal.

Canada is unique in the sense that whether it was the Conservatives or the Liberals, we have all been pro-international student recruitment and retention. Unfortunately, we turned a blind eye to how this policy shift created a flood of students to programs and institutions and encouraged the growth of associated businesses, both domestically and internationally—some legitimate, others not—that were there to take advantage of the system, paving the way for both students and non-students to join institutions as a pathway to immigration versus pursuing education.

Next, during the pandemic, and even after the pandemic, we lost sight of the difference between international students and temporary workers by enabling the students to take jobs in which they were working over the limit of 20 hours per week, further blurring the line between student and foreign worker status.

My second recommendation is that we need to invest in policy learning, not just policy borrowing.

Canada has been interested in borrowing and copying policy from our competitor countries. Ironically, while we have done this well, we have not been good about studying and learning from the mistakes of other countries. For example, Australia went through this very same experience about 10 to 15 years ago. We wrote about this in 2013 in an article entitled “Imagine: Canada as a leader in international education. How can Canada benefit from the Australian experience?”

Australia went about aggressively recruiting international students, with their higher educational institutions equally incentivized to recruit large numbers to fill their funding gaps. Their student programs were linked to immigration. The outcomes of all of these policies were very negative. There were imbalances and unregulated growth of programs and private institutions. There were challenges within communities, given this high growth rate. Chinese and Indian international students were becoming victims of assaults, and there was overall exploitation of them in the housing and employment market. There are a lot of parallels in how this story has unfolded and continues to unfold in Canada.

My third and final point has to do with why and how international students can benefit Canada and Canadians.

Rather than thinking in terms of immediate benefits by way of income to our institutions and communities or by meeting our labour market and immigration needs, I urge us to consider international students as a strong soft power resource, because the free flow of students and scholars has served and will serve Canada's interests—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Point of order, Madam Chair.

There's no interpretation.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): I'm sorry. We just had an issue with translation.

Please continue.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: This is because, as international students return to their home country or go to a third or fourth country

and take vital positions in different sectors, they will be ambassadors for the future of Canada and its interests. This soft power is important to Canada, especially given today's geopolitical context, where the world order has shifted. Our greatest ally, the U.S., has retreated in its own global position, and we are left to form new strategic global alliances and shape a new future for Canada in the world.

Unfortunately, we have sometimes been far too busy focusing on international students as solutions to our domestic policy issues or holding them responsible for our domestic problems. Restricting student mobility and developing attitudes of suspicion and hostility towards them will severely limit and negatively impact our soft power. International students and international education are very effective forms of public diplomacy for Canada. We need to reinvest in them now more than ever.

To conclude, number one, I urge us not to rush—

• (1540)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Finish up quickly, please. You have about five seconds.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: To conclude, I urge us not to rush once again to consider international students as solutions to our immediate problems, to make the effort to research and learn from policy mistakes of other jurisdictions and think of alternative approaches, and to invest in broader soft power approaches to hosting international students.

Thank you for your time and attention.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Colleagues, I gave our last witness a little bit more latitude because we had so many interruptions and technical difficulties, but I will try to hold our future witnesses to five-minute remarks.

Dr. Tibbits, please go ahead.

John Tibbits (President, Conestoga College): Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

The committee's study comes at a pivotal moment for Canada's international student program. Colleges, including Conestoga, have been subject to scrutiny about the role internationals play in housing, affordability and community pressures.

I welcome the opportunity to reaffirm that Conestoga's approach has always been about service. Our mission has always been to ensure that the communities we serve have access to the skilled labour force they need to survive.

We are one of Ontario's leading polytechnical institutes and we serve about 20,000 students in Waterloo, Kitchener, Cambridge, Guelph, Brantford, Milton, Stratford and Ingersoll. This is a catchment area that comprises more than 1.2 million people. It's actually one of the economic engines of Canada and is expected to grow substantially over the next 20 years.

We specialize in applied learning, industry partnerships and applied research, with recognized strengths in advanced manufacturing, skilled trades, health sciences, engineering, business and information technology.

For decades—at least 30 years—Conestoga's growth has been aligned with federal, provincial and municipal policies encouraging immigration and skills training to address labour shortages due to changing demographics and the accelerated retirement of baby boomers due to the postpandemic period and Canada's aging population. Immigration has been, and I believe will continue to be, vital to our nation's prosperity.

Our college has always invested deeply in the communities we serve. We have expanded campuses, built partnerships with local employers and created training opportunities that directly support regional labour market needs and encourage domestic enrolment growth.

These investments generate jobs, attract businesses and deliver lasting community benefits. Today, nearly 20% of our local full-time workforce in southwest Ontario are Conestoga graduates, and more than 50% of the local adult population has accessed our continuing education and workforce development programs.

Our graduates add more than \$6.2 million annually in employment income to the provincial economy, and since 2018, international students alone have added about \$1.6 billion to Ontario's GDP.

We also acknowledge the challenges that communities face in accommodating newcomers. Conestoga has worked proactively to address pressures on housing and settlement supports. Our goal has always been to strengthen, not strain, the communities we serve by preparing students for success and by ensuring that employers have the talent they need.

Looking ahead, we believe this is the time to stabilize the system and to build an international student program that is sustainable, fair, globally competitive and focused on Canada's economic priorities.

As the committee advances its discussions to ensure that immigration policies enhance Canada's long-term competitiveness, we would be pleased to offer input if requested.

Honourable members, thank you for your time today and for the work you do on behalf of Canadians. Conestoga and our colleagues across the college and university sector are ready to collaborate with all levels of government to strengthen the program, protect its integrity and ensure that it continues to serve learners, employers and communities across Canada.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, Dr. Tibbits.

Dr. Kristofferson, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Rob Kristofferson (President, Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations): Hello, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

OCUFA seeks a sustainably funded university system that educates the best and the brightest. This does not mean using international students as ATMs.

OCUFA has supported the decision to impose restrictions on the number of international students admitted to Canadian post-secondary institutions, but we hold that improvements can be made to ensure that the international students Canada accepts are supported to thrive.

Better coordination between the federal and provincial governments on this issue is needed. The study permit restrictions were suddenly imposed, leaving the universities and provinces to scramble. We need predictable, coordinated policy to allow for long-term planning, not reactive shifts.

Universities aggressively pursued international students, not because of a lack of domestic students but because they needed revenue. International students have not taken away seats from domestic students; they have supported the education of additional domestic students. Ontario caps the number of funded domestic students, but many universities go above these caps to educate more domestic students. International tuition revenue has effectively subsidized the education of these unfunded domestic students. In Ontario, international students pay nearly six times the domestic tuition average. This means that nearly six domestic students are needed to equal the tuition revenues of one international student.

International students enhance the vibrancy of our classrooms, support the development of valuable intercultural competencies among all students, provide this country with global talent—and yes, they do bring money. The federal government's 2019-2024 "International Education Strategy" noted that "educational expenditures by international students have a greater impact on Canada's economy than exports of auto parts, lumber or aircraft." The decisions made by the government on this issue will have major economic implications.

Already we are seeing the consequences of the permit restrictions. Universities are increasingly cutting or pausing programs, and large numbers of contract academic faculty are finding that their contracts are simply not being renewed. Many other staff are being laid off or are being offered voluntary retirement incentives.

This is a concern for local economies, because universities are major employers. In Oshawa, educational services are the third-largest employment category. This is larger than the auto industry. As a representative of the Canadian Automotive Museum put it recently, Oshawa is a university town. In times of economic uncertainty, universities play an important dual role as major sources of employment and as avenues for training and reskilling Canadian workers.

OCUFA encourages the government to link any potential changes to the number of permits available to the ability of institutions to properly support international students. Any increases to the number of international students should be tied to the availability of student housing and student services, with universities required to show that they can provide these supports.

The restrictions on study permits were motivated by so-called “bad actors”. These bad actors were primarily outside the university sector. They were international recruiting agents, whose compensation depends on volume rather than quality, as well as private educational providers. OCUFA shares the government's concerns about these actors.

In Ontario, OCUFA fights against private providers that do not properly support international students. We are at the forefront of opposing Navitas, which offers privatized first-year university education. Navitas students use public university facilities, but they do not always have full access to the wraparound services that universities provide.

Faculty have also resisted partnerships with private universities that target international students with non-degree programs that have little currency in the labour market. When Algoma University pursued such a partnership with the private Yorkville University, Algoma faculty led a vote of non-confidence in Algoma's president.

In summation, OCUFA calls for additional long-term predictability around study permit numbers that is built on the effective coordination of provincial and federal governments. Any upward revisions to the number of available study permits should be tied to the ability of institutions to support these students via appropriate housing, student services and program quality. Stringent quality standards will ensure that international students are properly supported and provided with high-quality education.

Thank you.

• (1545)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe) I thank the witnesses for their remarks.

We'll start the first round of questions.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you have six minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I'll be directing my questions to Dr. Tibbits.

• (1550)

Conestoga College took in 84,000 international students in four years. In 2023, they took in more than U of T, UBC and Calgary combined. This had an incredibly negative impact on the cost of housing and the availability of health care services and created a youth jobs crisis in the region, but yet Conestoga College's operating surplus went from \$3 million in 2015 to \$252 million in 2024.

Dr. Tibbits, in 2024 in an article in Guelph Today, you were quoted as saying that some of them—international students—live like that, 14 to a house, in slumlord housing, because they don't

want to pay more than \$400. You are still requesting a record number of foreign student permits. Is that correct?

John Tibbits: We've always worked with the federal government, provincial governments and the local communities. That's why we took in that many students.

We've been finding places for all of those students. This is a massive area. We're not just in Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph. We're across Brantford, Milton—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: But the cost of a one-bedroom rent in your region went up by 35%, by over \$500, in a very short period of time.

Did the federal government ever ask you to tie your requests for foreign student permits to housing costs and availability in your broader region?

John Tibbits: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do you think you'd be able to have juiced foreign student permits to the levels that you did if the federal government had tied the number of foreign student permits they issued to your institution to housing availability and cost?

John Tibbits: Well, it's more than the federal government. We were encouraged to grow in downtown Kitchener. We added 3,500 students there because we helped the city revitalize downtown. It was the same in Guelph and the same in Brantford and Milton. There was a huge demand.

I think that in Ontario in the fall of 2022, there were 323,000 job vacancies, and we were asked to try to help solve that problem.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

We just heard testimony that we should be decoupling foreign student permits from jobs. Now there is a substantive youth job crisis in Canada and also in your broader region. Did the federal government ever ask you to link permit availability to job availability in the region?

John Tibbits: Well, that's what we did. We did link the two. In fact, if you look at—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: But recently?

John Tibbits: I'm not aware that they did that, no. We did it. That's what we did.

In fact, our job placement rate for international students was 86% six months after graduation. That's pretty high.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did the federal government ever ask you to take any responsibility for fraudulent asylum claims being made by foreign students who were issued permits to your institution?

John Tibbits: There was one statement made by former minister Marc Miller, but as far as I'm concerned, that's Canadian border services. The first time we ever heard anything about asylum seekers was when Mr. Miller spoke to that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would you have not been able to juice foreign student permit numbers to the levels that you did if your institution had a financial liability tied to asylum claims or visa overstays made by foreign students at your institution?

John Tibbits: We were never involved in this from day one. We got involved in international enrolment back in the 1990s. There was no money to be made. We didn't try to make money. We were just trying to meet skill shortage needs. That's all we were doing.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm just making a note for the analysts, because I think that's a recommendation that probably needs to be made after what happened at your institution. It was pretty bad.

I note that the Waterloo regional health authority is now charging for non-residents to have births at their hospitals. If the number of foreign student permits issued to your institution had been tied to health care levels or health care support, would you have been able to juice student permits to the levels that you did?

John Tibbits: We had our own health care centre at the college. We invested in health care for the students. We don't handle pregnancies at the college, but we had a full health centre at the college, including mental health services.

• (1555)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have to say that it's kind of a mess.

You were quoted as saying some pretty wild things about Sault College president David Oraziotti. You called him a whore, yet I note that your salary is over \$600,000. You are now the highest-paid college/university president in the province.

We've heard some pretty bad things about foreign students at your college. How do you reconcile those comments you made about another university president with your present salary and the mess that the region now finds itself in due to your decisions to juice foreign student permits to that level?

John Tibbits: First of all, the region is not in a mess.

Secondly, I did apologize about that matter. That was a mistake.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: A lot of polling has said that Canada's immigration consensus is broken. Do you take any responsibility for that, given that you juiced foreign student permits to a level where health care, housing and jobs clearly didn't have the capacity in your region?

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe): Please keep your answer brief, Mr. Tibbits. You have 10 seconds left.

[*English*]

John Tibbits: First of all, all our students found housing, and they aren't all living in—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay—

John Tibbits: No, they did. We found housing—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe): Thank you.

Your time is up, Ms. Rempel Garner.

We'll go to Mr. Zuberi for six minutes.

Mr. Zuberi, you have the floor.

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

I thank all the witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

I'll start with Mr. Kristofferson.

Can you talk a bit about the role the provincial governments play in the recruitment of international students?

Rob Kristofferson: Thank you. I'd be happy to.

In the province of Ontario, similar to other jurisdictions in Canada, revenues for universities are based on a provincial grant per student, the tuition of students and international student income, plus some other smaller things. Since the economic crisis of 2008, the provincial grant has been essentially flat. In 2019, the provincial government reduced tuition by 10% and has frozen it there since, in a highly inflationary environment, so in order to make up revenues and keep afloat, universities, to some extent, turned to international students.

We have an opportunity for international student to enrich our classrooms and to cross-subsidize our institutions, but if institutions are just holding on by a tether financially, we can't enjoy the benefits of that.

Any coordinated policy needs to involve the provincial government's stepping up and restoring domestic funding levels. Right now, Ontario universities receive about 21% of their total revenues from the provincial government. When I did my undergraduate at Trent University in the eighties, it was closer to 80%.

Sameer Zuberi: It seems from your testimony that the current levels of provincial funding for post-secondary institutions are putting severe pressure on these institutions, which in turn make them recruit international students to cover the costs.

Rob Kristofferson: Yes.

Sameer Zuberi: To pick up on that, you said in your testimony that money is being brought into the country and it's more than—if I understood you correctly—the auto, lumber and aircraft sectors. Can you elaborate a bit more upon that and how that is important for our economy?

Rob Kristofferson: Right now, in the international situation we find ourselves in economically, having revenue sources like that is hugely important. Our auto sector, as we all know, is under threat, and often people don't realize just how much economic activity is generated by the university system.

In 2022, the Ontario university system, the Conference Board estimated, contributed \$96 billion to the Ontario economy in direct and indirect economic inputs that year. That's close to 12% of provincial GDP. International students, of course, were an important part of that.

● (1600)

Sameer Zuberi: You said that “bad actors” were generally those outside of the university sector, and I'm assuming, in Quebec, also outside the CEGEP sector, which is post-secondary. You said that the bad actors tend to be driven by profit-driven recruiters.

We've talked about housing and availability of housing for students. Have most of the challenges around housing for students been within the sector of these bad actors?

Rob Kristofferson: I don't know if I can fully answer that question. We certainly have had bad actors. They're largely outside the university system.

We have had some concern with Algoma University's operations in Brampton, which exploded by something like 1000% in enrolment over the course of the pandemic and has recently been seriously cut back, throwing that institution into some economic crisis. Beyond that, I can't comment on the actual housing impacts.

Sameer Zuberi: Would you say that universities make extra efforts, compared to these bad actors, when it comes to supporting students about the cost of living and the related expenses and to projecting the expenses they will need to live on their own? Do universities do a better job than these bad actors, in terms of helping students understand the costs to study here, away from home?

Rob Kristofferson: I think it's likely certain that it's the case. I think the larger picture is that universities are institutions with long-term time horizons. They operate on five-year plans, but they hire their instructors on much longer durations. We need to sync up federal and provincial policies—and with universities—in a way that actually works on those time horizons instead of—

Sameer Zuberi: You said that it likely is the case. Would you be able to get back to the committee with a bit of research on whether it actually is the case so that we can include that in our study?

Rob Kristofferson: Sure.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

We'll now go over to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here to discuss this important study.

Mr. Kristofferson, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the federal government slashed provincial transfers in order to balance its budget. As a result, the provinces had to make tough choices in areas like health and education, and they had to cut costs as well.

Funding that was cut was never reinstated. What impact is that having on your universities now?

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: I'm seeing massive consequences. I've been teaching at the university level for 35 years, and I've been a student for longer than that. Class sizes have exploded. Available resources and teaching support have dwindled.

We have critiques levied about how outrageous it is that there's a professor teaching a class of only 15 students or something like that. That's actually an ideal learning environment, a fleeting one that is rare to see in today's universities. It's something that those of us who have worked their way through the university system hear-ken back to, really value and would love to see restored.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I realize the current government wants to blame the provinces for education cuts, but I think we can all agree the cuts happened because the government wanted to balance its budget. Paul Martin happened to be a master of that. Thank you for your answer.

The federal government regularly boasts about investing in universities, but it is mainly investing in research programs, such as Canada research chairs and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. Universities compete for those funds. Does that mean some larger English universities get more than others?

My question is for Mr. Kristofferson.

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: I'm sorry. What is the inequity you're talking about?

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Maybe we haven't been hearing the same things you, but people on the ground tell us that access to funding for these programs is very competitive. Some universities end up with more than others. Can you comment on that?

● (1605)

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: If you're talking to the tri-council grants and things like that, it has become more competitive over recent decades. A lot of time and effort are put in by my colleagues in trying to obtain those monies. If we were able to access a larger pool of opportunity in that regard, for the whole system—the country, society and the economy—there would be multiple beneficiaries.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have another question for you, Mr. Kristofferson. That doesn't mean I don't like the other two witnesses, but I really like your answers.

In your opinion, is the federal research funding system equitable for researchers working or publishing in French?

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: That's not really in my jurisdiction. We have a national organization that would be better positioned to comment on that. I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: A recent report on the television show *Enquête*, which is very popular in Quebec, revealed that an international criminal organization is taking advantage of gaps in the study permit system. You may not have seen that report, but the University of Ottawa was identified as being a victim of this crime ring, which uses the international student program to bring bad actors into the country. I don't know if you were briefed on the report, but it really made waves in Quebec.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada's response to the report was astonishing. It was very surprising—catastrophic, even. An IRCC spokesperson reacting to the report blamed universities for this phenomenon. He even blamed the Government of Quebec by extension.

What was your reaction when you heard that? If this is the first time you're hearing about it, what's your reaction to an IRCC spokesperson saying that kind of thing?

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: My reaction is that I'm now going to go and read all that I can about it.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Well, you should, because your university is named specifically. It's unfortunate that you haven't seen the report.

Have you observed any irregularities in study permit applications that would lead you to believe a crime ring is using the international student program to get into Canada and is targeting your university?

[English]

Rob Kristofferson: OCUFA is a faculty association, a provincial organization, and we're not directly involved in the administrative apparatus of universities, so I don't get a view onto that.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Kristofferson, I have one last question for you. The federal government has one set of measures that don't necessarily take into account realities in different jurisdictions, such as Quebec and the provinces. In your opinion, should those measures be adjusted depending on the jurisdiction?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Give a brief answer, please.

Rob Kristofferson: Well, I think what's before the committee is trying to find a solution to an incredibly complex set of factors that need to fit together, but I think that's what we need to do: to all knuckle down—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. I'm going to have to cut you off there.

We're going over to Mr. Redekopp for a five-minute round.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Tibbits, in 2024, Conestoga had over 30,000 international students. That's about 75% of your student population. It's safe to say that you had one of the largest enrolments, if not the largest, of international students among colleges in Canada. Is that correct?

John Tibbits: I think so, yes.

Brad Redekopp: Okay. It's also safe, then, to assume the federal government was aware of Conestoga and its impact. Did the federal government come to you in 2023 or 2024 with concerns about the massive growth in international students?

John Tibbits: No.

Brad Redekopp: Okay. Then it came as a surprise when they announced the cap on study permits in 2024.

John Tibbits: That's difficult to answer. I think what was starting to happen here—

• (1610)

Brad Redekopp: I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt you, but I think we understand that there were a lot of things that happened. I think there must have been some element of surprise.

Then minister Sean Fraser allowed unlimited study permits, a system that Conestoga adapted to, but then minister Marc Miller pulled the rug out from under that system with, surprise, hard caps. Is the Liberal government to blame for creating this mess?

John Tibbits: Well, I think what we have done all along is work with the feds, work with the province and work with municipalities and industry. They certainly wanted us to grow dramatically because they couldn't fill positions across a wide range of industries: health care, skilled trades.... It's a huge issue in our community. There's no question that we needed to grow dramatically—no question.

Brad Redekopp: You're saying that the federal government was encouraging you to grow the student population as much as you could.

John Tibbits: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: Prior to these surprise caps, did any Immigration Canada officials contact you with concerns about the availability of student housing?

John Tibbits: No.

Brad Redekopp: The government was oblivious to this or didn't care about housing, I guess—

John Tibbits: We spent about \$300 million on additional housing, leases, purchasing.... We set up a housing office to help students.

Brad Redekopp: When this great growth in your student population happened in 2022, 2023 and 2024, your population increased by 16,000 students. With the housing shortage in the area, students had to live with sometimes dozens or more people in one house.

Is it safe to assume that you were more concerned with the potential revenue from these students than with the living conditions of the students?

John Tibbits: No. It was never our intention. It was not the money. I know that one gentleman was talking about the funding. That's not why we grew the international. We grew the international because we don't have enough domestic students to fill the jobs in our region. That's the reason we did it. We invested every bit of that back into the community.

Brad Redekopp: You said, "all our students found housing". You're telling me that in those years—2022, 2023, 2024—there were no students who had to live with 14 in a room, and there were no students living under bridges.

John Tibbits: I don't think anyone was living under a bridge. I know there was a picture, but I don't think anyone was.

In our area, don't forget that we were across six cities, so students were able to find places with our help. We know that because we worked with the students. There may have been three or four people in a house but—

Brad Redekopp: Let's switch gears and talk about living expenses.

The Liberals required students to have \$10,000 a year, which you must have known was not enough to live in the region, but you didn't do anything about this—

John Tibbits: No, that's not true.

Brad Redekopp: —and that caused students to go to food banks to survive. Doesn't this prove that you're more interested in tuition dollars than in your students' living conditions?

John Tibbits: No. First of all, we informed students, as part of the recruitment process, about what the real costs were of coming to Canada. You have to remember that a lot of students really wanted to come to Canada. However, we informed them of that.

As for the food banks, we had food security programs on every campus. We reimbursed the food banks at least \$30,000 or \$40,000. We worked with them. There were food security programs on each campus across the six cities.

Brad Redekopp: Dr. Tibbits, you had \$550 million in your bank account on March 31 of this year. Do you deserve your \$600,000 salary?

John Tibbits: That's the salary I'm being paid, and I take the job very seriously.

We have poured at least \$500 million back into the community. This year alone, we're spending about \$140 million on investing in services. We're spending \$80 million a year on student supports.

Brad Redekopp: When you spoke about your colleague and called him a "whore", he was speaking about the bad actors. Conestoga's name always comes up in that list. Is Conestoga a bad actor?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Answer briefly please.

John Tibbits: We have always worked with the three levels of government to provide services and really meet our objectives, and that is to stimulate the economy.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. You are out of time.

We will go over to Ms. Sodhi for five minutes.

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

Ms. Trilokekar, in your opening speech, you mentioned using international students as a soft power. Are you able to further expand on this?

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: I think this is why most countries started hosting international students post-World War II. It is to make sure that any country's national interests, political interests, are better served when students come stay and study in their countries. They learn about the country. They get an affinity for the values of the country so that whether you stay or whether you go back to your home country, or to a third or fourth country, there's an affinity that's built. Therefore, when you have future interests, in terms of business or politics, or whatever the case might be, you're able to connect with the country that you've studied in. That's called soft power.

The U.S. is a classic example. It's a power that they have lost, squandered, in the last few years. However, if you think about the U.S. soft power, this is one of the reasons it was built so well; they educated students from all parts of the world who went back and had political and economic affiliations with the U.S., including Canadians who have studied in the U.S.

This is the notion of soft power. It enables countries to form alliances, to have other countries affiliate and believe in Canadian values, in Canadian political and economic interests.

I think, especially given current geopolitics, Canada has an excellent role to play in building this soft power and in having these affiliations worldwide, which is something that we're not currently paying attention to.

I hope that answers the question.

• (1615)

Amandeep Sodhi: Yes, it does. Thank you.

You've also written about how universities themselves initiated the recruitment of international students in Canada. Are you able to tell us how this process began? What motivated it, and what strategies did universities use to attract students from abroad?

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: Canada is an anomaly in that sense, because unlike other countries, the federal government and provincial governments have not really invested in something that you would see in Britain, which is the British Council, or in the U.S., which used to have the United States Education Foundation all over the world. We never really invested in marketing educational services, many years ago, abroad.

The institutions themselves, the universities, saw the value in hosting international students for research, for exchanges and for building. The role of higher education is to build academic scholarship. It was the universities that initiated this process. It's part of what is called "internationalization of higher education", which is to expand their outreach and to expand their affiliations. I would say that Canada has been an anomaly, because before the federal government stepped in and had formal policies, it was universities, the institutions themselves, that began developing initiatives with other countries and hosting international students.

Universities have, even today, their own offices that recruit students and scholars all over the world. At one time, they invested more than the federal or provincial governments ever invested in recruiting students from abroad, so institutions have been on the front line, but things started changing over time. The federal government and provincial governments started taking interest and started investing monies in recruitment. However, in that sense, Canada is an anomaly. We've never really seen this in any other parts of the world, where the institutions took the lead, but we did.

I don't know if that answers it. Again, if you have questions, I'd be happy to answer them further.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you so much.

We're a little short on time now, so answer very quickly.

You've also written about the problems that arise when international education is treated as an industry. From your perspective, what would it take to rebalance the system so that international students are treated fairly and receive meaningful academic and employment opportunities, and are able to fully contribute to Canada's economy and society?

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: Going back to one of the points I made about how we can learn from other systems and other jurisdictions, one of the very interesting countries to look at is Germany. Just like Canada, Germany is a highly decentralized federation, but it doesn't have the same financial impetus to host international students. International students can still study without differential tuition in Germany. One of things you'll notice is that the international student population is very diverse, and it is more focused on—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): I'll just get you to wrap up quickly.

• (1620)

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: I'm sorry.

It is more focused on very specific specializations. One can look at other jurisdictions, but I would, again, go back to my first point—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. We are out of time, but maybe we'll come back to you. I gave you an extra 30 seconds, because I'm feeling so generous.

We're going over now to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Trilokekar, you've studied Ottawa's role in the internationalization of education extensively.

Do you think the federal government is currently providing appropriate leadership in the way it manages study permit programs?

[*English*]

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: Unfortunately, I would say that Canada has not had a lead. We don't have a federal ministry of education. I really worry about IRCC taking over as a de facto ministry of education and entering this arena. We do not have a ministry of education, which becomes a challenge when looking at the internationalization of higher education nationally.

However, earlier on, the Department of Foreign Affairs did take a lead, but there are several departments that have pieces of this puzzle of internationalization. There are ministries that look at research and innovation. There are other ministries that look at immigration and other ministries that look at global affairs. It is a very disparate file, which creates challenges for us. This is why I said that we can look at other models to see how we can have better coordination.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You and I certainly won't agree on the idea of setting up a federal education department because that's a provincial power. However, there may be something we can agree on. Quebec already has a ministry of immigration, francization and integration, as well as a ministry of education. Given that these two entities already exist and that Quebec has jurisdiction over education as well as an immigration ministry, wouldn't it make more sense for Quebec to manage international student permits itself? You pointed me in that direction. I hadn't thought of going there, but you put the idea in my head.

[*English*]

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: I'm not sure whether immigration should be transferred directly to the provinces; I cannot speak to that. All I can say is that our nature of federalism is very highly decentralized and there are mechanisms we need to put in place to have far better coordination and communication.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. We are over our time.

I understand that the Conservatives will take about three and a half minutes and it will be the same for our Liberal colleagues.

I will go over to Mr. Menegakis for about three and a half minutes.

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

My question is for Mr. Tibbits.

I was surprised when you made the comment that you don't have problems in the region. Are you aware of what the youth unemployment rate is in the Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo area alone, which is the area that you primarily service?

John Tibbits: No, I didn't say we didn't have problems. I said there are challenges when you bring in that many.

We look at the greater good. The contribution that was made as far as job placements in the region are concerned is enormous. We invested in—

Costas Menegakis: Mr. Tibbits, I believe your response to my colleague, when she mentioned that the region is a mess, was, "First of all," we don't have those problems; "the region is not a mess."

I would argue with you, sir, that a 16.7% youth unemployment rate is not something to brag about in the region, especially when you're bringing in international students in astronomical numbers, which obviously pads the bottom line. I'm sure that tied into your salary and bonus structure.

You also said you found housing for everybody. One of your own councillors in the region spoke to a student who couldn't take it any more after living in a house with 13 other students. He was number 14. I think you saw him walking down the street with the only possession he had in the house, because he couldn't live in a house with 13 other people. The only possession he had was a chair.

Do you think that falls under housing?

John Tibbits: If that's the reality, that's not good. We want our students to be housed properly, obviously.

Costas Menegakis: It is a reality. It was public, sir. It was published in a newspaper. It was one of the councillors who said it. I believe his name was Michael Harris. He went public about it. I think it's something you would have known, or ought to have known, as a person of some repute in the area.

My next question for you is simple. Conestoga, by your admission and your financial statements, raked in millions from international students, knowing that there wasn't enough housing, that some of those students would be visiting food banks and that there was an unemployment crisis in the area. More than half a billion dollars went into your bank account. It was over \$700 million last year. You said you've invested about \$150 million. That leaves you with about \$550 million. Your bank account has massively increased, in large part, because of this increase you've had from international students, no doubt.

The government often speaks of bad actors. The media talks about them. Conestoga, sadly, is one of the names that always come up. What do you have to say about that?

• (1625)

John Tibbits: What I have to say is we've invested all of that money. We put at least \$500 million into infrastructure, new programs, hiring hundreds of people and expanding our housing base. We worked with each community. We were encouraged. We helped to revitalize the downtown.

Obviously, there were some difficulties. There's no question about it.

Costas Menegakis: With all due respect, don't you feel you should have some social responsibility to the community you serve?

John Tibbits: We do have social responsibility.

Costas Menegakis: This year alone, you're laying off people. Why are you laying people off when you have \$550 million in the bank? According to the public records, you make an astronomical salary. Why are you laying people off?

John Tibbits: We don't have \$500 million in the bank. That's not the case. We do not have \$500 million, and the numbers, as you know, have been cut dramatically.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, colleagues.

I'm now going over to Mr. Zuberi for his last few minutes.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to ask my questions of Ms. Trilokekar.

You were speaking about the good examples of what other countries are doing. You touched briefly upon Germany, and maybe you can weave that in a bit as you answer.

I would like to know what lessons you think Canada can learn from other countries in terms of how they aren't overly reliant on international student tuition.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: Yes, I think there's a lot we can learn from other countries. As I said, Germany's an excellent example because it shows us how a system that's not reliant on tuition from international students can support international students and support local institutions with regard to the benefits of hosting international students. Mind you, Germany also has an interest in transferring international students from being students to being future immigrants in its country as well. As I mentioned, it has a wide diversity of students; it's a far more balanced approach. It looks at international students as high-skilled labour, not just as folks who would fill in any labour situations in the country. Germany has far more local-level initiatives that are worth looking at. It has many protective mechanisms so that international students do not face the exploitation that our students have faced in the labour market when they do seek jobs.

In New Zealand, for example, there is a new code of practice, which looks at learner safety and well-being.

So, there are many models we can look at to see how countries have consulted to develop these processes and to see what kinds of partnerships they have built. As I said before, a major challenge in Canada is the kind of decentralization that we have and the system we have. I don't mean to suggest that we should have a federal ministry of education. However, the fact is that we don't have one, and that changes a lot of situations for us. There's a lot we can learn about mechanisms for protection, for systems of practice, for looking at care and well-being, and for creating regulating, monitoring and legislative acts like other countries have done. Yes, there's a lot we can learn, and we can really reinforce this idea that we need to fund our system well.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I invite you to put anything additional in writing to us so that we can consider it for the report.

In your research, you speak about how you would like to see increased coordination between provinces and federal governments. What policies or best practices can we get from other federal states with respect to aligning education, immigration and settlements?

Roopa Desai Trilokekar: For one, I'm not in favour of aligning education, immigration and the labour market. I don't think that's the direction we should head in. There could be a linkage, but I don't think they should be linked as they are currently. We're going to run into these problems even more if we do that, so I want to clarify that.

However, there are other models that we can look at in terms of how this is done. Again, I keep going back to Germany for two reasons. One is that it is a highly decentralized federation like we are. Its states have a lot of autonomy, just like our provinces. The partnerships that have been developed between the federal and the state governments are worth looking at.

Again, we've had good models. For example, Nova Scotia's study and stay program is great—

• (1630)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. Unfortunately, we are out of time.

It has been great testimony, and it's very hard for me to cut everybody off, but we do have to suspend briefly to set up our next panel.

I want to thank the witnesses for their time.

With that, colleagues, we'll have a brief suspension just to reset the panels.

Thank you.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1636)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): I call the meeting back to order.

In our second panel today, we are joined by Dr. Lisa Brunner, as an individual.

We also have Jason Jacques and Caroline Nicol from the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

You'll each have five minutes for your remarks.

I'll start with Dr. Brunner.

Lisa Brunner (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of British Columbia, Centre for Migration Studies, As an Individual): Thank you to the chair and to the committee for this opportunity.

I am joining you from the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people, where the University of British Columbia centre for migration studies is located. I am a postdoctoral research fellow. I am appearing as an academic expert and not as a representative of the institution.

Explaining the systemic issues within the international student program is not a simple task, and I don't think the actors can be neatly sorted into victims, villains and victors. I did submit to the committee a report published yesterday by the Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation, which outlines my assessment of the program in detail. Today, I am just going to highlight a few points that have not been raised much, so far.

Since World War II, the recruitment of international students has been framed as a solution to many different Canadian policy problems. First, it was framed as a soft power vehicle and a form of international development and aid, as we heard from Dr. Trilokekar. Then, in the 1980s, it was an export industry to generate funds through differential tuition and later as a source of highly skilled researchers. In the 2010s, it was a source of so-called "ideal immigrants", and most recently, it was used to ease short-term labour shortages.

Each wave attracts different kinds of international students with different motivations, which makes it very difficult to discuss them as a single, homogeneous group. They are not. Each wave also draws in different policy actors with distinct objectives. Sometimes their objectives overlap, but they can also misalign to the point of contradiction.

What we see today is a disjointed and volatile policy arena that lacks multi-level, cross-sectoral policy coordination. Your study emphasizes long-term solutions. We need forward-looking, collaborative, systems-thinking planning that recognizes the recruitment and retention of international students as a distinct form of migration and the domino effects that occur when changes are made without genuine consultation. This is particularly important now that the higher education system is a growing economic immigrant recruitment mechanism across the OECD in many different countries, again, as Dr. Trilokekar has discussed. It may not be long before the Canadian federal government finds itself struggling to compete for international students as immigrants.

Including temporary resident targets in the immigration levels plan was productive, in my opinion, but immigration policy requires stability, reliable processing times and, most importantly, planning beyond a three-year horizon. Many elements of the international student program garner support across party lines when policies are clear and sustainable. We need to urgently restore public confidence not just in the international student program but also in our immigration and public higher education systems.

Once Canada has a coherent strategy, transparency should be ensured in two key ways. First, rigorous, publicly accessible reporting is required to promote shared accountability. Currently, there is significant disparity among institutional and provincial practices. What proportion of each institution's international student tuition revenue, for example, is directed toward purpose-built housing and support services for international students? Are provincial and territorial quality assurance mechanisms governing designated learning institutions sufficient? Given the degree of marketization introduced by this system, explicit benchmarks are essential.

Second, international student pathways to permanent residency need to be predictable and clearly communicated so that students have accurate expectations and can make informed choices. Not all international students want to stay in Canada after graduation, but many do, and those who become permanent residents have above average economic outcomes and contribute significantly to our communities. Achieving that goal under our current system requires years of uncertainty as to whether they will be able to stay permanently.

This leaves a segment of our society vulnerable to exploitation, with limited recourse or political representation. More transparency would uphold Canadian values of fairness and would address the systemic precarity associated with prolonged temporary status.

Finally, given reductions in study permit targets, Canada should think carefully about which international students to prioritize and about how we support them. Tailored initiatives such as the Atlantic Canada study and stay program, which I believe Dr. Trilokekar mentioned, and the francophone minority communities student pilot, which tie into broader policy goals like targeted regional retention, should be assessed.

As we rebuild trust, we also have the opportunity to reaffirm Canada's reputation for globally respected, evidence-driven immigration policy innovation.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

• (1640)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you very much, Dr. Brunner.

Now we'll go over to our colleagues from the parliamentary budget office.

Jason Jacques (Interim Parliamentary Budget Officer, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): Thanks for inviting us.

I'm here with Caroline Nicol. She's our expert in demography and immigration in the office.

In January 2025, we published "Impact assessment of the 2025-2027 Immigration Level Plan". We estimate that the government's "new immigration targets [will] reduce nominal GDP" by about \$37 billion "on average over the next three years."

[*Translation*]

We would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have regarding our analysis of the 2025-27 immigration level plan or other PBO work.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you very much.

All right, folks, we will head into our round of six-minute questions.

We're going to start with Mr. Ma for six minutes.

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

My questions are initially addressed to Dr. Brunner.

First of all, thank you very much for recognizing the problems that we currently have, or have had in the past 10 years, with the student immigration and student permit program.

I want to provide some background to my question that's coming. You were the lead author on a 2025 paper in which you compared the higher education institutions of Australia, Canada and Germany from 1990 to 2019 with regard to their roles in immigration governance. I couldn't help but notice that in your summary of Australia's 2011 strategic review of student visa programs, the main policy issue faced by Australia over a decade ago maps closely to what Canada is facing today.

Your summary of the problem faced by Australia in 2011 was that the "[t]arnished reputation of [the] Australian [education] sector" was due to the "growth of unscrupulous private colleges [and] 'non-genuine' [international students] using education as a pathway for immigration".

In your discussion in this report, I see statements that track to present-day Canada, such as, one, international students "were exploited by private education providers and agents"; two, "student visa program integrity was at stake"; and three, "the quality of education was perceived to diminish at some" institutions.

Given your understanding of the evolving migration policy landscape in Australia and Canada as tied to higher education institutions, my question to you relates to their trajectories.

Do you agree that there is a time delay parallel between Australia and Canada related to the international students in the policy domain where education meets immigration? If so, what lessons can Canada learn from the crisis Australia faced in 2011?

• (1645)

Lisa Brunner: I think Dr. Trilokekar spoke to this a bit in her comments.

There are similar competing priorities among policy actors and jurisdictional frictions in Australia and Canada. They happen at different periods of time. There are, obviously, significant differences in the two countries, but I think they do both suffer from a challenge on the higher education side, which is funding issues and the resulting marketization of public post-secondary institutions.

On the immigration side, they're explicitly positioning permanent residency as a carrot, without enough space for all of those students to transfer to permanent residency, and there's an impact on the higher education system in terms of what kinds of programs are attracting students and whether those align with the labour market.

Germany is very interesting because, in Germany, international students are not charged differential tuition compared to domestic students. Essentially, in Germany, the higher education system is funded much more robustly than in Canada, so we really see that the marketization of higher education has a very big impact. If we had more opportunities for funding for higher education, I think that would stabilize some of the issues—of course, with regulation as well.

Germany is primarily attracting international students as immigrants, not necessarily to fund its higher education system.

Michael Ma: I want to follow up on what role international caps have played in the mitigation of the exploitation international students faced in Australia and Canada.

Lisa Brunner: The rapid growth of temporary residents overall in 2022 and 2023 contributed to Canada having the highest annual population growth rate since 1957. Population growth has since slowed with the caps.

I understand that public attitudes towards immigration are very important for Canada to maintain the social licence of having support for immigration, which we know the country depends on significantly.

Michael Ma: I'll move on to a different area. In your analysis in your report, you highlighted that “higher education's recognition of its own economic dependence on international students as a vulnerability was the most notable focus” in the briefs you've encountered.

Why are we issuing study permits to foreigners who have not demonstrated at least a working proficiency in one of our national languages such that they need language training after graduating?

Lisa Brunner: I would have to see exactly what you're referring to.

Michael Ma: This is in a paper you issued.

Lisa Brunner: I'm not aware of any institutions in Canada that don't have a minimum language requirement for French or English, but I could be mistaken. I'm not sure.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. We are out of time.

We will go to Ms. Zahid for six minutes.

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to both of the witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

My question is for Dr. Brunner. Your post-doctoral work at the UBC centre for migration studies emphasizes social justice in migrant integration, including the gendered and rationalized dimensions of international student experiences, to foster a truly equitable system.

What measures would you propose to protect vulnerable international students, such as those from the global south, from exploitation in the education and migration pipeline while ensuring pathways to belonging that align with Canada's commitments to decolonization and inclusion?

• (1650)

Lisa Brunner: Thank you very much. I really appreciate that question.

There's a challenge with the marketization of international education overall because, in some ways, we see a large wealth transfer from lower-income countries to countries like Canada across the global north. As I mentioned, Germany has a very different approach. In some countries, there's more of a focus on recruiting international students as part of a broader development approach and a broader aid approach, prioritizing different diversity among students and their backgrounds.

It's a difficult question to answer because of the restrictions in the system. I'm just trying to think about this for a moment.

Many institutions have important services that they provide for international students that could be further supported. Higher education institutions play a really important role on behalf of the government in providing these services, which are essentially settlement supports for students who the government would have previously funded. There could be coordination and regulation of those services to ensure that there's consistency and that students are able to thrive while they're here.

Maintaining a positive outlook on immigration to ensure that we don't fall into empty immigration rhetoric that could produce an increase in hate crimes, racism and discrimination is also extremely important.

Salma Zahid: You mentioned Germany. Are there any other specific countries that have done this in a better way?

Lisa Brunner: What do you mean by a better way, exactly?

Salma Zahid: What has really worked for any country specifically for supporting higher education and the integration?

Lisa Brunner: When it comes to international students, I think there are areas for policy innovation. I think that's a role Canada could play if we really take seriously the opportunity to develop an international education strategy that puts that at the forefront and really thinks about the purpose of our higher education institutions and our responsibility to our own country and to the world.

There are opportunities for complementary pathway programs that can support students who are selected from outside Canada and brought in based on certain elements of need, if they're done in a very coordinated way.

Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In your Ph.D. dissertation on “edugration”, you described the recruitment of international students as a distinct, three-step economic immigration process that has shifted the societal role of higher education.

Given the rapid growth in international student numbers in Canada, how would you recommend the federal government implement a managed migration framework to ensure sustainable inflows while balancing economic benefits with integration challenges?

Lisa Brunner: Some of the policies that I mentioned in my opening statement—programs like the Atlantic Canada study and stay program and the francophone minority communities student pilot—are examples where we see a policy priority such as regional retention. We have cross-sectoral collaboration. The government selects students who are likely to be interested in staying in Canada long term, but who also meet specific needs and goals of other immigration policies. Then they're provided with settlement supports and connected to potential pathways to allow them to stay in those areas.

I personally think that more settlement services for students could be beneficial, but they don't necessarily have to come from only federal or provincial governments. There are ways to work together in a cross-sectoral, collaborative way because we have a lot of strength in our institutions that have been providing many de facto settlement services for quite some time.

I was an international student adviser at a research-intensive university for 10 years before I did my Ph.D. I know my colleagues work very hard to try to support students adjust to life in Canada.

• (1655)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

We will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Jacques, in your remarks, you said that you estimate the 2025-27 immigration level plan would reduce GDP by \$37 billion.

Can you explain to the committee how you reached that conclusion?

Caroline Nicol (Advisor-Analyst, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): The way that affects the Canadian economy is that, for one thing, fewer hours are worked. Essentially, there are fewer people available for work and fewer hours worked. That automatically affects the country's economic activity.

Another aspect to consider is consumption. Fewer people will consume different products, and that also reduces economic activity.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your report, did you examine the different categories of immigrants? For example, we have temporary immigration and permanent immigration. Temporary immigration would be workers, asylum seekers and students.

Does your report dissect the data for each category?

Caroline Nicol: In that particular study, we didn't necessarily differentiate among the categories. We treated it like an overall demographic shock.

We took a somewhat more detailed look at the realities of this segment of the population with respect to age. For example, our population of temporary residents and immigrants is younger than the national average. Our findings therefore reflect labour market behaviours that are a little different for this age group.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I gather your report did not include asylum seekers?

Caroline Nicol: We took the government's population numbers and compared them to a counterfactual scenario in which the government did not reduce permanent immigration targets or cap it at 5% of total population. Those are the two scenarios we compared.

The 5% target definitely includes asylum seekers. In our economic model—

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm not challenging how you did the report, but I think we can agree that situations vary case by case, such as when someone comes here as an asylum seeker.

You talked about consumption and hours worked and so on. Specifically, when someone looking for help comes here and claims asylum, they clearly need help. Not all of these people get refugee status. However, there is a difference between the economic contribution of an asylum seeker and that of someone who comes to work here in a professional occupation.

Caroline Nicol: That's true. The purpose of our study was to calculate the magnitude of the impact that a demographic shock of this size can have on the economy.

Of course, different economic realities in the labour market of various actors can change things. In this case, we sort of experienced the two extremes. For two years, a considerable demographic influx was observed in the Canadian economy. Now things are at more of an equilibrium, so our results are compared to those two previous years.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that same report, you say there has been no impact on housing. You don't make a connection between immigration and housing.

Caroline Nicol: Obviously, lower immigration means reduced demand for housing, which means downward pressure on housing prices. We do mention that. We also worked on a report on the housing supply and demand gap. When we compare both versions of our report, we can see that the population decline results in more balanced housing supply and demand.

That isn't in this report, but we did address that issue.

• (1700)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Did you examine it only for international students with respect to housing?

Do you have anything about that?

Caroline Nicol: We didn't break it down like that.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Brunner, I see that you're an expert on migration politics and study permits.

I've had opportunities to speak with many ambassadors from the African continent, and they've told me that there should be a debate about the fact that many students come from Africa. They go abroad to places like Quebec and Canada to study, but they don't go back to their country of origin afterward. These ambassadors are starting to get worried because they feel that some African countries are losing their best and brightest.

Have you looked at that situation? As an expert, have you heard about it?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Please give a very brief answer as we are out of time.

Lisa Brunner: It's not really my area of expertise, but there is an academic debate about brain drain versus brain circulation. Remittances, for example, can contribute to development.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

We are now moving on to Mr. Davies for five minutes.

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

I would just like some clarification from Ms. Nicol or Mr. Jacques.

You said the \$37-billion impact on the GDP was with temporary foreign workers and with student visas? Was that combined or was that segregated?

Caroline Nicol: The shock essentially that we were showing here is everything that was brought forward in the immigration target plan that was projected in November—so permanent residents and all of those temporary residents.

Fred Davies: Okay, thank you.

When officials were here earlier, I asked what the economic impact was of the sudden change in the student visa program, and they said that they couldn't answer the question, that they didn't have that data. When did you do your study?

Caroline Nicol: We published this in January 2025.

Fred Davies: Officials of the department should have had this information.

Dr. Brunner said something that I had been looking for since the beginning of the study, which is that a domino effect happens without consultation. After we've gone through all of the study, that's sort of the phrase I think is pertinent to where we are.

Has the PBO, for example, costed out the impact of sudden changes or, as our Prime Minister likes to say, this rupture? It is a fundamental rupture in the way the immigration system has been changed suddenly, which has had a huge impact on post-secondary institutions. Has the PBO calculated the cost to the federal government outside of just the immigration program, perhaps to CBSA or to IRCC, on the long-term impact of the changes to this program? Has it been costed out at all?

Jason Jacques: We have done work in the past on various immigration policy changes. One of the reports that touches on the point you raised that immediately comes to mind was instigated by the chair of the committee in 2018 with respect to irregular migration coming across the border. Our office would obviously be open to undertaking similar work in the future upon a motion from the committee.

Fred Davies: Madam Chair, I think that would be a useful bit of information for us to have.

When the government suddenly changed its direction on international students, it put a lot of colleges and post-secondary institutions into a serious financial situation. One of the things that happened in the 2023 economic statement is that the government changed the way post-secondary institutions are treated with respect to bankruptcy, insolvency and responsibility to creditors.

In essence, the federal government removed post-secondary institutions from the ability to seek bankruptcy protection or insolvency protection. What it effectively means is that governments, federal and provincial, are going to be responsible for the financial decline or, in some cases, catastrophic decline of some post-secondary institutions.

I'm aware that it's likely that, in the next couple of years, several post-secondary institutions will become insolvent and will be seeking some type of creditor protection.

Do you have any data, or are you prepared to do any investigation on how this might impact the taxpayer?

• (1705)

Jason Jacques: Again, with a motion from the committee, we'd be happy to undertake the work, undertake the analysis and furnish it to the committee.

Fred Davies: You have no data thus far on—

Jason Jacques: I don't know that we don't have data. I know I'm not familiar with any particular datasets that we have in the office right now, because we haven't been asked to look at the issue. That said, off the top of my head, I can think of a couple of datasets that one might want to look at.

Fred Davies: Can you give me an example?

Jason Jacques: As a starting point, something I do on my evenings and weekends is look at the financial statements of universities and colleges across the province of Ontario as well as the websites of the Province of Ontario and the Ministry of Education and the policy framework they have with respect to intervening in colleges and universities and supporting them in eliminating their significant and potentially, dare I say it, unsustainable operating deficits. Those are very good information sources, but if you gave me more than five minutes, I could probably come up with a better term of reference for you.

Fred Davies: I'm fine, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead for five minutes.

Peter Fragiskatos (London Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

To Ms. Brunner, thank you very much.

Thanks to the PBO as well for appearing today.

Ms. Brunner, the question goes to one statement you made at the outset of today's testimony that we should, wherever possible—in fact, always—avoid looking at victims and villains in all of this in terms of the discourse or the narrative on international students. “Victims, villains and victors” is what you said, if I remember exactly.

I think I know what you mean by that, but can you explain that a bit further?

Lisa Brunner: There's been some missed nuance in terms of who's to blame for this situation, and that includes which institutions are to blame because it's really not an issue of private versus public institutions, colleges versus universities, since we do have private, for-profit universities in Canada that have not really been examined much.

Exploitative private colleges undoubtedly deserve strong critique, as do these marketized systems that produce them and allow them to flourish, but many private programs were delivered through these lucrative curriculum licensing agreements with public institutions, as Alex Usher discussed in his testimony, I believe.

It's also a really challenging situation where we have international students being framed in certain ways and being blamed for systemic issues for which they might make up a very small proportion. There's been a lot of divisive rhetoric discussing international students—from various parties, to be honest—as being responsible for the housing crisis, for example, as opposed to looking at more structural issues like underinvestment in public and non-market housing, financialization of homes as assets, weak tenant protec-

tions, etc. There was significant growth in 2022 and 2023, but international students still represent a small share of demand.

Going back to the point of this very important moment in terms of the public attitude towards immigration in Canada, it's important to maintain dignity and respect for anyone in our communities, contributing in the various ways that international students do.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I'm going to ask you to return to the example of Germany because you made a really interesting point about the fact that, in Germany, there's no differential tuition. Tuition is the same for German citizens and for international students.

I think so many of the challenges that we're now seeing play out, which are faced by colleges, particularly, and by universities, have to do with the fact that provincial funding has declined, as we heard in the previous testimony. I'm not sure if you were watching that, but at one time, it represented 80% of the funding that universities and colleges were relying on, and it is now around 20%.

Can you speak to the German model, for example, and how that can maybe serve as an example for Canada? If we don't address some very fundamental structural issues... There are issues, of course, at the federal level that do need to be looked at and that will be looked at, but there are provincial responsibilities here that need to be adhered to. I think restoring funding on a level that is meaningful and serious will go a long way in addressing a lot of the challenges that we're seeing materialize.

• (1710)

Lisa Brunner: There's a lot of differentiation among the provinces and territories and, in general, public funding for higher education has declined across political parties since the 1970s. We know that operating grants have not kept pace with inflation, so certainly, the funding of higher education, the undervaluing of its role in society and Canadians' unwillingness, maybe, to pay for their own higher education system, instead relying on international student tuition to subsidize it, are certainly concerning.

I can provide you with some information about the German system in particular that would give more details. I'd be happy to provide that. There is a concern that, in Germany, there might be an increasing marketization similar to other countries because that draw is so powerful and because capitalism is so powerful. It's very difficult to think of a different model, but it is possible for us to really think about what our priorities are in society.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): You're right on time. That was amazing.

We'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Jacques, some parliamentarians tell us that Quebec and the provinces are to blame for financial disengagement from post-secondary institutions and for universities being underfunded.

I think it's because, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the federal government decided to slash provincial transfers in order to balance its budget.

Would you agree with me on that?

Jason Jacques: Unfortunately, we haven't yet evaluated that statement. If the committee put in that request, I'd certainly be in a better position to let you know my opinion.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, I would like the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide us with an analysis of what happened in the late 1990s and early 2000s with respect to provincial transfer cuts. I would also like to know if that impacted the provinces, specifically with respect to education.

Jason Jacques: According to the numbers, federal transfers to the provinces were clearly reduced. However, I'm not an expert on how those cuts affected each province, especially Quebec at the time. Nevertheless, we can imagine that it must have presented some challenges for Quebec and the other provinces.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Brunner, would you quickly comment on the international reputation of the current education system for international students in Canada?

[English]

Lisa Brunner: I can only speak anecdotally about what I've heard from colleagues because it's not exactly my area of expertise. It certainly has been impacted because the applications to Canadian higher education institutions have decreased. I think there's essentially a sense that Canada doesn't want international students, if I can simplify it in that way.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): You're out of time. Thank you.

Now we go to Mr. Menegakis for five minutes.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us.

I have a few questions for the PBO first.

Has the federal government asked you to complete an analysis of the cost to Canada's health care system that the excessive numbers of international students have caused?

• (1715)

Jason Jacques: No, we have not received that request.

Costas Menegakis: Can you undertake to do that? Is it possible to provide that to the committee?

Jason Jacques: Absolutely. With a request from the committee, we'd be happy to undertake the work.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you. That would be helpful.

Has the federal government asked you to complete an analysis of how many hours international students work in Canada? Have you done an analysis of that?

Jason Jacques: Likely somebody who actually works for the government would be better placed to respond to that question.

On our end, we're not part of the federal government per se, so I can't actually speak to what they have and haven't done.

Costas Menegakis: My question was, have they asked you to do it?

Jason Jacques: No, we have not received a request.

Costas Menegakis: Again, if we needed that information, the process would be to ask you, through the committee, to do that. I think that would be very helpful, Madam Chair.

Has the federal government asked you to complete any analysis of the cost to Canada's social infrastructure services that these excessive numbers of international students have caused?

Jason Jacques: No. I would say that because there are 360,000 people who work for the federal government and there are 36 of us, as part of that group of 360,000, they have robust policy capacity in place, so typically they do their own work.

I think that's why they don't ask us.

Costas Menegakis: You, as the PBO, which is an independent resource and a very valuable department, have not been asked to provide that.

Jason Jacques: No.

Costas Menegakis: Again, that's something we might be asking you for, with the committee's approval.

Has the federal government asked you to complete an analysis of the number of housing units that are required to properly house the large number of international students that the federal government allowed into the country?

Jason Jacques: No.

Costas Menegakis: They have not. Again, that's something that would be very useful to us. One would think it would be something that should be taken into consideration by a government before making its policies.

Has the federal government asked you to complete any estimate on how housing costs have increased, particularly in areas that house universities and colleges? We heard testimony earlier, before you were here, from previous witnesses where the housing costs have gone up considerably.

Have you been asked by the government to do an analysis of the impact on housing costs with respect to the large number of international students the government has let in?

Jason Jacques: No.

May I offer a recommendation?

Costas Menegakis: Sure.

Jason Jacques: Our starting point would be to have the committee actually issue a request to the relevant government departments to compel them to share any such studies that you've just referenced over the past couple of minutes with the committee. Certainly, on our end, that would be the starting point: send an information request to the relevant government departments and see what work has already been done before you have people in our office replicate the work of the 360,000 highly qualified federal public servants.

Costas Menegakis: I understand that. Thank you.

We've had testimony here from officials and that information was not available to us, so that's why I thought I would ask you. We will go through the right channels to make sure the request goes through properly.

Jason Jacques: Again, I'm not trying to create any barriers whatsoever.

Costas Menegakis: No, I understand.

Jason Jacques: We're here to support you. Our objective is to make sure you receive the information as quickly as possible. We just want to cut through as much bureaucracy as possible.

If the government's already done the work, then the committee has more power than an agent of Parliament. The departments are compelled to furnish you with the information that is currently sitting within the government department.

Costas Menegakis: That's very clear. Thank you, Mr. Jacques.

My next question is for Ms. Brunner.

Thank you for your testimony today as well.

Ms. Brunner, you have said there is a mounting tension from what you called "immigration politics" and that international students are being scapegoated to deflect attention from structural issues. That's a very powerful statement.

Do you believe this Liberal government is scapegoating the excessive number of international students that their policies let into Canada to cover their own failings in housing, health care and jobs?

Lisa Brunner: That is a good question.

• (1720)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Give a brief answer.

Lisa Brunner: It seems that the current government has taken a different approach than the previous government.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

Now we have five minutes with Ms. Zahid.

Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

My question, again, will be for Dr. Brunner.

In light of the reports of exploitative practices in some of the post-secondary institutions, what policy reforms do you advocate to prevent universities and colleges from treating international students primarily as revenue sources?

How can federal oversight enforce ethical internationalization, as outlined in your publications on education and migration systems, particularly given the primary provincial constitutional authority for education?

Lisa Brunner: It's a great question.

In the report I'm sharing with the committee, I make some specific recommendations that could be considered by the committee. One is to potentially limit international student enrolment primarily to accredited public institutions and rigorously regulate recruitment practices.

In the short term, we have to think about the fact that there are a substantial number of international students and post-graduation work permit holders who came to Canada and were told that permanent residency was a reasonable expectation, and the policies have changed.

One suggestion I have to reduce the potential precarity and challenges for that population is to prioritize temporary residents already in Canada for permanent residence over the next few years, which would increase the proportion of the overall permanent resident admissions. I know it was originally approximately 40% in the levels plan, and I think it's been about 50% so far. It could be higher, and that would also contribute to the goal of reducing the overall proportion of temporary residents in Canada's population to 5%.

Yes, in general, having more public-facing reporting done with metrics that are agreed upon in consultation would be good, because the institutions know the kinds of challenges that other institutions have had. There's a lot of information that the post-secondary sector can contribute to work with the government, at both federal and provincial levels, to try to improve the situation and move forward in a positive way.

Salma Zahid: How can Canada adopt a more balanced approach to international student migration based on one that weighs human capital gains against risks like labour market saturation and cultural integration strains without undermining the sector's contribution to innovation and diversity?

Lisa Brunner: You mentioned innovation and diversity in particular. As I mentioned in my remarks, international students are such a diverse group of people, with many different motivations. In particular, international students make up a disproportionate number of our Ph.D. students across Canada, and yet, compared to comparator countries, Canada has a smaller proportion of those Ph.D. students.

I think there's an opening for Canada to really focus on recruiting for research-based master's programs and Ph.D. students, in particular, if you're looking to improve innovation. Those populations tend to be economically diverse in terms of their backgrounds as well.

Salma Zahid: What specific protections should be embedded in federal immigration policies to shield international students from exploitation, such as precarious off-campus work or predatory housing? How might your insights from community-engaged service inform enforceable safeguards?

Lisa Brunner: There's a lot of work being done on the temporary foreign worker program, and international students are essentially a type of temporary worker in Canada. There are exploitative experiences that many temporary workers go through.

I can get back to you with some best practices in that regard for sure. I'd be happy to do that.

Salma Zahid: Thank would be great. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Since there is agreement among the parties to end the meeting here, the meeting is adjourned.

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