

Retention Opportunities and Challenges in Housing and Employment:

The International Student Experience in the
Cape Breton Regional Municipality in 2022-2023



With gratitude to the international students who trusted us with their perspective by contributing to this work. **You are an incredible part of our community.**



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Introduction to CBICI

The Cape Breton Island Centre for Immigration (CBICI) is a settlement services provider located in downtown Sydney, Cape Breton. In addition to provincially funded settlement supports, CBICI also is home to the International Student Retention Program, which provides a variety of supports specific to international students, such as immigration-related supports, referrals, and opportunities to explore the island and connect with local organizations and individuals for learning, networking, and employment opportunities. Whereas the Province of Nova Scotia does not fund settlement services for international students, this work is resourced by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) who has identified immigration as one of five strategic priorities for the Atlantic provinces.





Method

CBICI conducted a largely paper-based survey of local international students in 2019, prior to the pandemic and prior to the sustained and significant growth in international enrollment at CBU experienced between 2019 and today. The current survey is based on the questions and responses in the 2019 survey, with an eye towards increasing quantitative data collection. A student focus group reviewed the draft survey questions, providing feedback on the clarity of the questions and identifying gaps in question content.

Standardizing response options based on the previous survey data (while still providing the opportunity for respondents to expand on their answers) allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data year over year which in turn can contribute to the identification of changes and trends. All open-ended responses were grouped into thematic areas.

This survey included 2019 topics such as retention and business ownership, with new sections on

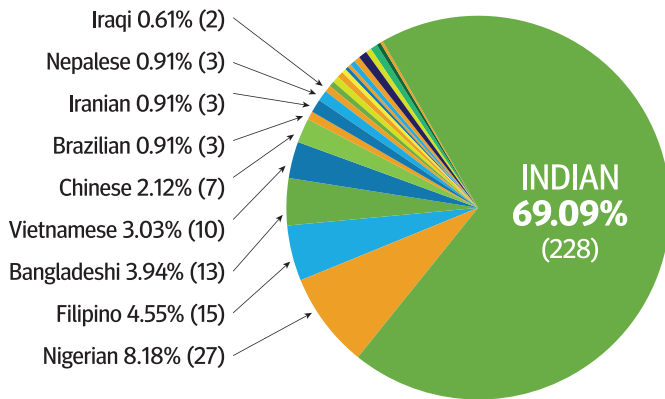
housing and employment, given that both are relevant to international students and other newcomers in the current socioeconomic context of Cape Breton. A mirror survey was then developed for international graduates, to get a sense of immigrant retention post-graduation and their reasons for staying or leaving after studying here.

The International Student Survey received a total of 350 responses, of which 268 were complete (with the remaining survey responses partially completed). The International Graduate Survey had a total of 92 responses, of which 38 were complete (the high number of incomplete responses was largely due to international students erroneously navigating to the International Graduate survey and being redirected). In comparison, 151 participants took part in the 2019 survey.

At the time of the 2019 survey, approximately 2,600 students out of 4,700 studying at CBU were international students. At the time of this most recent survey, approximately 67% (or 4,690) of the almost 7,000 enrolled students were international students. The vast majority of respondents were studying at Cape Breton University.

Demographic Information

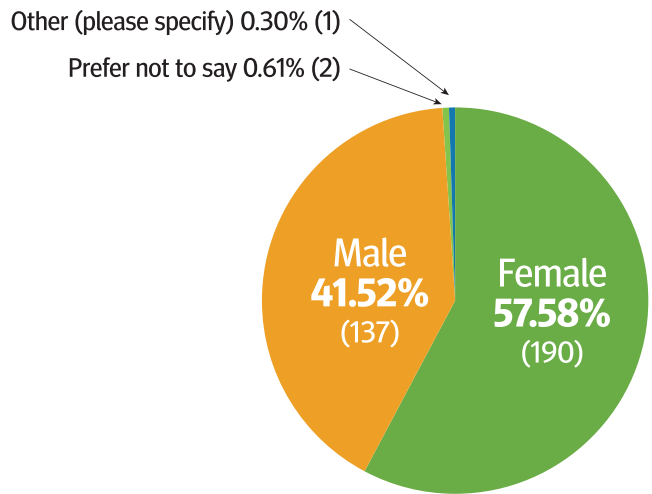
Q2: WHAT IS YOUR NATIONALITY?



Of 330 respondents to this question, the largest group of students identified as Indian (228 respondents, or 69.09%), followed by students identifying as Nigerian (27 respondents, or 8.18%), Filipino (15 respondents, or 4.55%) and Bangladeshi (13 respondents, or 3.94%).

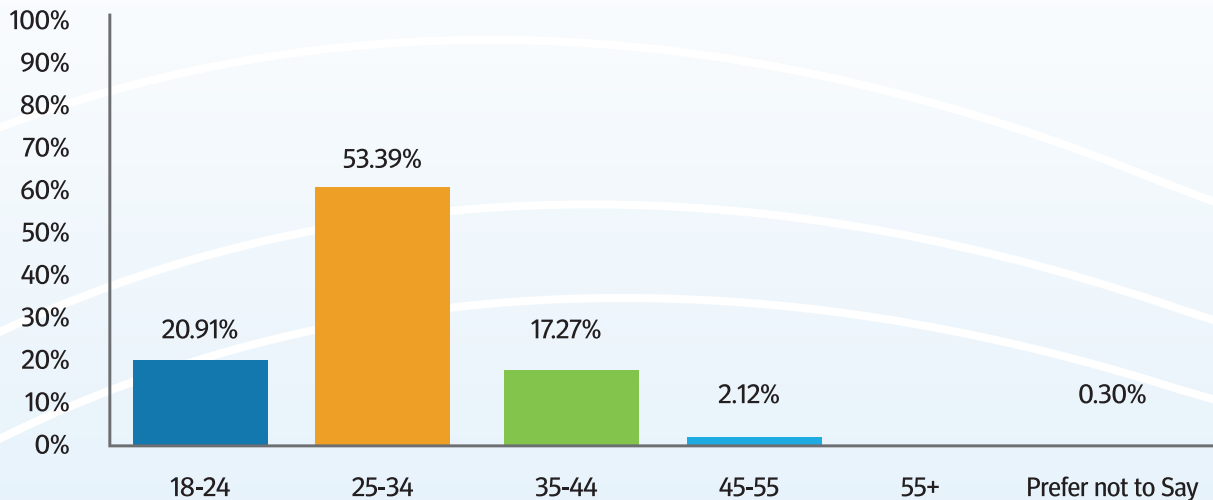
In CBICI’s 2019 survey, of 148 respondents to the same question, the largest group of students also identified as Indian (127 respondents, or 84%), followed by students identifying as Vietnamese (5 respondents, or 3.3%), Kenyan (5 respondents, or 3.3%), and Nigerian (4 respondents, or 3%).

Q3: WHAT IS YOUR GENDER?

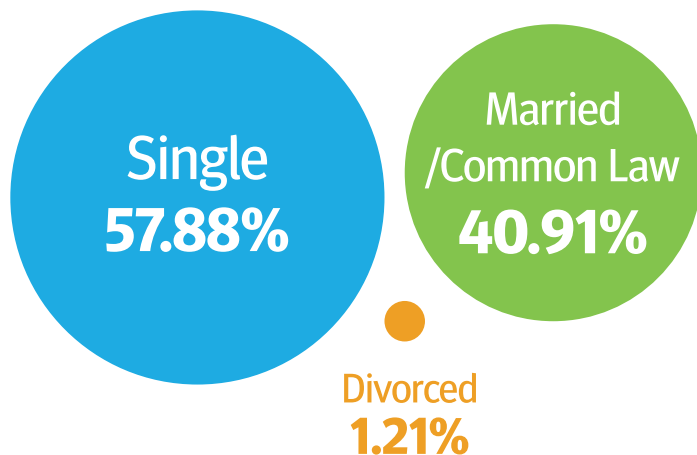


In comparison with the 2019 survey results, the 2023 survey had a greater number of female respondents; in 2019, 42% of students identified as female, and 58% identified as male; in the 2023 survey, approximately 58% of students identified as female, and approximately 42% of students identified as male.

Q4: WHAT IS YOUR AGE?



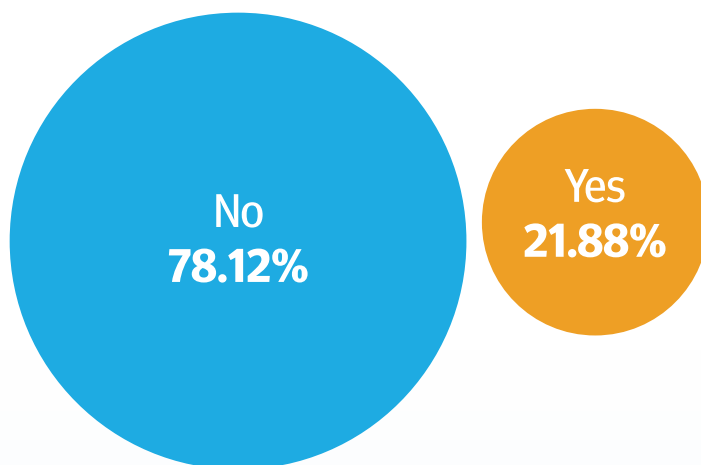
Q6: WHAT IS YOUR MARITAL STATUS?



Of the 135 respondents who indicated that they are married and the 134 who answered the question, “Is your spouse living with you in Canada?” 71 respondents (52.99%) indicated that their spouse was with them in Canada and 63 (47.01%) indicated that their spouse was not with them in Canada.

** In Nova Scotia, Common Law status is defined as ‘a person who has been living with their partner for 12 continuous months, has a child together, or has custody of a child who is dependant on your partner’s support.*

Q8: DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN?



Out of 329 respondents to the question, “Do you have children?” 72 (21.88%) answered yes, and 267 (78.12%) answered no.

Of the 72 who answered yes, 41 (56.94%) indicated that their children were living with them in Canada, and 31 (43.06%) said their children were not.

Of the 31 who answered that their children were not currently living with them in Canada, 30 (96.77%) indicated they would be actively working to bring their children to Canada, and 1 indicated that they would not be bringing their children to Canada.

There is an average of 1.5 children based on the answers of respondents indicating that they have children.

Although questions around family status were not asked in the 2019 survey, CBICI has seen a significant increase in the number of students arriving with family or planning for their families to arrive once they have begun their studies and settled into the community. Beginning to monitor these numbers will assist in ensuring that appropriate supports and referrals are available for the families of international students.

The vast majority of respondents were studying at Cape Breton University (CBU); out of 329 respondents to the question “Where are you studying?” 325 (98.78%) indicated CBU, and 3 (0.91%) indicated NSCC. The top programs of study for survey respondents were CBU’s Post-Baccalaureate Diploma programs, namely Health Care Management, Business Management, Business Analytics, and Supply Chain Management.



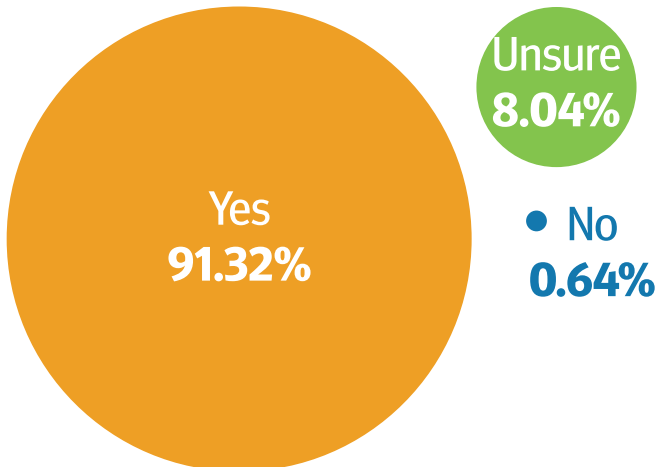
Q14: WHAT IS YOUR PROGRAM OF STUDY AT CBU?



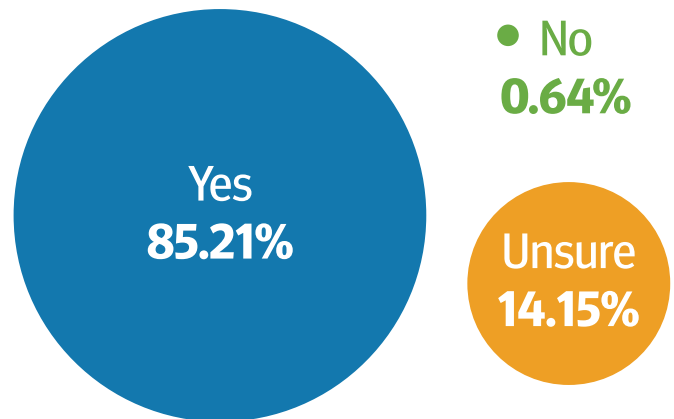
- **29.50%** (95) PBD in Health Care Management
- **22.05%** (71) PBD in Business Management
- **14.29%** (46) PBD in Business Analytics
- **11.80%** (38) PBD in Supply Chain Management
- **6.21%** (20) Bachelor of Health Sciences (Public Health)
- **16.15%** (55) Other

In response to questions regarding application for a Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) and Permanent Residency (PR) post-graduation, out of the 311 respondents to each of the following two questions, the predominant answer was yes (91.32% for PGWP, and 85.21% for PR).

Q18: DO YOU PLAN TO APPLY FOR A POST GRADUATE WORK PERMIT?



Q19: ARE YOU INTERESTED IN APPLYING FOR A PERMANENT RESIDENCY AFTER YOUR STUDIES?





Retention

Policy context

The face of Canadian immigration is rapidly changing. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has put forth a plan for immigration that will see more immigrants coming to Canada and settling in the years ahead than in almost any other period in Canadian history. As a part of this increasing focus on immigration, which is geared towards supporting the Canadian economy by combating an aging workforce and low Canadian birth rate, international students are increasingly viewed as a desirable source of skilled labour and a key component of IRCC's immigration strategy.

With “a combination of their familiarity with the destination country, education credentials, and knowledge and contacts from their home countries” (Arthur et. al., 2022, p. 43), international students represent an opportunity to fill ongoing skilled labour shortages being experienced in the country.

International students also represent a tangible and more immediate economic benefit; Canada's International Education Strategy 2019-2024 indicates that “International education makes a large and growing contribution to Canada's prosperity. International students in Canada spent an estimated \$21.6 billion on tuition, accommodation and other expenses in 2018 and sustained close to 170,000 jobs for Canadians in 2016. Educational expenditures by international students have a greater impact on Canada's economy than exports of auto parts, lumber or aircraft” (Global Affairs Canada, 2019, p. 2).

Settlement and Immigration Options: Gaps in Integration

Despite this indication of the value of international students' contribution to the economy and workforce, these students face numerous challenges from the perspective of settlement and integration, in addition to facing complex and limited opportunities to obtain permanent residence (PR) after graduation, should they seek to do so.

When international students arrive in Canada, they are faced with limited options for settlement services outside of their designated learning institution (DLI). IRCC funds settlement services across Canada, but due to limits on eligibility requirements, these are available to permanent residents, not temporary residents like international students (despite a recognition from the federal and provincial governments of a need to retain students after graduation); and as the numbers of international students increase locally and nationally, the lack of support affects increasing numbers of students (Conference Board of Canada, 2022a, p.14). In addition, the Nova Scotia Government does not provide settlement services to international students, indicating that “off-campus work permit holders (i.e., full-time international students enrolled in post-secondary studies with a valid off-campus work permit) are excluded and hence, ineligible” (Nova Scotia Government, 2023).

Cape Breton University provides advising services to international students, yet with a rapidly growing international student population that is currently 67% of enrolled students (CBC, 2022), and limited student advisors, there are limits to how many students can access timely support on-campus.

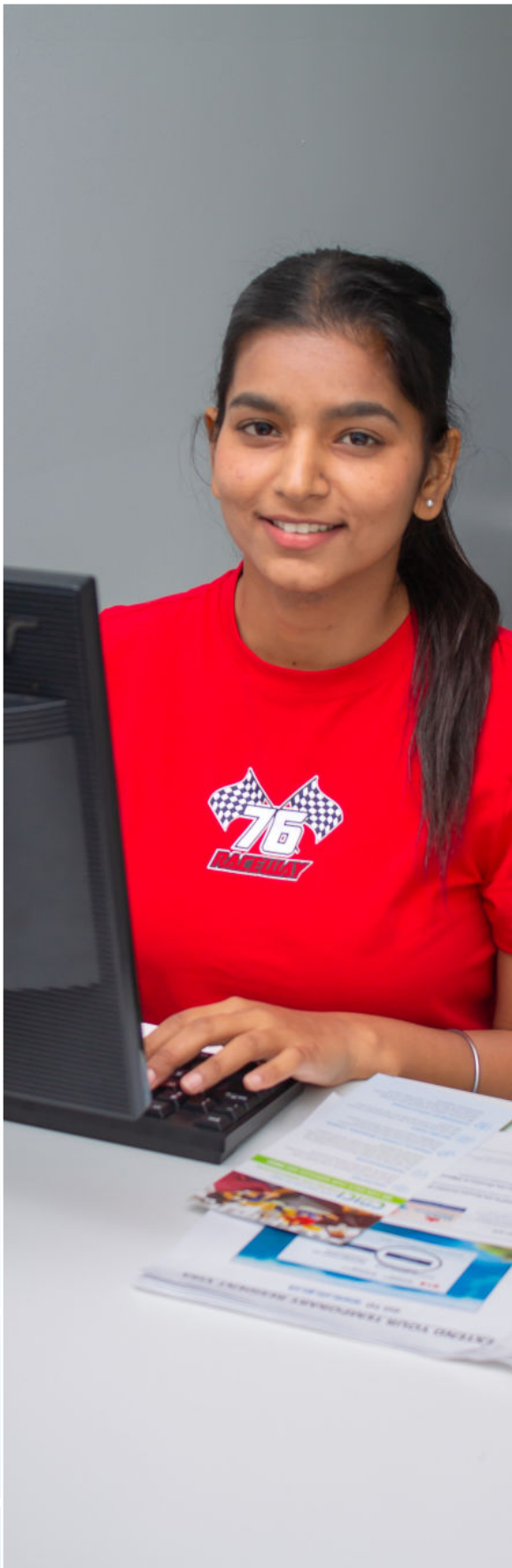
With the creation of the International Student Retention Program at CBICI in 2018, funded by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), additional options for settlement support are available for international students and graduates in Cape Breton, yet these kinds of settlement support programs for international students are the exception, not the rule, nationally.

Many students decide to study in Canada with a desire to apply for permanent residency and settle long-term. Yet, despite the official perception of students as the “ideal immigrants,” there are limited options



for obtaining PR post-graduation. Prospective international students, in applying for a Study Permit, are required to prove to the Canadian government that they will return to their country of origin as a condition for obtaining their permit. This contradicts “two-step” immigration as a legitimate Canadian immigration pathway (with transition from a Study Permit – step one – to Permanent Residency – step two – being one method of “two-step” immigration).

According to the Conference Board of Canada, “Canada lacks a purpose-built federal economic immigration program for international students and has few at the provincial level. This shortcoming makes it difficult for prospective or current international students to assess their likelihood of getting PR” (2022b, p. 8). Nova Scotia has limited options for international students to obtain PR. Most of them are tied to employers and many require a certain number of hours worked to be eligible. This leads to vulnerability in the international student and graduate community – longer periods of temporary status can contribute to mental health issues due to stress about immigration status and can increase the possibility that a student will remain in a job in which they are exploited or face harassment and/or discrimination to avoid impacts on their PR prospects (Conference Board of Canada, 2022b, p. 12).



Local Context

In Cape Breton, international students have had an outsized impact on the local economy. From tuition, rent, and consumer purchases, to growing the labour force, and creating and sustaining small businesses, many students saw the potential of Cape Breton and have decided to stay and contribute to the economy post-graduation.

Much has changed from an economic perspective in the last five years in Cape Breton; an increasing population and limited infrastructure has led to significant socioeconomic impacts on the housing market and the healthcare sector. The government of Nova Scotia sees immigration as a key factor in their plan to double the population of Nova Scotia by 2060 (Thomas, 2022), and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality's most recent Economic Development Strategy document, CBRM Forward, advocates for increasing the number of immigrants settling in the municipality from 150 per 100,000 people to 1,100 per 100,000 people to grow the workforce beyond its current limits (2022, p. 28).

Without the proper infrastructure (appropriate and affordable housing, accessible health care, employment opportunities) and supports (settlement supports that include community integration and targeted employment supports), these goals will be difficult to meet.

Investments in infrastructure and services such as housing and healthcare are pivotal to providing a community context in which newcomers are more likely to settle – these basic needs, if not satisfied, will lead to a renewed outmigration from the CBRM and the province.

Settlement services are also key to supporting population growth in rural communities:

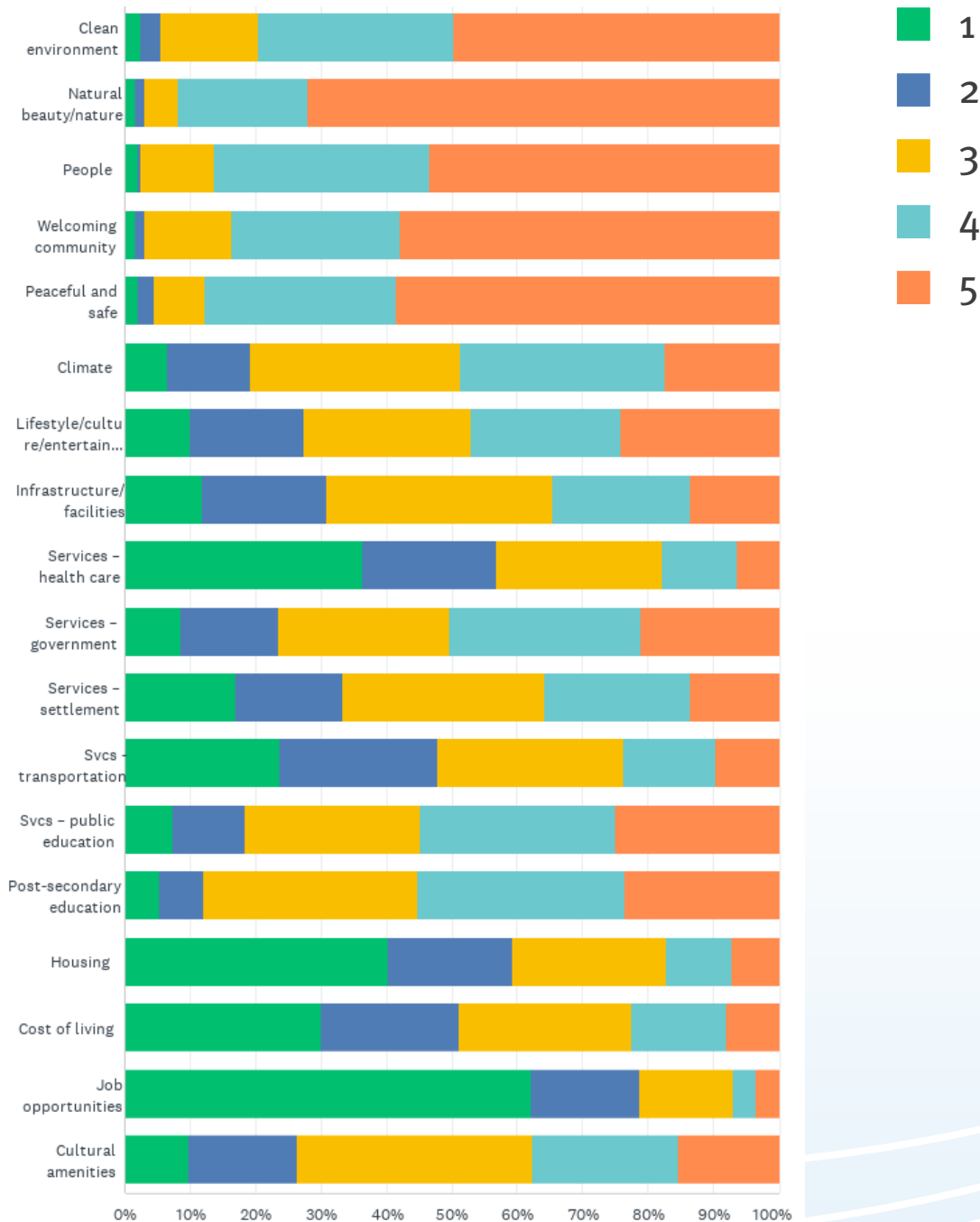
A temporary resident who feels connected to and supported in a community is more likely to remain if they are later granted permanent residence. Settlement services offered later, when someone has transitioned to permanent residence, are unlikely to offer the same benefits. Settlement services for temporary residents can therefore support the goal of regionalization, benefiting the whole community. (Conference Board of Canada, 2022a, p. 15)

International Student Survey Results

Current survey results reflected the socioeconomic challenges facing international students in Cape Breton. 292 survey participants responded to questions on what they liked most and least about Cape Breton.

Q43: WHAT DO YOU LIKE THE MOST/LEAST ABOUT LIVING IN CAPE BRETON?

(Rate each item from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating you dislike this and 5 indicating you like it alot.)

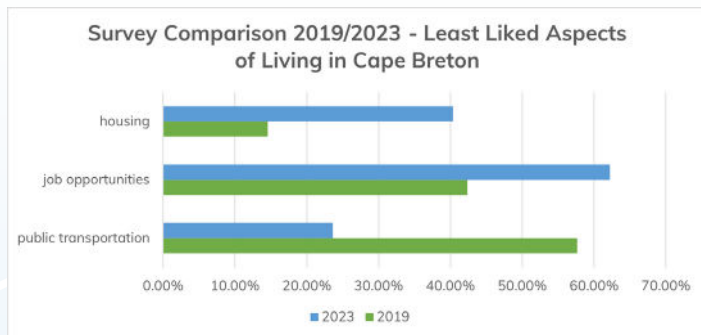


The natural environment/nature was the highest rated aspect of living in Cape Breton, with 210/292 respondents giving this a rating of 5. Other highly rated aspects included the cleanliness of the environment, the people, the welcoming nature of the community, and that it is a peaceful and safe place to live. In comparison with the 2019 survey, these aspects of Cape Breton (environment, people, natural beauty) remain consistently the top reasons that international students like living on the island.

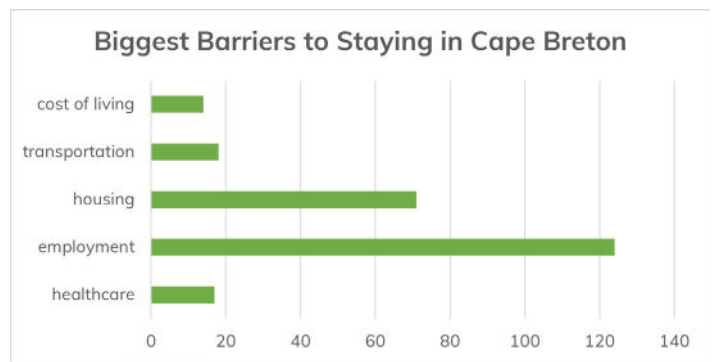
By far, job opportunities were the lowest rated aspect of living in Cape Breton in 2023, with 181/292 respondents giving this a rating of 1. Other aspects of living in Cape Breton that received a large proportion of the lowest rating were access to healthcare, housing, the cost of living, and public transportation.

In comparison with the 2019 survey, these remain concerns that are noted as the aspects that international students liked least about living in Cape Breton (inadequate public transportation, lack of job opportunities, inadequate housing), but the percentage of responses differs.

As shown in the graph below, housing and employment are much larger concerns for the international student population than they were in 2019, and public transportation has become less of a concern over time.

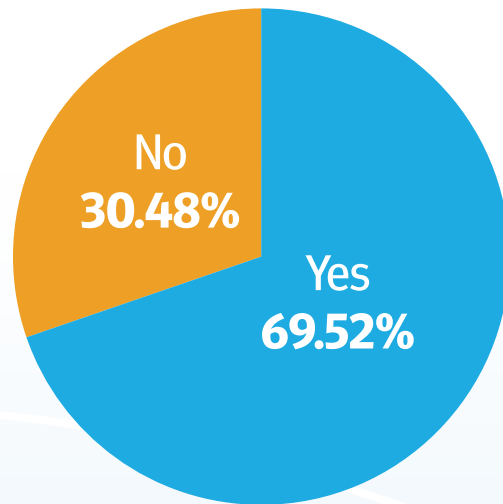


In responding to the question, “What is the biggest barrier to staying in Cape Breton,” the main concern was the lack of employment opportunities.



Following employment, the largest barriers were access to housing, public transportation, healthcare, and the cost of living. Many students included more than one of these barriers in their responses; for example, one respondent indicated that their barriers to staying in Cape Breton were “**Inadequate healthcare, difficulty in finding a good accommodation at a reasonable price and fewer jobs (especially relevant to a person’s background) as compared to cities.**”

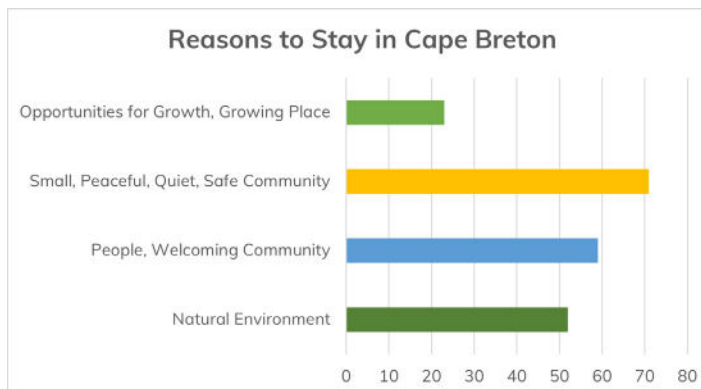
Q44: ARE YOU INTERESTED IN STAYING IN CAPE BRETON AFTER YOU GRADUATE?



Many students indicated a desire to stay in Cape Breton after graduation – 203 out of 292 respondents, or just about 70% of respondents. This is a positive response rate, but is significantly lower than the 2019 survey, in which 88% of respondents indicated that they were interested in staying in Cape Breton after graduation.



Out of 203 students who indicated they wished to stay in Cape Breton, 190 responded to the open question, “What made you decide to stay in Cape Breton.”



The top reason to stay in Cape Breton for respondents was related to the peaceful, quiet, and safe nature of the community, as well as its small size; 71 out of 190, or 37.4% indicated that these factors contributed to their desire to remain. One respondent said, “I like that it is a very peaceful, safe and a welcoming community.” Additionally, respondents indicated that the people and the natural environment both made Cape Breton a place they would like to settle.

“The people are nice and caring and I’ve made a lot of friends turned family.”

“The beauty of Cape Breton is from its people. It feels like home away from home. I don’t know how to explain this but I don’t want to leave Cape Breton. I already said no to 4 jobs (in my field and interests) because they were asking me to move out of Cape Breton.”

Finally, despite the many identified challenges, many respondents saw Cape Breton as a place, that despite its growing pains, presented opportunities for themselves and their families.

“I like how this is a growing place with a lot of potential to add value to the community and give back. I would like to explore the best parts of Cape Breton which I am yet to feel. I just know there will be something here that I can brighten my everyday.”

“It’s a growing place and I see potential for new ideas.”

“Though I’ve selected mostly towards dislikes but I believe things would change in five years down the line. I’ve good hopes that the island has potential to do wonders.”

“During my stay here I have only been treated with kindness and good heartedness and it’s a quiet place which is a plus. But the job opportunities are miniscule which could tempt a lot of people to move out and the area needs more entertainment. But other than that I think Cape Breton is a great place with loads of potential.”



Employment

Employment

As noted above, one of the main concerns of international students in both the 2019 and 2023 surveys was employment. In a recent report for the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration (now the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration), Dr. Ather Akbari, in a survey of 2,815 immigrants who either lived or had lived in Nova Scotia, demonstrated this concern more broadly in the immigrant population of Nova Scotia. For those who were living in NS at the time of the survey, when asked about their main reason for considering leaving NS, an inability to find employment topped the list at almost 27% (2020, p.27-8). In more recent local research conducted by the Cape Breton Local Immigration Partnership (CBLIP) with immigrants who had left Cape Breton, 78% of the 9 respondents interviewed indicated that they left the area due to a lack of job opportunities (Vo, A., 2022, p. 7).

Studies have shown that the first job an immigrant obtains in Canada can influence future employment and earnings. Despite this, many settlement programs focus on getting newcomers a job quickly, rather than seeking a job that is linked to the person’s skills and/or education (Conference Board of Canada, 2022c, p.9). International students specifically, despite their human capital and potential, can face challenges in obtaining employment commensurate with their skills/education, including language ability, employer bias, and visa regulations (Arthur et. al., 2022, p. 44).

Given these factors, the job that an international student obtains post-graduation can have lasting impacts on their retention in Cape Breton, as well as on their long-term employment and earnings. Despite mounting evidence, there is not a purpose-build program to assist international students in finding employment in their field post-graduation in Cape Breton, a time in which these types of support are key to their success in the labour market and thus in Cape Breton (Arthur et. al., 2022, 44).

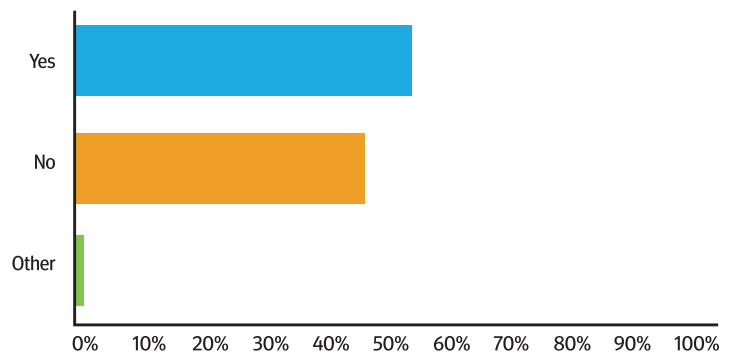
The survey responses demonstrate a positive perception overall of Cape Breton as a place to permanently settle, with potential for growth and a community that is welcoming and safe, yet without economic integration these factors are not sufficient to present a case for settling here.

“Overall, we don’t have a strong evidence base to suggest that studying in Canada alone sets up current or future permanent residents for economic success. Approaching international students as a potential permanent resident pool requires more explicit thinking about their economic inclusion. Immigrant selection currently reflects this need – Canadian credentials go only so far if they aren’t paired with immediate employment or job offers. We need more nuanced evidence before we encourage immigrants to study in Canada to find economic success and potentially reward Canadian study experience alone more generously at the federal level.” (Conference Board of Canada, 2022c, p. 13)

Survey Results

Out of 311 respondents to the question, “Are you currently employed?,” 164 (52.73%) indicated yes, and 142 (45.66%) indicated no.

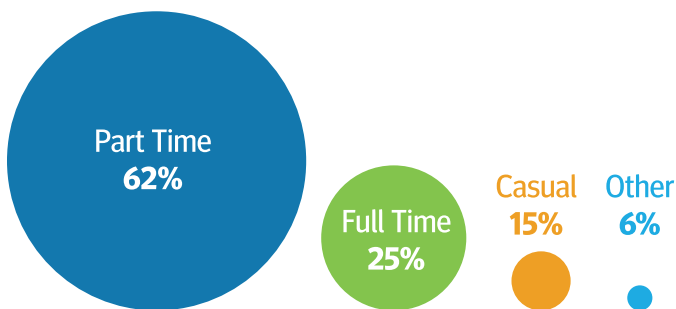
Q20: ARE YOU CURRENTLY EMPLOYED?



Of the 164 respondents who indicated that they were currently employed, 156 responded to the question, “How long did it take for you to find employment?,” reporting that on average, it took 2.5 months to find employment. Few reported working in the informal economy, with only 3 out of 159 respondents indicating that they worked either fully or partially in the informal economy.

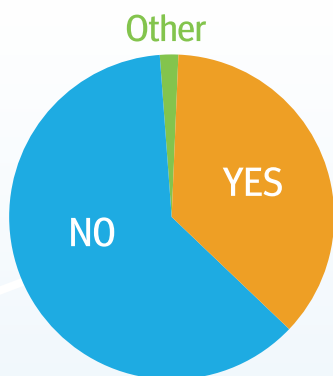
Out of 160 respondents to the question, “Are you working multiple jobs?” 30 respondents indicated that they were working multiple jobs, and on average, those who worked multiple jobs were working two jobs. Of the 156 who indicated their employment status, the majority of students were working part-time (97 respondents, or 61.01%), with full-time workers making up 40 (25.16%) of respondents.

Q25: ARE YOU WORKING?



When asked whether their job was related to their experience and/or education, out of 160 respondents, 99 (61.88%) said no, and 59 (36.88%) said yes.

Q27: IS YOUR JOB RELATED TO YOUR EXPERIENCE AND/OR EDUCATION?

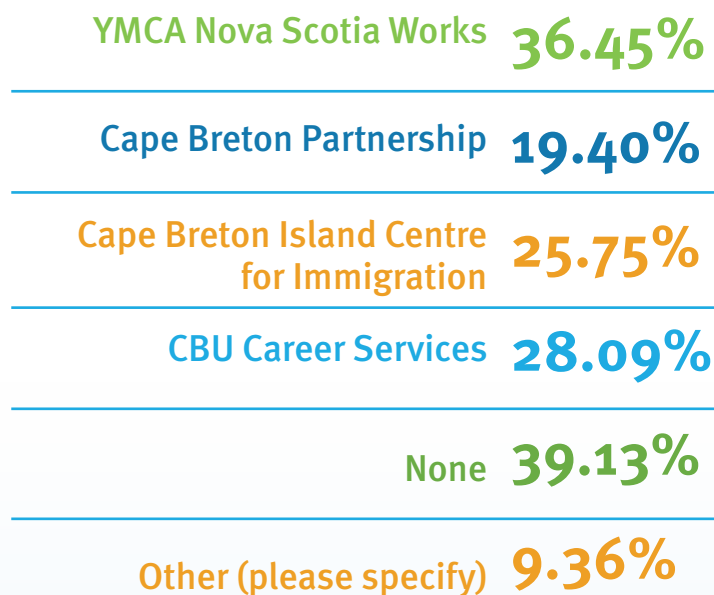


When asked what supports international students accessed for help with employment in Cape Breton, the majority indicated that they hadn't accessed any supports. Out of 299 respondents to the question, 117 (39.13%) indicated they did not access employment services, with the second

highest response being YMCA Nova Scotia Works at 109 respondents (36.45%).

Purpose-designed employment services for international students are an evident gap in the service sector in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality. YMCA Nova Scotia Works does not provide case management supports (including resume and cover letter review, job search support, and other one-on-one employment supports) to international students until they are 3 months away from graduation. CBICI provides these supports as time permits but cannot provide these one-on-one supports to all students due to demand and current staffing capacity.

Q28: WHAT EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS HAVE YOU ACCESSED?



During regular intakes to Cape Breton University, there is generally a large group of students seeking employment concurrently, leading to a glut of job seekers in an already strained job market. This leaves students financially vulnerable, seeking out employment where they can, and can lead to exploitation with the perception of needing to find and keep a job when there are few available.

Removal of 20 Hours Work per Week Policy

In November 2022, IRCC announced that it would temporarily lift the 20 hour/week cap on hours that international students can work off-campus until December 31, 2023.

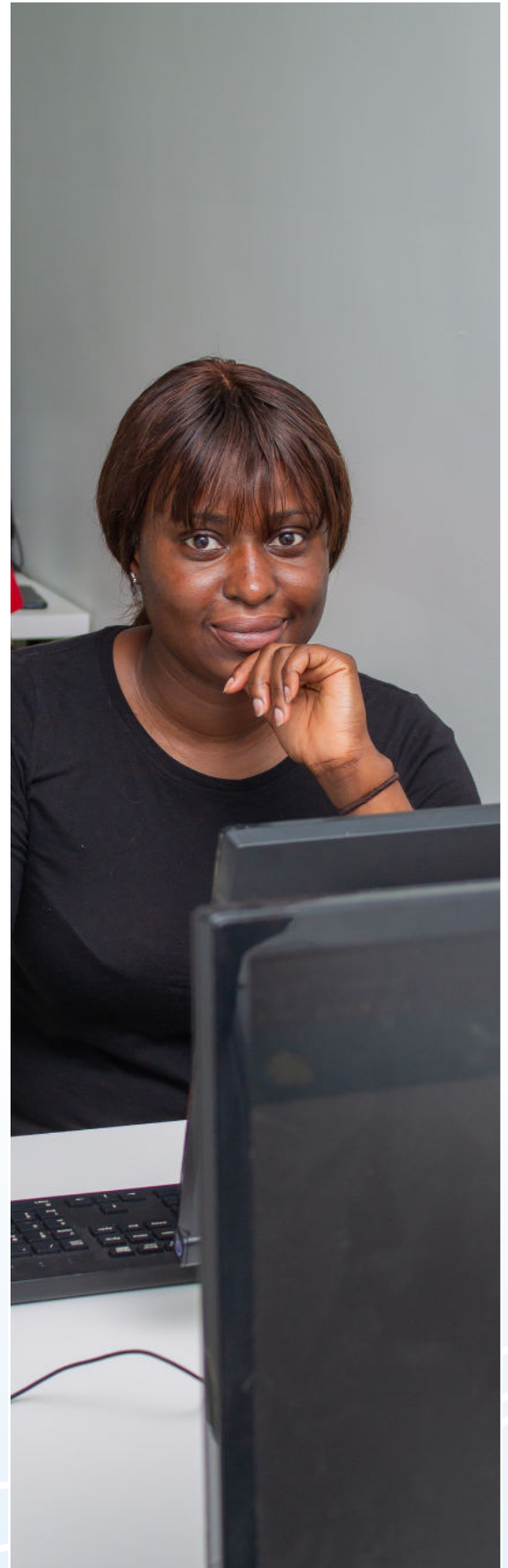
According to IRCC, “This measure will provide many international students with a greater opportunity to gain valuable work experience in Canada and will increase the availability of workers to sustain Canada’s post-pandemic growth. With more than 500,000 international students already in Canada available to potentially work additional hours, this temporary change reflects the important role international students can play in addressing our labour shortage, while continuing to pursue their studies” (IRCC, 2022).

When asked whether the removal of the cap benefited them, out of 156 responses, 93 indicated that it benefited them, and 46 indicated that it did not. Out of the yes responses, 41/96 responded that the lifting of the cap has enabled them to better manage their finances amidst increases to the cost of living (including rent, university expenses, and groceries). Additionally, as one student noted: **“Yes. I can work more hours now. But it also lures students to compromise their studies and earn more money instead.”**

For those who reported seeing no benefit, 27/41 described a lack of working hours in their current employment; some indicated they did not receive 20 hours per week currently, or if they did, there were no additional shifts available to work, despite their increased availability to do so.

While overall most students perceived this as a benefit to their personal economic situation, IRCC indicates that this is a labour market measure meant to address labour shortages in Canada. Given the temporary nature of the policy change, students find themselves at the whim of the federal government should there be a decision to reinstate the 20 hour per week off-campus work cap.

This highlights the lack of concrete policies that set out dependable immigration pathways for international students and demonstrates IRCC’s use of this group to further national economic goals rather than adopting a holistic approach to the well-being of international students that also furthers national objectives.





Housing

Housing

Recently, housing has been a contentious issue in Cape Breton. With the tragic death of Rajesh Gollapudi in a house fire on December 17, 2022, and the displacement of 12 other students living at the same residence (Pottie, E., 2023), the crisis in housing for international students in the CBRM came to the forefront both in local and national media.

With an increasingly tight rental market, housing has become significantly more difficult and expensive to secure, and this is reflected in the survey results above, with a 25% increase in the number of international students indicating dissatisfaction with access to housing between CBICI's 2019 and 2023 surveys. According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Sydney's vacancy rate currently sits at 1.5% (2023), down considerably from its traditional vacancy rate of 7-8%, leaving few options for new students upon arrival.

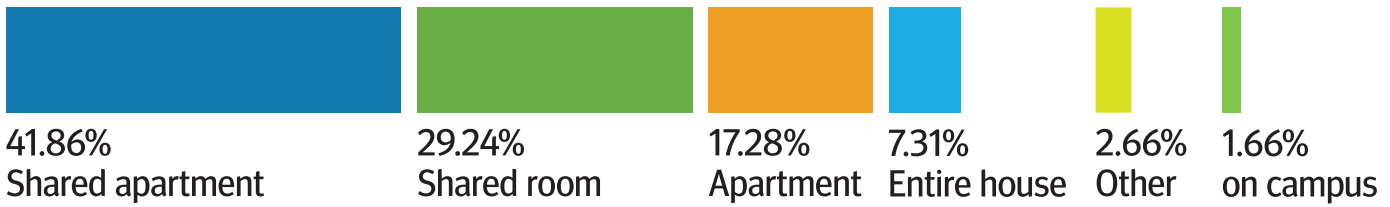
Recent research in the Greater Toronto area has shown that rental housing for students is often sub-standard, unsafe, and overcrowded, with skyrocketing rent costs leaving few options for international students with limited budgets. International students have faced discrimination in the rental market, as well as sexual discrimination and harassment, and wrongful evictions as tenants (Das Gupta, T., Su, Y., 2023). Students may not act in these cases due to their temporary resident status and the paucity of available accommodation, allowing egregious behaviour on the part of landlords to continue unchecked. It can also lead to paying exorbitant rates in hotels and Airbnb's and/or experiencing homelessness whilst seeking out permanent housing (Roach, C., 2023, Thomas, M., 2023). CBU, in response to calls from students and the broader community to better manage enrolment, has indicated that they will limit enrolment in some of their more popular Post Baccalaureate Diploma programs and have encouraged students to take advantage of on-campus residence options.

CBU Student Union President Damanpreet Singh, however, outlined the difficulty with residence on-campus, noting that students are required to purchase a costly meal plan to live on-campus, which is not affordable (or desirable) to many students. He also outlined the surge in off-campus rental pricing as an issue that needs to be addressed, with students seeing rooms that once rented for \$350 per month jumping to as much as \$700-800 per month (Armstrong, L., 2023).

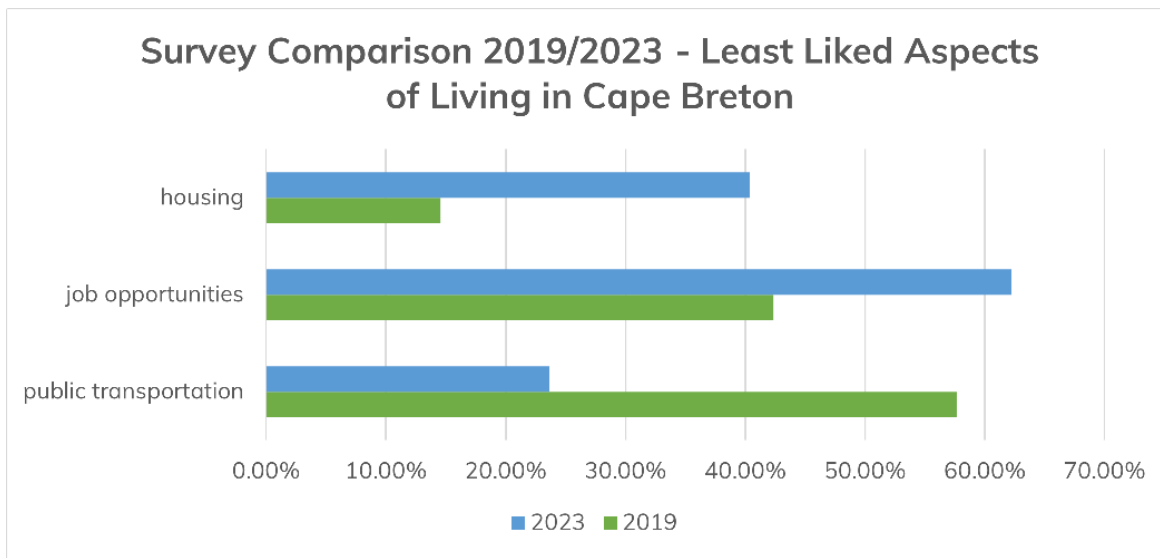
CBU administration had also issued a warning to incoming students in December of 2022 that if they do not secure housing, they should defer their enrolment until the next intake (Ronson, D., 2022). This presents a difficulty for incoming students who, in being required to obtain housing before arriving in Sydney, are left vulnerable to fraudulent rental agreements and financial scams. The Suhkmani Sahib Society of Sydney has been assisting prospective students by attending apartment viewings on their behalf while they are still living abroad to ensure the legitimacy of the lease agreement and the safety and security of the residence, but this is a stopgap measure subject to the availability of volunteers and by a group not responsible for the underlying issues.

Survey Results: Housing

Q36: WHERE ARE YOU CURRENTLY LIVING?

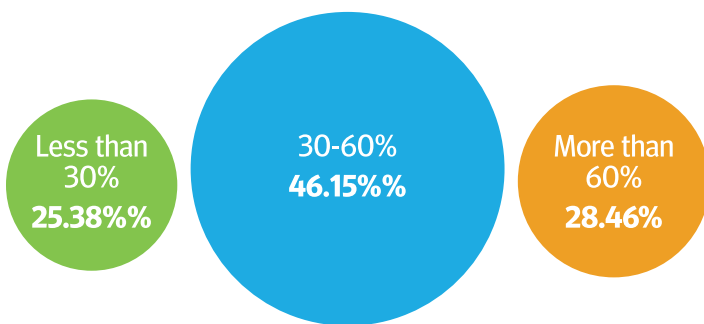


When asked, “Where are you currently living?” 126 of the 301 respondents to this question indicated that they were living in their own room in a shared apartment, with 88 of 301 respondents indicating that they lived in a shared room with more than one occupant.

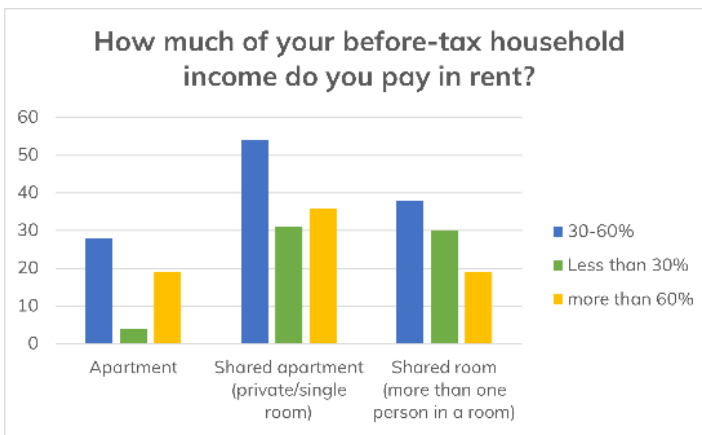


260 respondents answered the question “How much are you paying for rent per month (in CAD)?”. International students were paying on average \$1004 for their own apartment, \$552 for a private room in an apartment, and \$418 for a shared room.

Q39: HOW MUCH OF YOUR BEFORE-TAX HOUSEHOLD INCOME DO YOU PAY IN RENT?



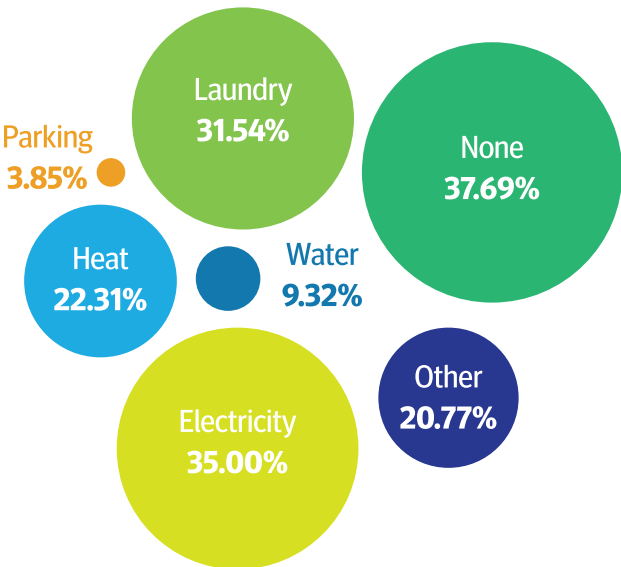
The CMHC defines housing as affordable when it costs less than 30% of a household’s before-tax income. In the question above, out of 260 respondents, 120 respondents were paying 30-60% of their household before-tax income on rent, and 74 respondents were paying more than 60% of their before-tax income on rent. Taken together, this means that 75% of the housing of respondents exceeds the definition of affordable.



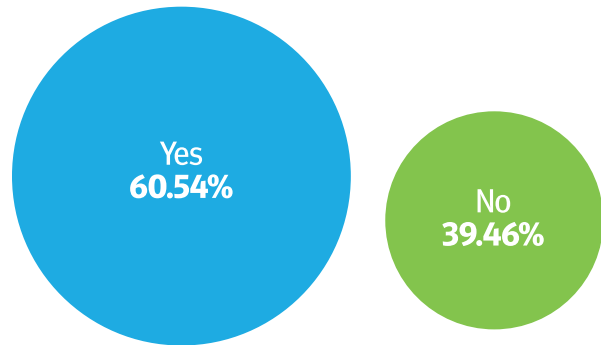
Broken down further, we can see that those who rent a private single room in a shared apartment have the highest proportion of students paying more than 60% of their before-tax income on rent; for those renting their own apartment, only 4 respondents spent less than 30% of their before-tax income on rent.

The high number of respondents in the 30-60% and 60% categories reflect rising rents owing to the housing crisis currently impacting international students in the CBRM. In addition to rent, many students are required to pay additional fees, as demonstrated in the following graph.

Q40: WHAT ADDITIONAL FEES DO YOU PAY IN ADDITION TO RENT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)



Q41: ARE YOU HAPPY WITH YOUR CURRENT PLACE OF RESIDENCE?



Of the 294 respondents to the question, “Are you happy with your current residence?” over 60% indicated they were satisfied, and about 40% indicated that they were not. Of the 116 respondents that were not happy with their current residence, 115 answered the follow-up question, “What are you unhappy with?” For 49 respondents to this question, their biggest concern with their current residence was the high cost of rent. One respondent noted that “[The price] is high for a sharing room in New Waterford and even locals from our street told us they were taking advantage of us.” Another stated that “It’s very small but I am thankful that I have a place to sleep... many people are homeless.” Another respondent outlined the issue quite succinctly: “People [are] exploiting for more money as house demand is more but supply is less.”

The second most prevalent concern of respondents was the condition of their residences. 30 respondents noted issues such as overcrowding, lack of heat or inability to control the heat in their unit, the presence of vermin such as rats and/or mice, dilapidated infrastructure, lack of safety measures such as smoke detectors, and lack of washrooms for the number of people living in a residence, among others.

One respondent described their situation as follows:

There is only one small room in which two people live. There is no proper study table, and there is a lot of suffocation. In this environment, how can a student be able to concentrate on his/her studies. Furthermore, there are many such areas where there is no such bus stop within 2-3 kilometers and yet rents are skyrocketing. With all these things happening, the students are going into depression and also degrading mentally day by day.”

Further concerns outlined by students included:

“Too many people in the house. Only one kitchen for 12 people.”

“Living in an outhouse with a furnace. Living here is a bit risky, especially with children.”

“Lots of people together in one place. The wages I am earning are not allowing me to rent a good place for my family as the IT opportunities are not there for students.”

“Payment and unhealthy condition of the house (there are mice, rats, and bugs) the place is untidy.”

“The house is more than a century old, not up to date with fire code, and has rodent trouble post Fiona.”



With a low vacancy rate, deteriorating housing stock, and a rapidly increasing cost of living, international students are caught in the middle of a deepening housing crisis with few avenues to improve their living situation. As one respondent noted, **“[It’s] expensive. I cannot afford to move to a bigger place so my child can have a bedroom.”** Despite the amount of funds that international students are required to have to study in Canada, the exponential increase in costs related to housing and associated fees has forced some students to go without basic necessities in order to pay their rent. Recent anecdotal observations suggest that a growing number of students are moving to Halifax and traveling weekly to Cape Breton to attend classes, hoping to find better employment and housing in a larger city. This trend will continue until concrete actions are taken to improve housing quality, availability, and affordability.



International Graduates



International Graduates

There was a significantly lower response rate to the international graduate survey, yet the perspectives shared were rich and insightful. Similar to the international student survey, the largest group of students identified as Indian (36 respondents or 65.45%) and were predominantly graduates of Cape Breton University (54 respondents or 98.18%). The majority of respondents were enrolled in Post-Baccalaureate programs (Business Management, Supply Chain Management, and Business Analytics) with the next largest group enrolled in Bachelor of Engineering Technology programs (Electronics and Controls, Petroleum, and Environmental Studies).

Q2: WHAT IS YOUR NATIONALITY?

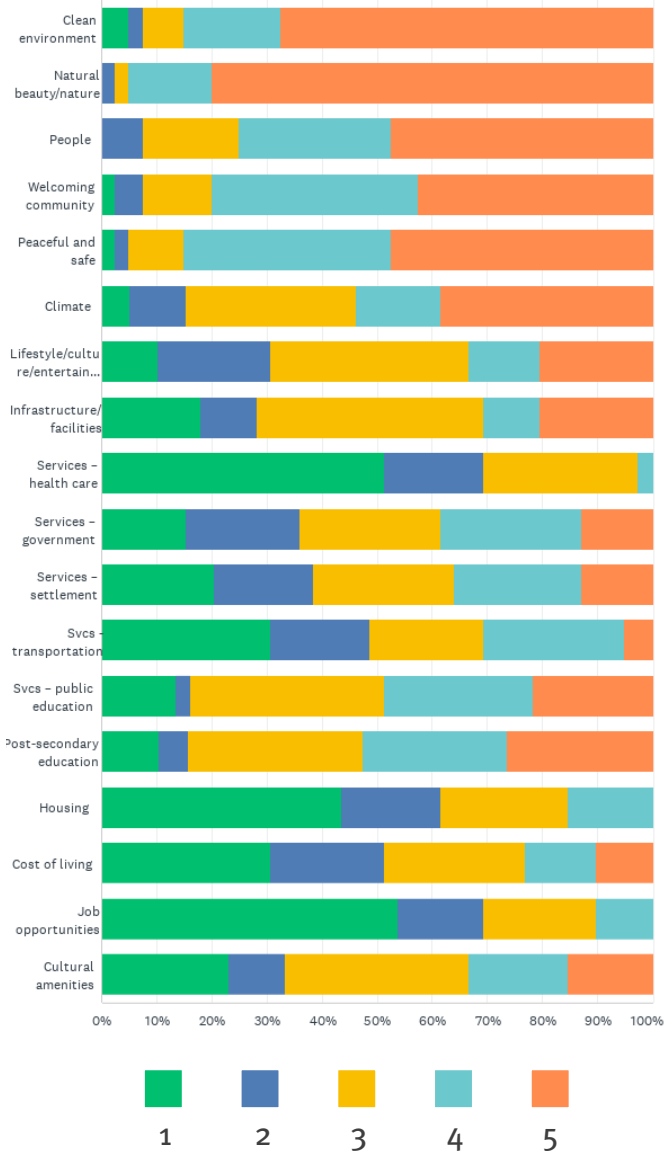
Vietnamese 5.45%	Kenyan 5.45%	Indian 65.45%	American 1.82%	Bangladeshi 5.45%	Belgian 1.82%
Chinese 3.64%	Colombian 1.82%	Canadian 1.82%	Bhutanese 1.82%	Georgian 1.82%	Filipino 5.45%

Out of 49 respondents to the question, “What is your current status in Canada?” 36 (73.47%) indicated that they were on a Post Graduate Work Permit, and 9 (18.37%) indicated they were Permanent Residents. Of those who were not Permanent Residents, 36/38 (94.74%) indicated that they are or would be applying for Permanent Residency.

In response to the question “Are you currently employed?” 40 of 49 (81.63%) respondents indicated that they were currently employed. Of those who indicated they were employed, 35 of 40 (87.50%) were working full-time. One respondent indicated that they were working in the informal economy. 14 of 40 (35.00%) were working multiple jobs, with most respondents to this question working two jobs. When asked “Is your job related to your experience and/or education,” out of 39 respondents, 18 (46.15%) responded yes and 19 (48.72%) responded no.

Q42: WHAT DO YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT LIVING IN CAPE BRETON?

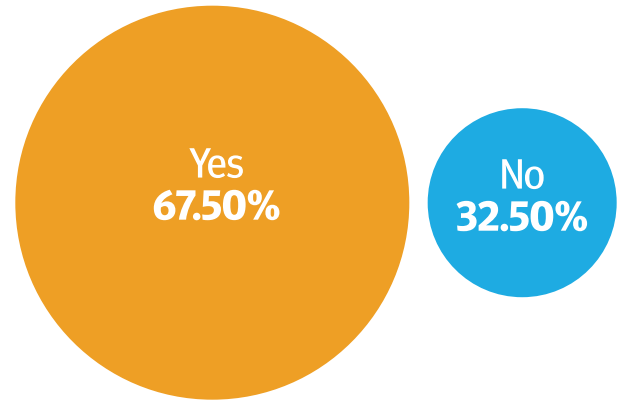
(Rate each item from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating you dislike this and 5 indicating you like it alot.)



International graduates had similar areas of concern to current international students – employment and housing were two of the lowest rated aspects of living in Cape Breton. A higher proportion of international graduates gave health care services a rating of 1 (51.28%) compared to international students (36.46%).

Close to 70% of the 40 respondents indicated that they did choose to stay in Cape Breton post-graduation. In response to the question “What

Q43: DID YOU CHOOSE TO STAY IN CAPE BRETON AFTER YOU GRADUATED?



made you decide to stay in Cape Breton?” the top two answers to this open question were that the community is safe and peaceful, and that there are immigration opportunities/opportunities to apply for PR.

Out of 25 respondents who answered the question “What is/was the biggest barrier to staying in Cape Breton?” 17 indicated that employment was the biggest barrier to settling in the region. Some specifically pointed out a lack of support to transition into the local labour market.

One respondent noted “[p]lacement after education; not enough companies are called in to offer jobs to new graduates.” as barriers to securing employment. Likewise, another noted a “[l]ack of skilled job opportunities.” This is consistent with regional research cited previously, indicating that a large factor in the retention of immigrants is the ability to obtain meaningful employment linked to their education and experience. Of immigrants leaving the region, 45.8% indicated their inability to find employment for themselves as their reason for leaving Nova Scotia. Of those who provided a written response, the top reason for leaving was to seek out better, higher paid employment (Akbari, A., 2020, p. 47-48).

The second most cited barrier to staying in Cape Breton for graduates was the lack of housing options, with 8 of 25 respondents indicating this as a barrier.



Conclusions

Consistently, across two large surveys of international students in Canada, a picture has emerged of Cape Breton as a welcoming and safe community, in an idyllic natural setting, where students feel they would be happy to settle and raise a family. Yet, we can also observe through the survey results that local socioeconomic factors are increasingly impacting the ability of international students to settle long term in the CBRM.

As noted in recent CBLIP research, “Deciding to leave can be a strongly conflicting feeling many people were concerned about. For them, the attractiveness of a slow balanced lifestyle with a high value on rural life became less attractive because the job market was too small and did not meet their salary expectations” (Vo, A., 2022, p. 6). Employment options and adequate and affordable housing have become significant challenges for international students in their journey from study to settling long-term.

In response to the question “What would make it possible/desirable for you to stay in Cape Breton?” many students also indicated access to health care as a challenge they faced. One student noted “[...]improved access to health care. **From experience, you need to have a NS health card to access healthcare. Healthcare should be accessed regardless of one’s status. Even finding a private doctor is an issue.**” Students who arrive as individuals cannot apply for MSI until their 13th month of residence in the province, but students who arrive with a spouse can access it shortly after arrival, due to their spouse’s open work permit. For students this is confusing and contradictory. Research has shown that even a three month wait period can have an impact on the health of immigrants, in particular vulnerable groups, and can cost the health system more in the long run due to delayed treatment, in addition to increasing health inequity (Rodriguez, E. & Glynn, T., 2022, p. 7).

With a municipal and provincial focus on attracting newcomers to rural areas, the challenges presented in this study must be addressed in a tangible way. The CBRM has benefited greatly from the contributions of immigrants, and particularly international students, in a variety of ways – from contributions to the economy through tuition payments, spending, and the creation of small businesses, to the increasing multiculturalism of the local community. Consequently, there is a strong case to be made to avoid a second outmigration from the CBRM due to the growing socioeconomic challenges facing many of those we seek to attract here, in particular, international students. As noted in the report, *Making Rural Immigration Work*:

“Small and rural communities can benefit from immigrants, who bring new ideas and contribute to multiculturalism, population growth, and the local economy. These benefits make the most meaningful difference if immigrants remain in the community, which allows their contributions to endure. Federal, provincial, and municipal governments must think beyond just attracting immigrants to small and rural communities and plan for retention.” (2022a, p. 3).

In closing, we note some of the responses to the question, “What advice would you have for someone who was moving to Cape Breton from another country?” Responses largely centred on the necessity of financial planning for the increased cost of housing and the difficulty that prospective immigrants might have in finding a job. Though many of these same respondents included their sense of the community as a welcoming and beautiful location. One respondent stated to **“[c]ome with enough money to support yourself for long because it could be very hard to find an appropriate accommodation and even harder to find a job.”** Many respondents simply stated, don’t come. There were some positive responses to this question – one respondent advised to **“[k]eep your heart and mind open, if you embrace Cape Breton with open arms, they will too open their arms wide to welcome you.”** Yet overall, the predominant advice given by current international students and graduates was to be cautious in a decision to move to Cape Breton at the current time, given the challenges to settlement.

The can-do, welcoming culture of Cape Breton remains a significant draw to the island for new international students. It will only be by working together with this same can-do attitude that we will create a community that has the services and infrastructure to better support incoming international students, with the fruits of that labour benefitting not only international students but the broader community as well.



Recommendations

Recommendations

Taking a holistic approach to retention requires attention to the fundamental infrastructure and services needed by immigrants when they arrive as well as the supports and resources they need throughout their settlement journey. The following recommendations are tangible actions that could be taken by community stakeholders and all levels of government to facilitate the settlement and retention of international students from arrival to graduation and future long-term settlement.

Municipal government and local stakeholders

RECOMMENDATION #1:

CBICI recommends that the Cape Breton Regional Municipality invest in a full-time housing compliance officer directly responsible for rental housing who can respond to non-compliance with CBRM's Bylaw M-100: Minimum Standards By-Law for Existing Residential Dwellings in the CBRM.

Given the concerns of international students regarding housing conditions, and the recent tragic death of one international student largely due to lack of safety equipment in an overcrowded residence, the municipality can and should immediately remedy this issue by implementing and publicizing a reporting system through 311 for tenants to report sub-standard conditions in their rental units. Students (and all residents) need to know that complaints and compliance violations will be thoroughly addressed by by-law enforcement in a timely manner.

This process is clearly outlined and defined in the M-200 By-Law of the Halifax Regional Municipality and could be mirrored here in the CBRM. This would represent a net benefit for the community and could prevent further tragedies in the future.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

CBICI recommends that Cape Breton University temporarily remove the requirement for a meal plan for international students seeking housing while the development of new housing options, such as the planned development at Tartan Downs, are executed. This would take some of the pressure off the housing market and address the rising cost of living for students by eliminating a significant and costly aspect of on-campus living (that many don't need or want) and would likely see vacant residence units filled as a result. Alternatively, temporary funding of meal plans for new international students could provide an alternate solution to this issue.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

CBICI recommends that the CBRM actively review and provide feedback on the recommendations of the Affordable Housing and Homelessness Working Group (AHHWG) that were provided to Council in March of 2022. The public has yet to see an Issue Paper on this topic (requested in November 2021) and there have been no major advances on any of the AHHWG recommended measures.

Given the ongoing housing crisis, the municipality can play a key role in the shaping of local policy to provide fertile ground for the advancement of various types of housing. Action on housing must be

taken immediately starting with an issue paper that is produced in conversation with the affordable housing sector in the CBRM.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

CBICI recommends that the Department of Health and Wellness immediately amend their policy for single study permit holders to allow for coverage to begin on the date of arrival in Nova Scotia or the date their Study Permit was issued, whichever is later, to bring the policy in line with eligibility for students whose spouses accompany them to Nova Scotia on an Open Work Permit.

This will have a number of positive outcomes, including eliminating additional financial hardships for international students should they need to access the health care system, and the long-term health and wellbeing of international students given that they will not need to wait to address emerging health issues.

RECOMMENDATION #5:

CBICI recommends that settlement funding agencies, including IRCC, and the Government of Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, expand eligibility criteria for temporary residents, of whom international students make up a significant population in Nova Scotia. International students contribute significantly to the local economy and culture of the CBRM. Affording them wider access to settlement supports assists in their long-term integration into the community, which can lead to increased retention post-graduation.



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