



When is a Strategy not Strategic?

The federal government's role in international education

BY ANDREW PARKIN

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The background features an open book with its pages visible, set against a blurred background of bokeh lights. A semi-transparent teal and purple overlay covers the entire scene, with the text in white. The text is centered and reads: "Ottawa doesn't really need an international education strategy at all. It does, however, need to think about how to use international education more strategically."

Ottawa doesn't really need an international education strategy at all. It does, however, need to think about how to use international education more strategically.

1 INTRODUCTION

The annual fall economic statement is one of the main tools the federal government uses to steer the country's economy and shape the political agenda. The 2018 statement was no exception: it included a marquee announcement on business tax measures in response to tax reductions in the U.S., as well as additional measures to support Canadian journalism, advance pay equity and subsidize clean technology.¹ Most of these attracted considerable commentary, both pro and con. Inevitably, though, some of the statement's proposals flew under the radar, including one on international education that remains, several months after the event, a puzzle.

Hidden within the full text of the November economic statement – but absent from the finance minister's official speech and the accompanying press releases – was the following declaration: “to build more skills and provide training that will help support Canada's international trade and increase global ties, Global Affairs Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada will work together to develop a new international education strategy.” No further details were provided that day and none have been announced since. Why a new strategy is needed, and what it might entail, therefore remains unclear.

This paper is designed to help fill this void by advancing some ideas as to what goals the federal government should be setting for itself when it comes to international education. Underlying these recommendations is the more general argument that Ottawa doesn't really need an international education strategy at all. It does, however, need to think about how to use international education more strategically. The federal government can make a significant contribution, but only once its role has been clarified, and its ambitions refocused.

¹ Government of Canada, *Investing in Middle Class Jobs: Fall Economic Statement 2018* (November 21, 2018); available at: <https://budget.gc.ca/fes-eea/2018/home-accueil-en.html>

International Students in Canada



572,415

Total Number of International Students in Canada*

Distribution of International Students by Province*



48% ONTARIO



23% BRITISH COLUMBIA



12% QUEBEC

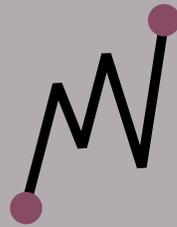
Rate of Int'l Student Increase from 2014-2018

73%

CANADA

96%

ONTARIO



The world's 3rd highest proportion

of international students out of all postsecondary students in the country

Int'l Student Top Countries of Citizenship*



30% INDIA



25% CHINA



4% SOUTH KOREA

Over \$15B

Amount spent by international students while studying in Canada (2016)



*2018 data

2 THE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

To question whether we really need a new federal strategy in this area is not to doubt the importance of international education (the exchange of students and educational services across international borders), or the goals of building skills, supporting trade and increasing global ties.

At the end of 2018, there were 572,415 international students with valid study permit in Canada.² In 2017, international students accounted for 15.2 per cent of students in higher education in Canada, the third highest ratio in the world (trailing only Australia and the UK).³ According to Statistics Canada, international students accounted for the entire growth in postsecondary enrollment in Canada from the academic year 2015-16 to the academic year 2016-17, with domestic enrollment showing a slight decline.⁴

In purely economic terms, students from abroad spend over \$15 billion while studying in Canada⁵, a sum that forms a growing portion of the revenue that supports the operations of the country's universities and colleges.⁶ The benefits of welcoming international students to Canada, however, go beyond this monetary one.⁷ Other advantages include the enhancement of a country's influence abroad. Foreign students can

be expected to move on to play leadership roles in their home countries, equipped with familiarity and personal ties to the country in which they studied. These relationships can help not only raise the host country's profile abroad, but also boost business and trade links.

For immigration-friendly countries such as Canada, international education also can be a way of adding highly skilled people to the domestic economy, as many foreign students choose to apply for permanent residence after their studies.⁸ Moreover, immigrants who complete their education in Canada tend to do better in the labour market than those who arrived in Canada with their education credentials in hand.⁹

2 Government of Canada, *Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates*. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>.

3 Deborah Coutinho, "Canada is Top 3 in the Highest Percentage of International Students," *Canada Immigration News* (June 8, 2018); <http://www.immigrationnews.ca/2018/06/08/highest-international-students/>.

4 Statistics Canada, "Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments and Graduates, 2016/2017" (November 28, 2018); <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181128/dq181128c-eng.htm>.

5 Roslyn Kunin & Associates, *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada – 2017 Update* (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 2017); <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2017/index.aspx?lang=eng>

6 See Alex Usher, "The State of Canadian Post-Secondary Education, 2018," *One Thought Blog* (August 28, 2018); <http://higherstrategy.com/the-state-of-canadian-pse-2018/>.

7 See Alex Usher, "The Four Logics of International Student Mobility," *One Thought Blog* (February 11, 2019); <http://higherstrategy.com/the-four-logics-of-international-student-mobility/>.

8 See: Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), *Facts and Figures*; <https://cbie.ca/media/facts-and-figures/>.

9 Andrew Parkin, *A Different Ontario – Education: Gains and Gaps in Attainment and Earnings* (Toronto: Mowat Centre, 2018); https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/177_ADO_education.pdf.



For immigration-friendly countries such as Canada, international education also can be a way of adding highly skilled people to the domestic economy, as many foreign students choose to apply for permanent residence after their studies.

The benefits of encouraging more Canadian students to study abroad are also seen to be multi-dimensional, as these experiences allow young Canadians to learn new skills, gain confidence in intercultural environments, and develop personal ties that over time can be turned into economic opportunities. According to advocates of greater international student mobility, “global education generates the skills, understanding, outlooks and relationships that can help our country at a time of rapid change in the world and at home.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Study Group on Global Education, *Global Education for Canadians Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad* (Ottawa and Toronto: Centre for International Policy Studies, University of Ottawa, and Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 2017), p. 9.

3 DON'T WE ALREADY HAVE A STRATEGY?

These various benefits notwithstanding, it is nonetheless worth questioning the government's November announcement of its intention to develop a new international education strategy for one simple reason: it already has one.

Five years ago, in January 2014, the federal government released what it called *Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity*.¹¹ This strategy originated in an announcement in Budget 2011 and was informed by the work of a federally-appointed advisory panel that delivered its report in August, 2012. The panel recommended that Canada double the number of international students it receives by 2022, fund a program to send 50,000 Canadian students to study abroad, invest in its efforts to brand and market Canada as an educational destination, deepen its diplomatic engagement with key source countries, and improve the efficiency of its student visa processing system.¹²

Most of these recommendations were subsequently endorsed in the government's 2014 international education strategy, notably the target of doubling the country's intake of international students by 2022 (a target that was in fact reached by the end of 2018). The final strategy also included pledges to refresh Canada's international education brand, to develop better marketing plans and materials, to focus resources and activities more strategically on six priority markets, and to improve the federal immigration system's capacity to process applications for international student visas.¹³ Finally, the

strategy included a commitment to measuring performance: "the Government of Canada will develop and apply performance measures including targets for the numbers of incoming and outgoing students, and bilateral agreements, along with web and social-media metrics, and stakeholder and public-opinion research."¹⁴

The fact that the current government's November 2018 announcement failed to even mention the existence of the 2014 international education strategy is disconcerting. It could mean that no one currently in office is aware that Ottawa only recently completed the exact same exercise, which signals a breakdown in the machinery of government. It could mean that current ministers believe that the strategy tabled by the previous government has been a failure – in which case it would have been helpful for them to say why (being open about the mistakes that have been

11 Government of Canada, *Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity* (2014); <https://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/education/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

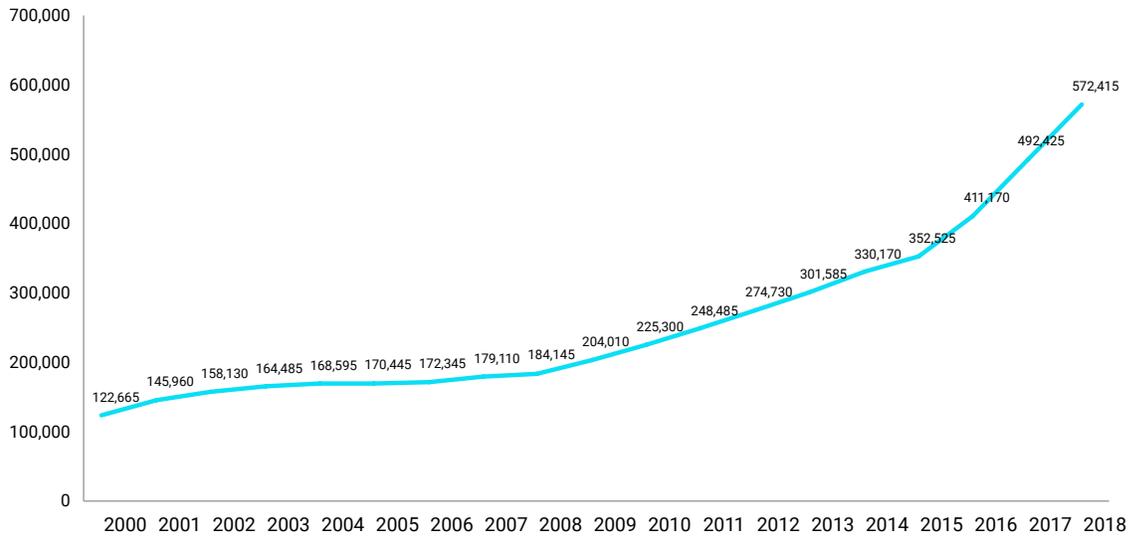
12 Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, *International Education: A Key Driver of Canada's Future Prosperity* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2012); <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategy-strategie/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

13 Government of Canada, *Canada's International Education Strategy*, pp. 9-13.

14 Government of Canada, *Canada's International Education Strategy*, pp. 17-18.

FIGURE 1

Growth of International Students in Canada



Source: Government of Canada, Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8faceae>.

made in the past is the best way to ensure that they are not repeated in the future).¹⁵

It could also mean that the government believes that recent political changes both in countries that compete with Canada for international students (notably the UK and the US) and in major source countries such as China warrant an entirely fresh look at the file. Again, if this were the case, verbalizing this proposition openly would have been a good way to ensure that it actually comes to frame the new strategy.

Regardless, there is no scenario in which the failure to acknowledge the existing strategy in the context of a call for a brand new one can be read as an encouraging sign.

It is worth pressing this point further, since the current federal government has gone on record as favouring an evidence-based approach to policy making. The first step in replacing an existing policy would normally be an assessment of the outcome of the previous one. Presuming the government followed through on the 2014 strategy's commitment to performance measurement, this should not have been difficult. At the time of writing, however, no such assessment has been published.

Of course, the government will have received feedback from actors in the sector on a regular basis. There is nothing wrong with collecting information in this way; any effective government must keep its ears open. But lobbying should never be confused with program evaluation. To embark on the development of a new international education strategy in the absence of an evaluation of the existing one is not what one would call a "best practice" approach to policymaking.

¹⁵ Being transparent about the perceived failings is also the best way to dispel the suspicion that the previous strategy might be seen as a failure simply because it was released by a government of a different political stripe.



When it comes
to international
education, then,
the federal
government
neither steers nor
rows the boat.

4 THE INEVITABLE ISSUE OF JURISDICTION

These quibbles about the best approach to policy development are not as significant as a second concern about the federal government’s announcement. This is the inevitable issue of jurisdiction, and of the federal government’s role in an area relating to education.

FIGURE 2

Main areas of federal and provincial/territorial responsibility related to international education

Policy area	Federal government responsibilities	Joint responsibilities	Provincial/territorial government responsibilities
Foreign policy	» Foreign policy and diplomatic relations with foreign countries	» Canada’s reputation abroad	» Representation of Canada on matters relating to education
Education policy			» Funding and regulation of education systems » Education policy, including international student tuition policy, and policies and practices relating to student well-being
Immigration (student and labour mobility)	» Processing of international student visas enabling study in Canada » International student scholarships	» Selection of immigrants	» Implementing of Canada’s obligations under the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region 1997 – commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) ¹⁶ » Selection of immigrants (Quebec)
Trade promotion and marketing	» International trade promotion (including promotion of Canadian education)	» Management of Canada’s international education brand (<i>EduCanada: A World of Possibilities</i>) » International agreements (including memorandums of understanding) with foreign countries relating to international student mobility	» Promotion of province / territory abroad » Bilateral agreements with foreign partners (including memorandums of understanding)

16 See https://www.cicicca/1398/an_overview_of_the_lisbon_recognition_conventioncanada

While education in general is exclusively in the hands of the provinces, there is a role for the federal government when it comes to international education. Among other things, the federal government oversees the immigration system that determines who is permitted to come to Canada to study and under what conditions. It also maintains the wider infrastructure of international relations that allows the movement of people between Canada and other countries.

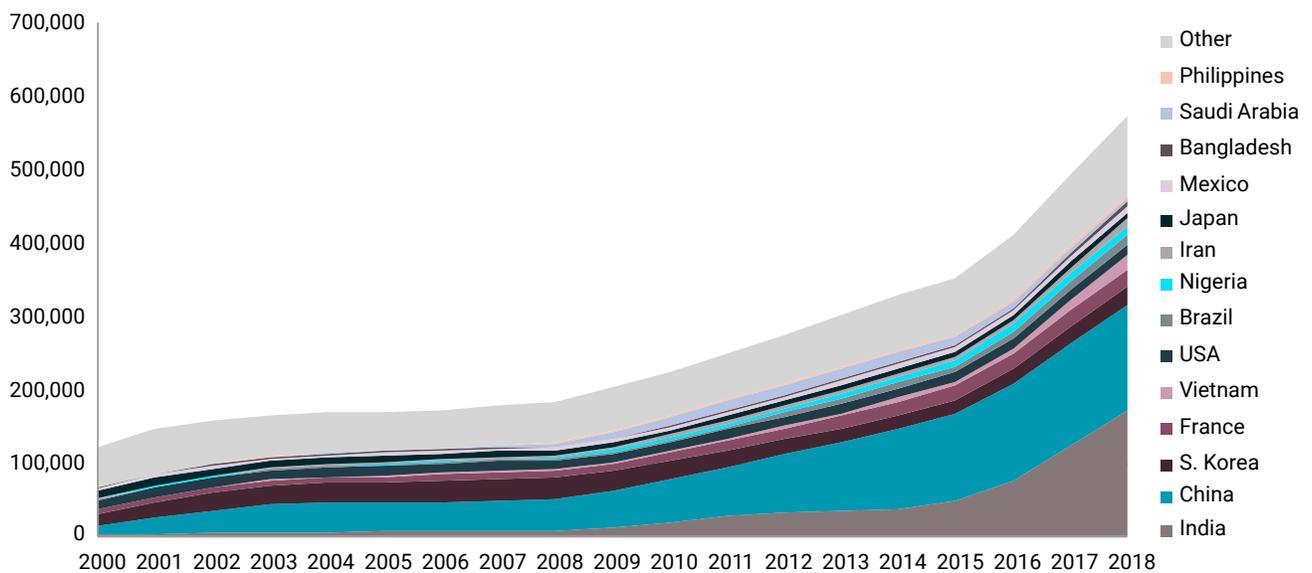
The federal government also promotes Canada in foreign markets in order to advance international trade. In this context, the Government of Canada co-manages – together with the 13 provinces and territories (acting collectively through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)) – Canada’s international education brand, called *EduCanada: A World of Possibilities*. This

is the common brand under which the country’s education destinations – be they provinces or territories, or educational institutions (schools, colleges or universities) – market themselves to prospective students.¹⁷

What the federal government does not do, of course, is fund or manage the education system or educational institutions in any way as to influence how many international students are offered places to study, in which programs and at what cost. Nor do they have any role in shaping the international student experience in Canada through the delivery of high-quality programs, the regulation of international student recruitment practices, the provision of services on and off campus (including student accommodation), and the monitoring of student safety or well-being.

FIGURE 3

International students in Canada, by country of citizenship



Source: Government of Canada, Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>.

17 See <https://educanada.ca/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

The advisory panel was appointed by the federal government to advise the federal ministers of finance and international trade, even though most recommendations related to international education are not ones that those ministers would be able to implement. It was also appointed despite the fact that the provinces and territories had already identified Canada's international education priorities through a report released in 2011.

Rather, these are all things that provinces and territories do. In fact, to some extent (and more so than in many other countries), even provincial and territorial governments adopt a relatively hands-off approach to these functions, leaving it mostly to universities, colleges and schools to determine for themselves how much of an effort to make to attract more international students, how to best accommodate those students who choose to study at their campus, and how much emphasis to place on developing partnerships and exchanges with researchers and institutions abroad.

When it comes to international education, then, the federal government neither steers nor rows the boat. It does not have the levers to direct Canada's key educational actors (provinces and territories, and universities, colleges and schools) to adopt or work towards any system-wide goals or targets, and it does not deliver any of the educational programs or services that can make Canada a more attractive place for international students to study. Given this, it is a fair question to ask why any federal government would spend time and energy to develop a strategy for a policy domain in which it plays only a supporting role.

This is ultimately what hampered the 2014 strategy and the advisory panel whose work informed it. The advisory panel was appointed by the federal government to advise the federal ministers of finance and international trade, even though most recommendations related to international education are not ones that those ministers would be able to implement. It was also appointed despite the fact that the provinces and territories had already identified Canada's international education priorities through a report released in 2011 by the Council of the Federation, making the whole federal exercise redundant.¹⁸

The broad vision and targets that the advisory panel set out, and that were repeated in the 2014 federal strategy, therefore had little impact – they were welcomed for their symbolic value by the sector, but changed little in terms of activities or outcomes.¹⁹ Admittedly, some parts of the 2014 strategy did touch on areas in which federal government activity can (and did) make a positive difference, notably the reform of the international student visa system (by the federal immigration department) and the funding of scholarships (though the research agencies run by the federal industry department). But these activities pre-existed the release of the strategy; the strategy simply re-packaged them under its rubric.

¹⁸ *Bringing Education in Canada to the World, Bringing the World to Canada: An International Education Marketing Action Plan for Provinces and Territories* (Ottawa: Council of the Federation, 2011); http://www.canadaspremiers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/cof_bringing_ed_to_canada_eng_final.pdf. The author wishes to disclose that he contributed to the drafting of this document.

¹⁹ A possible exception is that the release of the strategy may have helped to ensure that the program situated within the foreign affairs and trade ministry that supports the *EduCanada* brand received cabinet approval that ensured it would continue to be funded. But if this is the case, the level of effort and fanfare was entirely disproportionate to such an end.

FIGURE 4**International students in Canada, by province/territory (2018)**

Province/territory	2018
Newfoundland and Labrador	4,105
Prince Edward Island	3,245
Nova Scotia	16,265
New Brunswick	5,840
Quebec	70,185
Ontario	277,320
Manitoba	18,725
Saskatchewan	9,480
Alberta	29,865
British Columbia	134,270
Northwest Territories	40
Yukon	235
Nunavut	5
Province/Territory not stated	2,835
Total	572,415

Source: Government of Canada, Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>.

Ultimately, then, the federal government’s 2014 international education strategy was not very strategic. It did not put forward any substantive new proposals related to actions that fell within the federal government’s sphere of competence – proposals that, if implemented, could have been expected to bring about a measurable positive change in international education in Canada. It did not lead to the sector carrying out activities or seeking to attain goals that were different in any substantive way from what was already underway.

There is no indication that the federal government has drawn any lessons from this experience. While the announcement in the November 2018 economic statement is but one sentence long, that sentence tells all: the department of Global Affairs is instructed to work, not with its actual partners in international education – namely the provinces

and territories²⁰ – but with Employment and Social Development Canada, which has no role in international education whatsoever. Whatever strategy that results, therefore, appears destined to have as little impact as the previous one, for precisely the same reason.

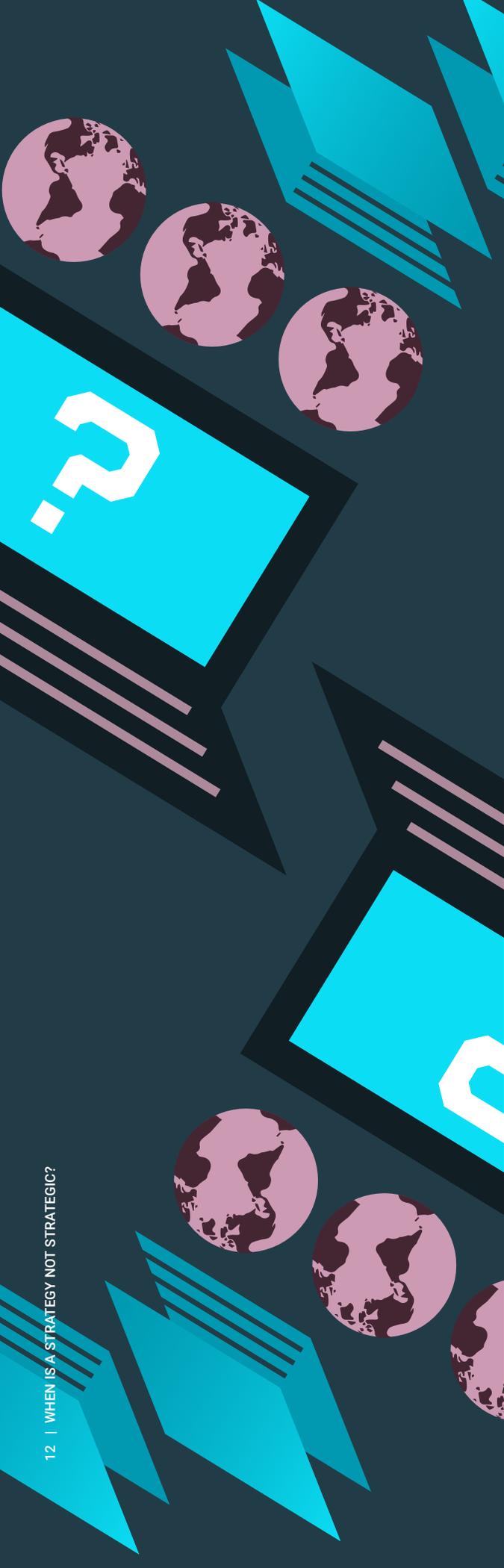
There has been some speculation within the sector that things will be different this time. The unstated goal of the new strategy called for in the 2018 economic statement might be to provide funding to enable more Canadian students to study abroad – one of the recommendations of the previous advisory panel that was actually left out of the 2014 federal international education strategy.²¹

The federal government already funds students, through instruments ranging from the Canada Student Loan Program to the research granting councils, so arguably more funding for students would not be a stretch. The federal spending power also enables Ottawa to cut cheques to anyone it chooses, without strictly speaking crossing jurisdictional boundaries.²²

20 It is worth emphasizing that there is a federal-provincial-territorial coordinating committee responsible for international education in Canada (including the brand), with representation from all 14 partners in the federation. The fact that the federal government is again announcing its intention to develop an international education strategy on its own, rather than by means of this committee, is not only problematic from a jurisdictional point of view, but also ensures that the resulting strategy will be doomed to irrelevance, since it will neither be shaped by nor delivered to the one body that exists to manage the issue.

21 For examples of advocacy on this point, see: Frank McKenna, “Canada’s Postsecondary Students Would Greatly Benefit from More Opportunities to Study Abroad,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 3, 2019); <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-canadas-postsecondary-students-would-greatly-benefit-from-more/>; Study Group on Global Education, *Global Education for Canadians Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad*.

22 “Strictly speaking” because, while the legality of the spending power is not in question, the legitimacy of its use to establish priorities in areas of provincial jurisdiction certainly is.



While few would object to the announcement of such funding, its impact is destined to be limited for the simple reason that it is doubtful that direct cost is the biggest barrier to Canadian students studying abroad. Rather, bigger issues are at play. One is the integration of study terms outside of Canada into Canadian postsecondary programs so that students obtain full credit for foreign courses and don't put their time-to-completion at risk. Another is the lack of foreign language training, which currently is not emphasized in Canadian education.

These barriers can only be addressed by the actors that manage education systems and programs, which again, leaves the federal government on the outside looking in (even if it has its cheque book in hand). The unilateral announcement by Ottawa of a study abroad program would benefit a certain number of students, but would still be better characterized as tinkering than as a strategy.²³

²³ Some might also argue that it is more essential to the country's future to fund students to study in different regions of Canada than it is to fund them to study abroad.

5 WHAT CAN OTTAWA DO?

It doesn't have to be like this. Other outcomes could be achieved, if we could only hit the pause button and reflect instead of rushing off to repeat past mistakes. One place to start is to ask more openly: what problem are we trying to solve?

To the extent that the problem is defined in terms of either how many international students we attract or how many Canadian students choose to study abroad, then this is about the funding and management of education systems, institutions and programs of study – and is therefore not the appropriate focus of a federal strategy. If educational institutions lack the funding to develop joint programs with foreign partners that open the door to Canadian students earning credits through terms spent abroad, then the federal government can increase the amount of funding it allocates to postsecondary education through the Canada Social Transfer, and hope for the best. It is not up to the federal government to decide whether study abroad is a better place to put education system resources than other areas.

If the problem is that Canada's brand is not as effectively deployed in the marketplace as those of competitors such as Australia and New Zealand, then the solution again is not to write another strategy that says we need to improve our marketing materials – the solution is to focus on the practical means needed to enable our marketers to do better (e.g. by providing those responsible for the *EduCanada* brand with better training, more resources or a longer leash). If the problem is still that we are slower than competitors at processing applications for student visas, the solution is to channel more resources into visa processing.

Solutions such as these – ones that that are tailored to the problems in question – tend to be less attractive to federal decision-makers, because they place Ottawa in a supporting rather than visionary role. In other words, they rest on the recognition of the fact that the federal government

does not set priorities or provide direction in education in Canada. They involve a degree of "letting go" and respect for jurisdiction that has traditionally eluded decision-makers in Ottawa.

A better way forward is for Ottawa to set aside any ambitions of creating a new strategy, and instead start to think more strategically about the things that it is already doing. Here are several suggestions for how the federal government could act strategically within its areas of competence in ways that could make a significant and lasting impact to a variety of important policy objectives.

Redefine "priority markets"

The 2014 international education strategy decrees a focus on six priority markets: Brazil, China, India, Mexico, North Africa and the Middle East, and Vietnam.²⁴ No rationale was given for this choice.

²⁴ Government of Canada, *Canada's International Education Strategy*, p. 10.

The list, however, closely resembles the one floated by the advisory panel, which argued that countries such as these have “the greatest growth potential for Canada.”²⁵ Clearly, the argument is that these markets should be prioritized because they consist of countries or regions with large populations and a growing middle class fueling a demand for quality advanced education that is outstripping their domestic supply. The list therefore amounts to saying that Canada should look for students precisely where every other country is looking for students, and more or less where the recruitment efforts of Canadian schools, colleges and universities are already targeted.

FIGURE 5

Country of Citizenship of International Students in Canada (2018)

India	172,625
China	142,985
South Korea	24,195
France	22,745
Vietnam	20,330
USA	14,620
Brazil	13,835
Nigeria	11,290
Iran	10,885
Japan	8,365
Mexico	7,835
Bangladesh	6,520
Saudi Arabia	5,100
Philippines	5,070
All others	106,015

Source: Government of Canada, Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8faceae>.

25 Advisory Panel on Canada’s International Education Strategy, *International Education*, p. 48

Of course, there is nothing wrong with looking to China and India as promising sources of international students; but such a focus is more obvious than strategic. And it doesn’t really require the federal government to do anything different from what it is already doing, namely maintaining the diplomatic infrastructure that enables mission after mission of Canadian representatives to tour the countries in question.

But the appropriate question for Global Affairs Canada to ask is not: where are the largest pools of students whose parents are able to pay international tuition fees? This is a question that the recruiters at institutions such as McGill University and Centennial College are perfectly capable of asking, and answering, for themselves. The appropriate question for Global Affairs Canada to ask is: where in the world could an accentuated presence for Canada, achieved by means of educational exchanges, make a significant impact on strategically important foreign policy goals such as regional stabilization, democratization and the promotion of human rights?

The answer to these questions leads to a very different list of priority markets. Top of this list might be countries like Haiti or Lebanon. Sub-Saharan countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Rwanda or Botswana would be good contenders. And countries on the edges of India and China, such as Kazakhstan, could be considered as well.

Granted, students from less developed countries may not be as well-prepared academically to study in Canada, and may be less able to afford to pay the tuition fees that Canadian institutions charge international students. This, however, is precisely the point: federal funding can make a meaningful difference if it opens doors to programs that allow students in these countries to master the necessary pre-requisites, and subsidizes the costs of their study and stay in Canada.

This approach to the notion of priority markets represents a shift in federal thinking about international education, more or less from a primarily commercial approach to a geopolitical one. Instead of chasing commercial opportunities – which again, are important, but which are already in the sights of educational institutions – Ottawa should be thinking about which regions of the world would most benefit from an incremental gain of 25, 50 or 100 students educated in Canada in strategically important fields of study, with exposure to Canadian values and personal ties to Canadian peers. This is what should lead the country to focus, not on crowded markets where Canada and its international education competitors are already active, but on overlooked “markets” in the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arctic and central Asia, where there are gaps to fill. Importantly, this approach still calls on Ottawa to play a leadership role, but it is a role understood in terms of foreign policy, not education policy.

Rediscover international development

In 2013, the federal government folded the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) into the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; it remains there as part of the renamed department of Global Affairs. The move was controversial at the time, as many saw it as loss of status for international development and feared the subordination of humanitarian policy objectives to commercial ones. From the perspective of international education, however, it was theoretically possible for the opposite to happen. Bringing CIDA into the federal department that handles international education could have served to build a bridge between international education, which otherwise is managed as a form of trade promotion, and international development.

In practice, this bridge was never built – but it is never too late to start. Expanding educational opportunities and infrastructure in developing countries is already a focus of countless separate, federally-funded international development projects. All that is missing is the cross-sectoral linkage that would lead to a more strategic and less *ad hoc* mobilization of Canada’s educational assets to support international development objectives.

What this could mean in practice is rather simple. For instance, the federal government could provide the funding and diplomatic infrastructure to encourage the many promotional visits of Canadian university and college officials to India to be extended to include visits to Bangladesh, Pakistan or Sri Lanka – visits that would focus more on strengthening capacity in those countries than recruiting students to study in Canada.²⁶

A portion of research funding provided through the granting councils could also be earmarked for projects that result in training for graduate students situated in universities in regions prioritized for Canada’s development aid. Existing or new federal funding for Canadian students to undertake study or work terms abroad could be reoriented from richer cities such as London, New York, Hong Kong or Shanghai – experiences which are no doubt valuable but which the Canadian private sector could fund – and redeployed to encourage service-oriented terms in areas of the world where federally-funded development projects are underway. Educational services could even be folded into Canada’s response to natural disasters or humanitarian crises, with the federal government funding Canadian educational institutions to fill gaps in afflicted countries until such time as their own educational infrastructure can be rebuilt.

²⁶ Similar arrangements could be made for promotional tours anchored on China in East Asia, or Brazil in South America.

This type of approach calls on Ottawa to exercise leadership, but again in an area in which it has jurisdiction: international development. Its benefits may be comparatively small on aggregate when compared with the financial benefits to Canada of doubling the number of international students it hosts.

But these benefits may nonetheless be remarkable in terms of local impact – making a difference on the ground in a specific area of the world that is an international development priority. This approach is thus strategic in a tactical sense rather than in the sense of sweeping statements and grand gestures: it represents a thoughtful use of modest amounts of funding to achieve results that are potentially transformative for those involved.

Link international education to intractable domestic challenges

The argument of this paper is that Ottawa doesn't need an international education strategy, but it does need to think about how to use international education more strategically. Another way to do this is to think about how international education can be used to address intractable domestic challenges that fall within Ottawa's purview.

One clear example is that of Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Canada is not the only society on the planet trying to extricate itself from a colonialist past and build a new relationship with Indigenous peoples. Our efforts would be well-served by providing more opportunities for collaboration among Indigenous scholars and students by, for instance, funding scholarly exchanges among Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Such exchanges could strengthen the expertise in all countries relating to issues such as Indigenous language preservation and cultural revitalization, the elaboration of Indigenous rights within British parliamentary and common law systems, and the decolonization of justice systems or family and social services. More frequent exchanges with, for instance, staff and faculty from New Zealand's Māori wānanga (higher education institutions) could help strengthen Canada's First Nations and Métis postsecondary institutions. And scholarly exchanges across the global Arctic could help expand opportunities for Inuit education and research.

All this could be done with a modest injection of new funds using existing tools, ranging from funding for the research granting councils, to transfers to territorial governments, to funding for non-governmental organizations such as Indspire, Universities Canada or the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

Other examples are easy to imagine. The recent appointment of a federal minister for rural economic development affords new opportunities. Canada has many colleges and universities situated in rural areas, none of which is able to match the international marketing efforts of larger, urban institutions. Assisting with the development of marketing materials focused around these institutions, the programs they specialize in, and the unique experience they offer students could help them in their recruitment efforts; and attracting more international students to these campuses can in turn help them remain attractive to Canadian students as well.²⁷ This effort could be accompanied by efforts to bring together the institutions, rural employers, provincial governments and federal immigration officials to

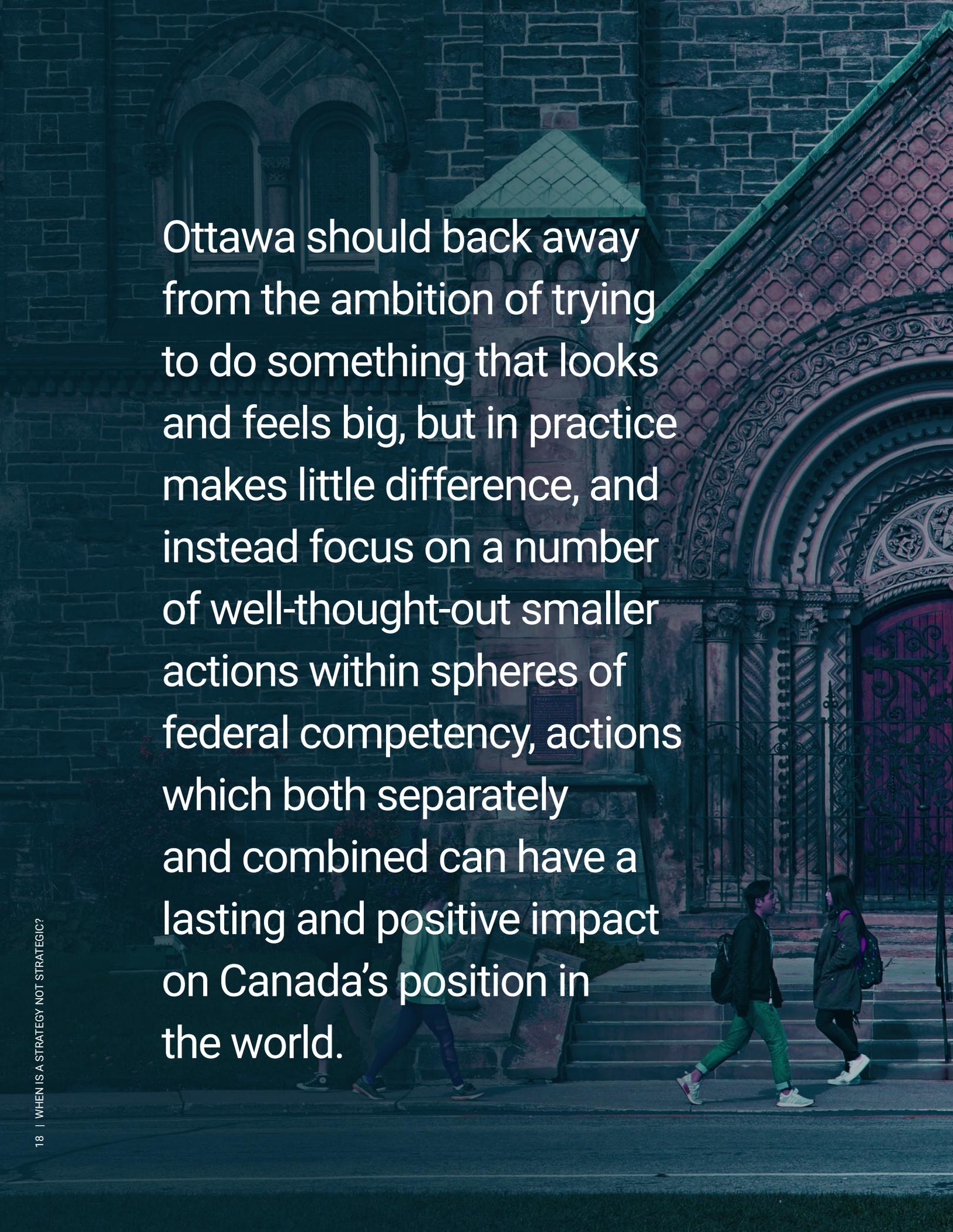
27 Not all institutions located outside of major cities in Canada struggle to attract international students; a number of institutions – such as Cape Breton University or Thompson Rivers University – have been quite successful.

A federal government that is constantly chasing shiny new objects rather than exploring creative new ways to address perennial problems only has itself to blame when little progress ends up being made.

create post-graduation pathways to permanent residence in rural areas for international students.²⁸

There are likely many other similar examples of how international education can help advance policy priorities at home. Compared with grander objectives such as doubling the number of international students enrolled in Canadian institutions or sending thousands of Canadian students on life-changing adventures abroad, these other policy priorities may seem somewhat pedestrian. But a federal government that is constantly chasing shiny new objects rather than exploring creative new ways to address perennial problems only has itself to blame when little progress ends up being made.

28 This would simply mean the expansion of pilot projects already underway; for example, see: <https://www.canadastudynews.com/2017/03/23/atlantic-immigration-pilot-program-graduates-apply-without-work-experience/> and <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/application/application-forms-guides/guide-5497-atlantic-immigration-pilot-program-atlantic-international-graduate-program.html>.



Ottawa should back away from the ambition of trying to do something that looks and feels big, but in practice makes little difference, and instead focus on a number of well-thought-out smaller actions within spheres of federal competency, actions which both separately and combined can have a lasting and positive impact on Canada's position in the world.

CONCLUSION

The federal government plays a vital role in international education. By building vibrant relationships with foreign countries, maintaining an effective immigration system, and co-managing the education brand, Ottawa serves as an essential partner to Canada's education providers – namely provinces, territories and educational institutions.

While playing this role, it is certainly a good idea for Ottawa to pause every few years to ask whether its international educational functions are being performed as well as they could be. Results achieved should be compared with those that were expected, and adjustments made to drive continuous improvement. But none of this is to suggest that the federal government needs to launch a new international education strategy every five years.

In fact, the argument of this paper is that it is not that helpful for the federal government to have an international education strategy at all, since it neither funds, nor regulates, nor manages the education system. Precisely because Ottawa does not have its hands on the main levers that can be pulled to shape international education outcomes, its strategies in this area, such as the most recent one issued in 2014, inevitably end up being feel-good restatements of the obvious objectives that everyone already shares – in other words, they end up being anything but strategic.

This can be avoided if Ottawa backs away from the ambition of trying to do something that looks and feels big, but in practice makes little difference, and instead focuses on a number of well-thought-out smaller actions within spheres of federal competency, actions which both separately and combined can have a lasting and positive impact on Canada's position in the world. Each of these actions would be strategic, in the sense of being carefully designed to make a measurable difference to an outcome that matters.

This approach would also shift Ottawa's role from one where it jostles with provinces to see who can better provide overall direction to the education sector, to one where it complements the provinces by building linkages between Canada's international education activities and other activities that flow naturally from federal responsibilities.

Ultimately, this new approach entails a shift in thinking as to what federal leadership in international education might mean. It is to shift from trying to provide leadership to the education sector, to trying to think through how the education sector can help Ottawa better exercise its leadership in areas relating to foreign policy, international development, and priorities in carefully selected areas of federal responsibility at home.

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