

**Annual Public Outreach Event held by Atlantic Research Group on  
Economics of Immigration, Aging, and Diversity**

Date: March 8, 2024

Time: 1:00 – 4:00 pm

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***Theme: Immigration and Skilled Labour Force in Atlantic Canada: The Role of Employers and International Students***

Venue: Sobey School of Business, Sobey Building (SB 260) Saint Mary's University



**Event Overview:**

The Atlantic Research Group on Economics of Immigration, Aging, and Diversity (ARGEIAD) hosted its annual public outreach event on March 8, 2024, focusing on "Immigration and Skilled Labour Force in Atlantic Canada: The role of Employers and International Students." Dr. Tony Fang, of Memorial University of Newfoundland, was the keynote speaker. The event also featured a presentation on an online survey of 3,584 international students on their lived experiences in Atlantic Canada, followed by a panel discussion. Government policymakers,

officials from settlement services organizations, private business employers, university administrators, faculty, and students were in attendance.

**Introduction by Dr. Ather H. Akbari, Chair of ARGEIAD, and Welcoming Remarks by Dr. James O'Brien, Associate Dean Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**

Dr. Ather H. Akbari, Chair of ARGEIAD and Professor of Economics at Sobey School of Business, opened the event with an overview of ARGEIAD's mission. He highlighted the importance of evidence-based research in informing public policy decisions, particularly regarding immigration, diversity, and aging. Dr. Akbari emphasized the need for understanding the immigrant and international student experiences in Atlantic Canada to facilitate their retention and future attraction. This is particularly important in Nova Scotia where the province aims to double its resident population by 2060.

Dr. James O'Brien welcomed the audience on behalf of the Vice President of Academic and Research of SMU and on behalf of Sobey School of Business (SSB). He highlighted the importance placed by the university on immigration and international students as important sources of economic growth in the region and in developing a multicultural community.

**Section 1:**

***Immigration and skilled labor force in Atlantic Canada: The role of employers and international students by Dr. Tony Fang (keynote speaker)***

Dr. O'Brien introduced Dr. Tony Fang. Dr. Fang's keynote speech can be divided into seven sections.

**Labour Market Challenges in Atlantic Canada:**

Dr. Fang highlighted the significant demographic challenges faced by Atlantic Canada, including an aging population and low fertility rates. He emphasized the pressing need to address low immigration rates and also retention issues, which exacerbate the efforts to meet labour and skill shortages in the region. The impacts of COVID-19 further compounded existing labour market challenges, underscoring the urgency for proactive strategies.

**Low Immigrant Population and Retention Ratios:**

Atlantic Provinces have been receiving more immigrants over the last two decades, but their retention continues to be low. A smaller national share of the resident immigrant population

than in other regions, motivates immigrants to move to other regions thereby weakening the policy attempts to meet labour market challenges through immigration. Dr. Fang gave the example of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador which has one of the lowest immigrant retention rates, hovering around 46.2%, although the province has been attracting more immigrants on an annual basis over the last two decades. (Rates in In Prince Edward Island, have been in the 30-35% range, New Brunswick at 49% and Nova Scotia at 65%. Each province welcomed more immigrants over the past two decades).

### **Role of International Students:**

Atlantic Canada can witness a significant shift in its demographics with the influx of international students who are generally younger – in the 25-35 age group. Through their part-time employment during the study period, these temporary residents help meet the shortage of low-skilled workers. After finishing their studies, they become eligible to apply for Post-Graduate Work Permit as a pathway toward permanent residency and become available for high-skilled jobs. Dr. Fang presented some data on study permit holders in Atlantic Provinces from 2000 to 2023 which show a notable rise, highlighting their increasing significance in the region's education sector and for its labour force. International students are young, and if they can be retained after finishing their studies, they can be a good source of meeting the regional demographic and labour market challenges.

### **What attracts newcomers to Atlantic Provinces?**

Newcomers are drawn to Atlantic Canada because of its many appealing features. Firstly, there are economic reasons including the lower-than-average cost of living when compared to other parts of Canada and the availability of more affordable housing. Secondly, Atlantic Canada provides lifestyle options to suit different interests and inclinations, ranging from lively urban areas to tranquil rural environments. Past survey research has shown that immigrants find the place to be hospitable and safer where they can experience acceptance and encouragement. All of these elements work together to make Atlantic Canada a desirable destination for people looking for both career and personal advancement as well as a high standard of living. However, a report published by the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) found that, even though 65% of international students express a desire to remain in Atlantic Canada after completing their studies, the inability to find a job suitable to their field of study impedes their ability to do so.

## **Conditional Retention Rates International and Domestic Students in the First and Fifth Year after Graduation, by Province of Study (2010-2016)**

Dr. Fang provided data on conditional retention rates for domestic and international students in the first- and fifth years following graduation, categorized by the province of study from 2010-2016. In the first year after graduation, Canada-wide retention rates stood at 90% for domestic and 81% for international students. However, significant variations were observed across provinces. Newfoundland and Labrador exhibited a retention rate of 81% for domestic students, but only 49% for international students. Similarly, Prince Edward Island had retention rates of 64% for domestic students and 55% for international students, both lower than the national average. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Manitoba also showed lower retention rates for international students compared to domestic students in the first year after graduation.

All provinces' retention rates for local and international students generally declined by the fifth year following graduation. With only 30% of international students still living in the province after five years, Newfoundland and Labrador had the lowest retention rate. Comparing international students' five-year retention rates to those of domestic students, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick showed comparatively lower rates. As evidence of the province's capacity to hold onto talent over time, Quebec had the highest retention rate for both local and international students in the first- and fifth years following graduation.

### **Main Reasons for Low Retention Rates in Atlantic Canada:**

Numerous important factors contribute to Atlantic Canada's low retention rates, most notably the limited labor market opportunities. The retention challenge is further compounded by small city sizes and comparatively smaller ethnic populations in comparison to major urban centers, which may affect the social integration and sense of belonging of newcomers. Retention efforts are further complicated by the lack of strong family and social links in Atlantic Canada since people—especially international students—may prefer being close to family and pre-existing social networks when they choose where to settle down permanently. To tackle these issues, comprehensive strategies are needed that focus on improving economic prospects, cultivating dynamic and diverse communities, and aiding recent arrivals so they may form social links and feel at home in the area.

## **Labour Market Integration and the Role of Employers:**

To address both short- and long-term issues, Dr. Fang emphasized the vital significance of labor market integration as well as the crucial role businesses play in assisting immigrants' economic integration. The Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP), Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), and Express Entry programs are among the recent immigration policy reforms that give priority to job offers in the short term. The objective of these programs is to improve economic integration by streamlining the process of matching job opportunities for new arrivals. In the long run, creating a welcoming and sustainable environment for newcomers helps with retention. These factors depend heavily on community support, a sense of belonging, and access to social networks.

The above elements of attraction and retention were corroborated by two studies that Dr. Fang has conducted, one analyzed employer hiring attitudes towards newcomers in Atlantic Canada, conducted in 2019 with a follow-up study in Newfoundland and Labrador in 2021. The other study explored the impact of COVID-19 on business operations in Atlantic Canada in 2022. These studies also shed light on the evolving dynamics of labor market integration and underscore the importance of ongoing research and collaboration to address challenges and opportunities in this domain. Dr. Fang also presented a detailed analysis of data collected for his two studies.

Finally, for retention of international students, Dr. Fang suggested some practical measures such as engagement with university resources, tailored services like Study and Stay programs, and opportunities for on-campus employment and co-op positions. By facilitating employment opportunities for international graduates and providing them mentorship and support services on campuses, Atlantic Canada can capitalize on the skills, talents, and perspectives of international graduates to address labor market needs, drive economic growth, and foster a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

## **Section 2:**

### ***Lived Experiences of International Students in Atlantic Canada: Dr. Ather H. Akbari's Survey Presentation***

The next segment of this public outreach event focused on providing some preliminary analysis of recently completed survey-based data exploring the lived experiences of international students in Atlantic Canada. This survey was spearheaded by Dr. Akbari in collaboration with

the Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Group ATN. The Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board reviewed the survey parameters and provided its clearance based on ethical considerations involving human participants. Various aspects of lived experiences covering both academic and social lives were addressed in the survey. The survey covered a population of about 68,825 international students who had arrived in Atlantic Canada to attend a post-secondary institution during 2018-2023. They may have either finished or were still pursuing their education in an Atlantic Canadian institution at the time of survey. E-mail invitations to a sample of 41,000 students were sent by IRCC to access the survey questionnaire launched on the Group ATN's website. A total of 3,589 responses were received. While all multiple-choice type questions have been coded, coding of descriptive questions is in progress. Key preliminary findings of the survey are presented below.

### **Student Satisfaction and Accommodation Experience**

- About 54% of students were extremely satisfied (22%) and somewhat satisfied (32%) with their overall accommodation experience. Further analysis of microdata will help reveal who is unlikely to be satisfied with their experience and why.

### **Interaction and Social Engagement**

- 34% of students reported being extremely satisfied with their interaction with domestic students.
- A significant majority (58%) were part of a study group, and 60% of these groups were a mix of international and domestic students.
- However, 35% of students reported feeling social isolation on campus.

### **Academic and Financial Challenges**

- The main causes of mental stress for students included bearing living costs (59%), increases in tuition fees (44%), and academic performance (44%).
- Most students worked part-time (74%) while studying, and only 30% were extremely satisfied with their work experience.

### **Post-Graduation Plans and Satisfaction with On-campus Services**

- A substantial number of students planned to stay in the same province after graduation (83%).
- Among the services accessed, academic counseling (46%) and employment counseling (37%) were the most utilized.
- Of the students surveyed, a collective 75% expressed satisfaction—either extremely or somewhat—with the current state of their institution in terms of its modernity.

### **Cultural Integration and Experience**

- Numerous minority students learned about Indigenous Communities in Atlantic Canada (78%).
- A considerable number of students (23%) were hosted by a local family outside campus, with most having a warm and welcoming experience.

These findings indicate that while there is a high level of satisfaction in certain areas like academic interaction and the use of technology, challenges like social isolation, mental stress due to financial concerns, and the cost of living persist for international students in Atlantic Canada. Besides, further analysis of microdata will inform strategies to enhance the student experience.

### **Section 3:**

### ***New Brunswick's Efforts to Support International Student Success: Fernanda Damiani's Presentation***

**Fernanda Damiani**, representing the Government of New Brunswick, virtually presented her work. Ms. Damiani's presentation focused the province's dedicated efforts to enhance the overall experience and integration of international students, thereby enriching the ongoing dialogue on immigration and diversity in Atlantic Canada.

### **Introduction to New Brunswick's International Student Support and Enrolment Growth**

The Government of New Brunswick has implemented targeted measures to enhance the achievements of overseas students studying there. These initiatives aim to improve the educational experience and open doors for opportunities beyond graduation. The number of

international students enrolled in New Brunswick's post-secondary institutions has steadily increased between 2018 and 2023. These institutions include the Maritime College of Forest Technology, St. Thomas University, Mount Allison University, University of New Brunswick (UNB), Université de Moncton, and New Brunswick Community College (NBCC).

### **Diversity of International Student Population and their Reasons for Choosing New Brunswick**

Students from different countries make up the diversified international student community of New Brunswick's post-secondary institutions. India is the leader, although the Philippines leads the public colleges. International students choose New Brunswick because it is viewed as an affordable and high-quality study destination. Factors such as program diversity, cost of study, and program quality all play a role in their decision.

### **Policies and Efforts to Support International Students**

With an emphasis on guaranteeing top-notch educational standards, offering a secure environment, and improving regulatory compliance, New Brunswick has put rules in place to assist overseas students. Revisions to policies are intended to enhance student achievement monitoring, institutional control, and academic support. Increased retention of international graduates, improved accountability, and improved ties between the government and educational institutions are anticipated results.

### **Conclusion: Commitment to International Student Success**

The initiatives discussed by Ms. Damiani highlight New Brunswick's dedication to the success of international students and in turn, the development of the region. The province sees itself as a leader in promoting cultural diversity and economic development through its support of international students emphasizing the academic, social, and post-graduation components of their experience.

## **Section 4:**

### ***Panel Discussion: Navigating International Student Experiences in Atlantic Canada: Policies, Practices, and Perspectives***

Dr. Paul Dixon of Saint Mary's University moderated this panel discussion. Dr. Dixon has a very long experience in university administration and institutional data analyses. He posed four



questions to the audience about the survey of international students: What responses were you pleased to see? What results disturbed you? If we were to drill down into this data set to look for causes or patterns associated with your responses above, what other variables should we look at? What do you wish was asked, but wasn't?

Mr. Peter Halpin (Association of Atlantic Universities) provided feedback on the survey findings presented by Dr. Akbari. He emphasized the comprehensiveness and actionable nature of the survey, noting that it offered valuable insights into the experiences of international students in the region. Mr. Halpin highlighted several surprising or unexpected results, such as the significant influence of family or friends as a source of awareness and the impact of the cost of living on the choice of institution in Atlantic Canada. While many students expressed satisfaction with aspects like interaction with faculty and academic success, concerns regarding housing and accommodation emerged as disturbing trends. He concluded by stressing the critical importance of factors such as overall student experience and the urgent need for accessible and affordable housing. Looking ahead, he suggested that future surveys should delve deeper into social and cultural experiences, as well as address issues such as food insecurity and precarious housing.

Ms. Francesca Southwell, an international student at Saint Mary's University and panelist at the event, provided an insightful commentary on various aspects of international student experiences in Canada. She pointed out the significance of foreign exchange rates in shaping students' financial burdens. Additionally, Ms. Southwell emphasized the importance of cultural acceptance in Canada, drawing connections to the survey's findings that indicated high levels of satisfaction among international students in their interactions with domestic peers. Furthermore, she noted Canada's progressive stance on LGBTQ+ rights, commonly known as the "lesbian rule," which fosters inclusivity and contributes to the country's appeal as a welcoming academic destination. She also highlighted the ease of faculty interaction in Canada, aligning with survey results that emphasized positive experiences in engagement with faculty and staff. Overall, her insightful commentary underscored the multifaceted factors that influence international student experiences and highlighted Canada's commitment to inclusivity and academic support.

In his remarks, Dr. Dixon noted there were many good stories to tell in the data, but it was not surprising rather disappointing that many students wanted to leave, were unhappy with housing

and employment, and had faced discrimination. Issues, such as mental health, need more attention in his view. The causes appeared to be stress that “we” cause through the cost of education and the academic pressures we create. The current focus seems to be on treating mental health and not treating causes. He also found it disturbing to note that although students were generally happy with the quality of their programs and faculty, they were not nearly as pleased with their institutions. This needs to be further investigated.

**In closing remarks, Dr. Ather H. Akbari,** reflecting on the insightful discussions and findings presented throughout the event, reiterated the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of international students in Atlantic Canada. The preliminary conclusions drawn from the survey underscored the critical importance of several key factors that are shaping the experiences of international students in Atlantic Canada. Dr. Akbari expressed gratitude to all participants for their valuable contributions. By leveraging insights from events like this and ongoing research endeavors, Atlantic Canada can continue to position itself as an attractive destination for students from around the world, contributing to the region's cultural vibrancy, economic growth, and global competitiveness. Dr. Akbari also acknowledged the support provided to ARGEIAD by Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency.

