

Innovative Collaborations: Working together to promote education and strengthen the study permit application process

In June 2018, Immigration Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) launched the Study Direct Stream (SDS) in China, India, Vietnam and the Philippines. To support the growth in study permit applications, students from those countries can benefit from faster processing times by demonstrating upfront that they have the financial resources and language skills to succeed academically in Canada. A significant development for Canada's international education industry, many have wondered, how was SDS developed and why those four countries?

The origins of SDS date back to 2008. At the time, the average study permit approval rate for college-bound students at the Canadian High Commission in India was 34%, significantly lower than for those destined to university. Visa officers found it challenging to determine whether a college-bound applicant was a genuine student: could the family easily afford to cover the cost of studies in Canada, or was the study permit solely a route to gaining access to Canada? It was difficult to verify supporting documentation and obtain feedback on whether individuals who were issued study permits were actually making their way to the classroom. Colleges were frustrated, too; the students they had worked hard to recruit would submit their applications, only to be refused.

A Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan), formerly known as the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), delegation to India in November 2008 provided the right opportunity for meaningful discussion about this issue. Led by then-President and CEO Jim Knight and Vice-President for Canadian Partnerships Katrina Murray, CICan met with David Manicom, then Migration Program Manager at the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi to address the low visa approval rate. Reflecting on the visit, Manicom recalls, "We wanted to develop a more rapid and reliable feedback mechanism, not so much to measure the longer-term outcomes of our decisions, but to answer at least the question of relative rates of 'no show' for studies. This would allow us to know whether we had accurately assessed the intent of the student."

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Sharing their respective areas of expertise, CICan and IRCC collaborated to set objective and easily verifiable requirements to facilitate the determination of whether an applicant was a genuine student. In addition, the institutions selected to participate committed to providing regular systematic feedback on student enrolment and attendance. The Student Partners Program, most often referred to as the SPP, thus began in 2009.

CICan and IRCC set a series of criteria for students. One semester of tuition had to be paid in advance. Applicants needed to undertake their medical examination ahead of time and language proficiency, long used by visa officers as a critical factor in determining whether an applicant is a genuine student, had to be demonstrated through IELTS (6.0). The results submitted with applications could be easily verified if fraud was suspected.

As part of the arrangement, the institutions needed to confirm whether or not the students issued study permits actually showed up in class. A reporting mechanism was established between the institutions and CICan and the visa office.

The Student Partner Program pilot launched in 2009 with 20 participating colleges. The approval rate for those colleges more than doubled, rising to almost 80% in 2009 with over 3100 cases approved, a 125% increase and a processing time of 13 days. By 2010, the SPP became an official program in India and China, with 30 participating colleges in India and 37 in China. By the time the program ended in the transition to the SDS in 2018, the India SPP had 47 participating colleges and China had 52.

As the word spread about the SPP, the volume of applications increased. IRCC was looking for additional ways to streamline SPP processes. Fraudulent banking documents were easy to obtain and extremely difficult to verify in China and India; as a result, ascertaining the financial circumstances of a prospective student had always been extremely challenging. Visa offices required the submission of historical banking

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records to ensure that funds were not borrowed for the application and returned to a lender once a study permit was issued. Reviewing those documents took precious time away from assessing the other elements of a file.

To reduce the financial documents that needed to be submitted with an application and ensure that funds were truly available to the student, IRCC, CICan, and financial institutions began collaborating on setting up a special Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC) so students could easily demonstrate proof of funds. The GIC was locked in and dispersed to the student on a monthly schedule during the first year of studies. The GIC program initially began in China when the SPP was launched in coordination with RBC.

The GIC element was more complex in India than in China, with Scotiabank the first financial institution to enter the market. ScotiaBank had initially planned for 3000 applicants for the first intake in 2012. The High Commission, however, received 4000 applications in October - November alone, and ScotiaBank needed to adapt their resources to this demand, with new hires and systems put in place to handle the volume. It was not long before Scotiabank's Student GIC was extended to China.

By quickly establishing bona fides and reducing the need for verifications, these innovations enabled visa officers to more quickly assess applications, resulting in exponentially higher acceptance rates and reduced processing times.

The success of the program became a source of pride and a [showcase](#) for both CICan and the Government of Canada. Beginning with the inception of the SPP, IRCC continued to collaborate with CICan and its members, maximizing finite resources to deliver timely facilitative programs resulting in a higher rate of visa approvals. With clear lines of communication established between parties, IRCC noted that it would continue to work with 'trusted external partners and target markets where Canada derives the most benefit' to deliver innovative programming. CICan was precisely one of those

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trusted partners, continuously reaching out to Canadian missions abroad and IRCC headquarters on behalf of its members.

Wishing to replicate the compliance element of the SPP reporting on student attendance, in 2014 IRCC launched the [Designated Learning Institution \(DLI\) portal](#). The DLI portal and processes mirrored much of the SPP's reporting mechanism and put all DLI's directly in contact with IRCC for bi-annual confirmation of attendance and liaison issues. That same year, the Study Direct Stream (SDS) began as a pilot in China with ['similar criteria \[to SPP\], but open to any post-secondary education program that is eligible for the post-graduate work permit program \(PGWPP\).'](#) The IELTS requirement was set at a 6.0, compared to a 5.5 under SPP, and no additional reporting was required beyond what was now mandatory through the DLI Portal.

CICan, IRCC, and Scotiabank continued to collaborate to reach new markets in 2016 with the advent of similar program in Vietnam, known as the Canada Express Study (CES) program. The IELTS score was set at 5.0 and IRCC required that applicants pay a full year of tuition in advance, as opposed to one semester. This, combine with the GIC, would ensure that students had the financial means to pay for their studies and cost of living in Canada in their first year of studies. The program further positioned CICan members for success in this rapidly developing market. Processing times dropped significantly and approval rates for college bound applicants more than doubled in the first year. With a growing economy (and thus lower risk profile), a large and successful Vietnamese diaspora in Canada, and the steady advocacy of CICan, IRCC was satisfied that a facilitative program could yield a similar degree of success in Vietnam. By the end of 2017, study permit applicants to colleges and institutes had more than doubled and accounted for roughly 55% of the total. As a result of the program, demand for Canadian education grew across all study levels, including university and K-12 studies.

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The CES pilot was long in the making: advocacy from CIGan had begun in 2010. Initially established as an exclusive arrangement with 45 CIGan member institutions, the CES expanded to include 55 members in 2017.

In June 2017 IRCC launched the Study Direct Stream (SDS) for post-secondary applicants from the Philippines, with Scotiabank, like in Vietnam, the only financial institution to offer a GIC. This program, with similar elements to the SPP and CES was managed by IRCC and mirrored the SDS program previously established in China. It remained the purview of post-secondary education programs eligible for the PGWPP.

As was the case in Vietnam, the success of this new facilitative program was of tremendous interest for students contemplating study abroad. CIGan organized the first ever Canadian college and institute-specific recruitment event in the Philippines coinciding with the launch of the SDS. The event provided CIGan members the opportunity to quickly capitalize on the growing demand from the Philippine market. The number of study permit applications from the Philippines reached an all-time high in 2017, totaling 3,360 with applications to colleges and institutes accounting for approximately 57% of the total. The number of applications surpassed 4900 in 2018, signifying a sustained increase in interest in studying in Canada at all levels.

Discussions regarding facilitative programs continued throughout 2017, with CIGan again playing a leadership role. Close to 30 member institutions participated in a consultation session at the High Commission in New Delhi with discussions focused on how to improve the program. After a long wait for a decision from IRCC on the fate of the SPP in India, CIGan was informed in December 2017 that IRCC intended to implement SDS in India and Vietnam. The SDS would be open to applicants intending to study at any DLI. Once in effect, all facilitative programs, including CES in Vietnam and SPP in India and China, would be aligned under SDS to ensure consistency. The SDS program was officially launched in [June 2018](#). By the end of September, almost 10,000 students had been processed through SDS – approximately 50% had applied for

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a study permit associated to a college or institute with an overall approval rate of 93%, a remarkable increase from ten years earlier.

The coordinated efforts of IRCC and CICan in developing innovative approaches to study permit processing were instrumental in creating the right conditions for success, but that is only part of the equation. Canada's colleges and institutes are inherently responsive to labour market needs and offer a wide range of flexible and career-oriented credentials and programs. With skills development and career prospects post-graduation top of mind, it is little surprise that more and more international students are turning to Canada's colleges and institutes to help them transition to the labour market and develop in their careers. At the end of 2017, colleges and institutes hosted 44% of study permit holders in Canada at the post-secondary level and, between 2015 and 2017, demand for study permits associated to a college or institute grew faster than for any other study level – 104% compared to 40% for universities.

Ten years on, and with the success of the SDS program now apparent, CICan continues to work with IRCC and Canadian financial institutions towards its expansion. Ensuring that prospective students from around the world, irrespective of their nationality or country of residence, have access to timely and predictable study permit processing is critically important. Not only does this have obvious benefits for the applicants themselves, it helps Canadian institutions develop new markets and diversify their international enrolments – of importance to the long-term sustainability of the industry. To this day, approval rates for college-bound applicants from most markets remain lower than for university-bound applicants. While the SDS program has proven useful in helping to reduce this gap, CICan continues to work with IRCC and willing stakeholders towards the development of new and innovative approaches to promote information sharing and greater coordination between the department and its members.