



Strengthening Talent Attraction, Trade Diversification, and Bilingualism through Official Languages Education

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Introduction

Canada's English and French language education sector is strategic national infrastructure that directly supports federal priorities related to talent attraction, economic growth, trade diversification, labour force development, newcomer integration, and the protection and promotion of Official Languages, including Francophone minority communities.

Languages Canada is the national association for Canada's 152 accredited public college, university, and private language school programs. Languages Canada members welcome international visitors, students, newcomers, and Canadian learners to learn one or both of our Official Languages. Members are all accredited and adhere to a national Quality Assurance Scheme, recognized by federal and provincial governments. Although there are minor financial contributions from government, primarily to support Official Languages in minority regions and newcomer integration, the sector is self-funded and contributes to Canada's export revenues. Revenues come from individuals, organizations, and foreign governments investing in upgrading English and French language skills to access educational, professional, and migration opportunities.

The Official Languages education sector plays a unique role within Canada's postsecondary education ecosystem. In 2024, research conducted by Academica Group found that international students who complete language pathway programs before beginning their degree or diploma studies achieve higher GPAs and have stronger retention and graduation outcomes than direct-entry international students.¹

This in turn directly supports the federal government's talent attraction objectives. Canada's Talent Attraction Strategy, being developed under the leadership of IRCC, seeks to attract highly skilled international talent that supports economic growth, innovation, productivity, and long-term labour force needs.² Official Languages education serves as an important upstream component of this strategy by recruiting and preparing desirable candidates studying in high-demand fields for successful transition into Canadian postsecondary programs and the Canadian workforce.

At the same time, the Official Languages education sector advances diversity and diversification objectives that have been identified as a weakness within IRCC's International Student Program. The Auditor General's report, tabled in March of this year, identified overreliance on a small number of source countries as a structural vulnerability within Canada's international education ecosystem.³

¹ <https://www.languagescanada.ca/web/default/files/research/student-outcomes-in-public-sector-english-for-academic-purposes-programs.pdf>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-nov-18-2025/talent-attraction.html>

³ <file:///C:/Users/rache/Downloads/ag-202603-international-student-program-reforms-3.PDF>

Languages Canada members recruit highly diverse student populations from 85 countries and the top source markets include Japan, China, South Korea, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, France, Taiwan, Italy, and Spain, helping diversify Canada's international student base while supporting broader trade diversification objectives.

Context

Prior to the pandemic (2019), Canada's Official Languages education sector:

- Welcomed approximately 150,000 learners annually (71% came into Canada through Temporary Resident Visas or eTA's, 24% through study permits, and the rest were Canadian residents.⁴)
- Contributed \$6.7 billion to Canada's economy, including \$1.8 billion in direct export revenue;
- Supported approximately 75,000 Canadian jobs⁵; and
- Had measured and steady growth rates. Growth of the Official Languages education sector from 2010 to 2019 was controlled and measured and averaged 1% a year.⁶

However, Canada's Official Languages education sector is now in crisis, functioning in some cases on life support. Canada is in danger of losing skills and infrastructure foundational to the country's identity, to talent attraction and development, and to a productive workforce and society. The pandemic impacted the sector, certainly, but it emerged strong and resolute because of strong leadership and collaboration, and policy and financial support from the Canadian government. However, following the pandemic, the sector was never able to recover as other segments of international education did. While universities and especially colleges had record enrolments in 2023, Official Languages programs had only recovered to 75% of their pre-pandemic student numbers by that time, adversely impacted by government immigration policies and process.

Changes to IRCC's International Student Program since January 2024, intended to strengthen integrity and stabilize temporary resident growth, have had unintended and disproportionate consequences for Canada's Official Languages education sector. Accredited language programs, including those supporting pathways into postsecondary education and Francophone minority communities, have experienced significant declines in student volumes, economic activity, and institutional capacity. Today, students, economic output, and jobs supported by the sector are just half of what they were in 2019.⁷

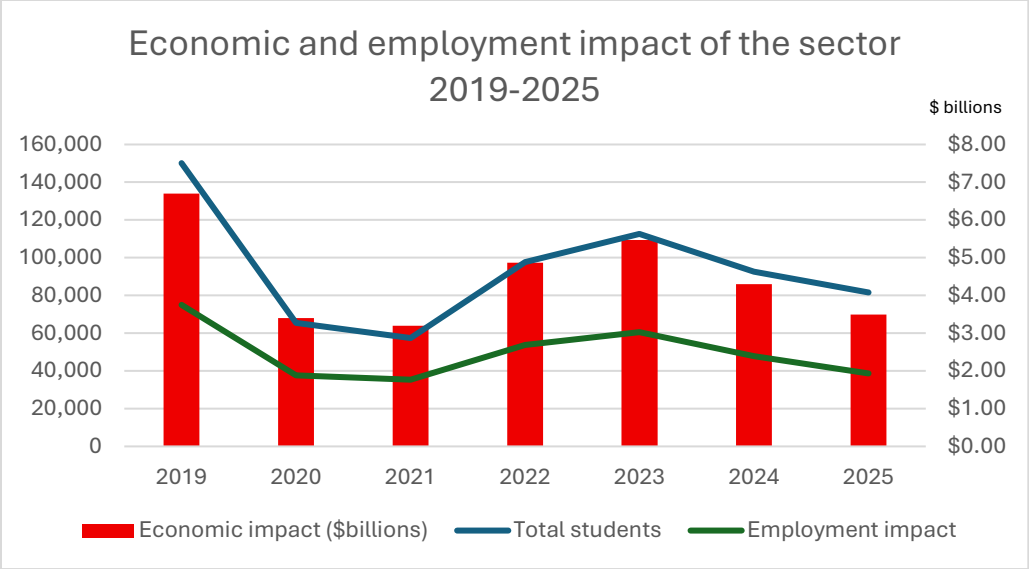
The trajectory of Official Languages students, economic impact, and employment impact is shown in the chart below:

⁴ Languages Canada 2019 Annual Report on English and French Language Education in Canada.

⁵ Rosyln Kunin and Associates Inc. *Estimating the Comprehensive Economic Impact of International Students in Language Education Programs in Canada*. May 31, 2021.

⁶ Based on data obtained through annual surveys of Languages Canada members from 2010 to 2019.

⁷ Languages Canada 2025 Annual Report on Official Languages Education in Canada.



Student numbers: The sector welcomed 150,112 learners in 2019, dropping to a low of 57,423 during the pandemic (2021). It began to recover in 2022 (97,679 learners) and 2023 (112,564 learners), up to 75% of pre-pandemic numbers. Numbers declined again with the introduction of changes to the International Student Program in 2024 (92,529 learners). In 2025, the sector welcomed only 81,636 learners.

Economic and employment impact (calculated based on the number of students weeks taught, not unique students): Prior to the pandemic (2019), the sector enabled \$6.7 billion in direct and indirect economic activity and supported 75,000 jobs in Canada. This dropped to a low of \$3.2 billion and 35,250 jobs in 2021 (48% of pre-pandemic impact). Post-pandemic recovery saw the sector’s impact recover to \$5.47 billion in economic impact and 60,490 jobs by 2023, 82% recovery. This impact has dropped to \$3.49 billion in economic impact and 38,670 jobs in 2025, only 52% of pre-pandemic economic and employment impact.

Key impacts:

- The share of international study permit applications for English and French language programs has fallen from approximately 8% of all students in 2018 to 3% % in 2025⁸.
- Canada has lost 32% of its accredited Official Languages programs, from 225 in January 2024 to 152 today, with more closures expected this year. This includes closure of long-standing public English and French language programs at Acadia University, the University of Saskatchewan, Trent University, Georgian College, Bow Valley College, Lethbridge Polytechnic, and Langara College.⁹ The remaining programs have all been reduced in size and capacity. The economic and employment impact of the sector to Canada has been halved since 2019, as shown above.¹⁰

⁸ IRCC international student data.
⁹ Languages Canada membership database.
¹⁰ Calculated based on student weeks, derived from Languages Canada Annual Reports from 2019 to 2025 and economic and employment impact multipliers developed by Roslyn Kunin and Associates.

Recommendations

The following outlines targeted federal measures that would help protect Canada’s Official Languages education infrastructure while advancing broader federal priorities related to immigration integrity, economic competitiveness, bilingualism, Francophone community development, and talent attraction.

Recommendation 1: Establish an Official Languages Student Pilot Under the Federal Study Permit Cap

Official Languages are a federal responsibility under the *Official Languages Act*. In the current Provincial/Territorial Attestation Letter (PAL/TAL) allocation system under the federal study permit cap, allocation to institutions is made by each province or territory. Provinces and territories are focused primarily on supporting public colleges and universities. IRCC data confirms that proportionally, the ratio of approved study permits for students attending French and English programs in Canada has dropped from 8% in 2018 to 3% in 2025.¹¹ The combination of an overall reduction in international students and the drastic reduction in the ratio of PAL/TALs for Official Languages has reduced Official Languages programs to unsustainable levels across much of the country. Official Languages education has not been adequately protected despite its national strategic and cultural importance.

Languages Canada recommends that the government establish an “Official Languages Student Pilot” program for students applying for study permits to study English and/or French in Canada, operating under federal authority and outside of the PAL/TAL system. A federal pilot model would address this policy gap while remaining aligned with the government’s objectives related to integrity and responsible growth management.

The proposed pilot would:

- Be a strategic value-add to the federal Talent Attraction Strategy, supporting a pipeline of prospective newcomers who are well integrated and prepared for success in the classroom, the workplace, and communities;
- Uphold federal Official Languages obligations and protect critical Official Languages infrastructure;
- Advance Canada’s bilingual identity and Francophone minority community development objectives;
- Improve newcomer integration outcomes by enabling programs welcoming self-funded learners, reducing reliance on government-funded language programs for newcomers;
- Strengthen trade diversification and International Student Program diversity objectives by attracting learners from source countries that are part of Canada’s new economic and strategic objectives.

¹¹ IRCC study permit application data.

The proposed pilot would follow the precedent established by existing federal immigration initiatives designed to advance Official Languages objectives, namely the Francophone Minority Communities Student Pilot. The Official Languages Student Pilot program should be implemented with similar guardrails, including:

- Limit eligibility to international students seeking a study permit for the purpose of learning English and/or French as a second language (ESL/FSL);
- Restricted to students applying to study at Designated Learning Institutions offering accredited English and/or French language programs under the Languages Canada Quality Assurance Framework;
- Require applicants to demonstrate sufficient proof of funds and meet all standard study permit eligibility requirements;
- Maintain existing restrictions preventing ESL/FSL students from working while studying;
- Maintain existing restrictions preventing eligibility for a post-graduation work permit based solely on language studies; and
- Students transitioning into a college, university, or polytechnic degree, diploma, or certificate program after achieving the required language proficiency level would remain subject to all applicable study permit extension requirements and PAL/TAL policies in place at that time.

Importantly:

- ESL/FSL students are self-funded and invest in language acquisition before entering the labour market or postsecondary system;
- These students do not have access to employment while studying;
- They are not eligible for post-graduation work permits based solely on language studies; and
- They reduce long-term pressure on publicly funded language training and settlement programs by acquiring English and/or French proficiency at their own expense.

Recommendation 2: Support Francophone Minority Community Recruitment and Promotion Through French Language Education Pathways

Canada has established ambitious targets to increase immigration into Francophone minority communities. However, its current approach to recruitment is limited, focusing almost exclusively on attracting newcomers who already speak French but are not integrated properly for success. The majority of applicants come from countries that have low study permit acceptance rates.

As a country, we are failing to take advantage of the exceptional capacity of accredited language programs to recruit and teach French to prospective newcomers from “Francophile” countries, such as those in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Accredited French language education providers represent an underutilized strategic asset in achieving Francophone immigration and community development goals.

Languages Canada members possess:

- Extensive global recruitment networks;
- Proven expertise recruiting diverse international students; and
- Established pathways connecting language training to postsecondary education and labour market participation.

Languages Canada recommends that the government of Canada establish dedicated funding to support international recruitment and promotion initiatives to attract international students to accredited French language-to-postsecondary pathway programs that serve as a pipeline into French colleges and universities in Francophone minority communities outside of Quebec. A three-year pilot with total funding of \$1.5 million to cover operational, recruitment, and administrative costs is a suggested starting point.

The proposed program would provide targeted federal funding to accredited French language education providers to develop formal pathway partnerships with colleges and universities in Francophone minority communities outside of Quebec. The program structure is already supported by IRCC policy through its “Joint Program” program classification and through the Languages Canada Joint Pathway Program, vetted by IRCC.¹² Through these partnerships, institutions would collaborate on coordinated international recruitment initiatives in strategically identified Francophile markets to attract students with an interest in learning French and pursuing postsecondary education in Canada.

Students would first complete intensive Academic French language programs combined with settlement and integration supports designed to prepare them for academic success and community integration. Upon achieving an upper-intermediate level of French proficiency, students would transition into designated diploma or degree programs through established institutional pathway agreements. These partnerships could also prioritize recruitment into academic fields experiencing regional labour shortages, helping align Francophone immigration objectives with local workforce and economic development needs.

Federal support for French language education pathways would:

- Strengthen Francophone minority communities;
- Increase the pool of French-speaking newcomers;
- Improve newcomer integration outcomes;
- Advance Canada’s Official Languages objectives; and
- Align with broader federal priorities related to economic growth, labour force development, and national cohesion.

¹²¹² <https://www.languagescanada.ca/en/joint-pathway-program>

Recommendation 3: Improve Predictability and Efficiency of Study Permit and Visitor Visa Processing

Study permit and visitor visa processing delays and unpredictability are a major roadblock in Canada's global talent pipeline, deterring prospective top students from choosing Canada as a study destination, and all too often causing students to miss program start dates, creating operational instability and significant losses for the Canadian institutions that have invested heavily in student recruitment. Ultimately, unpredictable processing timelines and lack of transparency in visa decisions undermine Canada's international reputation and encourage students to choose competitor countries with more predictable systems. This is counter to Canada's talent attraction objectives.

Languages Canada recommends that the government of Canada provide targeted operational funding to IRCC to improve the predictability, transparency, and efficiency of study permit and temporary resident visa (TRV) processing. Improving visa processing efficiency and predictability would support Canada's broader objectives related to talent attraction, economic growth, and international competitiveness while maintaining program integrity.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish an Official Languages Student Pilot under the federal cap on study permits, operating under federal authority and outside the PAL/TAL system, for students accepted into DLIs with accredited English / French language programs.

Recommendation 2: Dedicate \$1.5 million over three years for Francophone minority community recruitment and promotion initiatives linked to accredited French language-to-postsecondary education pathways.

Recommendation 3: Invest in improved predictability, transparency, and efficiency of study permit and visitor visa processing.

About Languages Canada

Languages Canada is Canada's national association representing 152 accredited public and private English and French language education programs across nine provinces.

Its members include public universities, colleges, and private language schools accredited under the Languages Canada Quality Assurance Scheme and committed to the highest standards of educational quality, student protection, and ethical practice.