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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (0920)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): We will now resume.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 20, 2023, the committee is meeting to continue its study on the economic development of official language minority communities.

I would like to welcome Martin Normand, who is the Director of Strategic Research and International Relations at the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne.

Mr. Normand, we are glad to have you join us for this conversation. This isn't the first time you've attended a meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

You will have the floor for five minutes, after which we will go to the round of questions. I am very strict about speaking time.

Mr. Martin Normand (Director, Strategic Research and International Relations, Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne): Thank you.

It's obvious to us that the post-secondary sector plays a role in the Canadian economy, a fact that's particularly true of our 22 post-secondary educational institutions in the francophone communities, which often drive local economies because they are innovation hubs, dynamic employers, consumers of goods and services, magnets for public and private investment and calling cards both here at home and abroad.

You also have to consider the work they do in incubating business startups and the productivity gains associated with research projects established in local communities and businesses. Then there are the economic activity and revenue created by generations of graduates from our institutions.

Your committee is looking for best practices and economic models that it should follow, and post-secondary educational institutions have made an impressive contribution in that area. However, our institutional network aspires to expand its contributions to Canadian society by offering new programs that are tailored to changing socioeconomic realities by attracting and retaining the local francophone clientele and establishing spaces that will continue to drive innovation. Which is why, in recent years, we have repeatedly stated our network's expectation that permanent funding of \$80 million a year be established to support the sector and enable it to continue growing.

Today, however, I would like to focus on a more urgent matter. On January 22, 2024 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, set a national intake cap on study permit applications for the next two years. The announcement came as a major shock to our institutional network as a whole.

We believe that the modernized Official Languages Act and the francophone immigration policy are promising new tools, provided they are complied with. However, that announcement has now brought us all, including this committee, to a first test of those federal tools and could reveal their limits.

This decision is a clear contradiction of the revised version of the francophone immigration policy that was announced on January 16, 2024. According to the policy's objectives, IRCC wishes to maximize the selection of foreign French-speaking students, enhance programs aimed at them and expand their access to francophone post-secondary educational institutions outside Quebec. The policy should constitute the backdrop against which every measure targeting the international clientele of post-secondary educational institutions is defined. However, the opposite appears to be the case.

As others have noted this week, the international clientele of post-secondary educational institutions plays a crucial role in the Canadian economy by injecting more than \$22 billion into it every year. Based on various data sources, we estimate that the international clientele of member post-secondary educational institutions of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, or ACUFC, generated an economic impact of more than \$300 million in 2018–2019 alone.

That clientele meets a varied range of labour needs while they are studying, and they may acquire post-graduation work permits in order to add to their work experience in Canada. They may then decide to file an application to transition to permanent residency. According to a study conducted in 2020, nearly 90% of foreign students in our institutional network said they wanted to remain in Canada after graduation. This success clearly shows how IRCC should rely on our institutions to meet its new, more ambitious francophone immigration targets.

Study permit holders in our institutional network make up less than 2% of the total number of holders of study permits issued in Canada in 2022. That number is very low at the national level, but this clientele has a considerable impact at the community level. Which is why, for the moment, and given the emergency we face, we are making only one recommendation this morning.

We recommend that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada introduce measures to ensure that a national intake cap on study permit applications does not have an impact on the ability of post-secondary educational institutions in minority francophone communities to maintain and increase the number of foreign students, as the new version of the francophone immigration policy provides. For example, IRCC could designate the international clientele studying in French outside Quebec as a priority cohort, as it has previously done for other cohorts.

If we want (1) post-secondary educational institutions to retain an ability to influence the economic development of francophone communities and (2) the international clientele to feel they can contribute to the vitality of those communities, then the measure announced last week and intended to align with the other objectives of the federal government's public policy must be reviewed. This solution would be consistent with the spirit of the Official Languages Act and the francophone immigration policy and would enhance the impact that these two tools would have on the economic situation of francophone communities across the country.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Each of the political parties will have six minutes of speaking time in the first round of questions. We will begin with the first vice-chair of this committee.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Normand, thank you for being with us this morning. It's a pleasure for us to meet you. It's good to have our witnesses in the room because that prevents technical issues.

Mr. Normand, I listened closely to your remarks this morning, and I see that the government is saying anything and everything. Its intentions are good, but IRCC's recent announcements run counter to the objectives we see, in particular, in Bill C-13. You said that IRCC had changed its policy; that's what was announced on January 22. Our understanding is that nothing has happened in the short term.

Here's my first question. What's important for you in the short term, and what could have an impact on economic development in the official language minority communities, the OLMCs?

• (0925)

Mr. Martin Normand: It's wrong to say that nothing has happened since January 22. The measure has been in place since the day it was announced. There's a moratorium on the processing of student permit applications right now. That could mean that some of our institutions may not have a cohort of foreign students registering for the spring term in May. Furthermore, if the provinces don't act quickly, that could also have an impact on the cohort arriv-

ing in September. Our institutions are very concerned right now. They don't think applications will be processed promptly enough for a cohort to attend the spring term, and that could have an impact on the September cohort.

The impact on our institutions is immediate. If some cohorts disappear, or if there's a significant decline in the number of foreign students this coming September, that also means there will be fewer graduates in two, three or four years who will remain in the country, apply for permanent residence and take part in the growth and vitality of francophone communities.

That will have an immediate impact on the institutions and a medium-term effect on our communities.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Normand.

Considering what you just said, can we say that we'll be compromising the existence of francophone institutions outside Quebec if no change is made? Whether we like it or not, students who register generate revenue, and that revenue enables those institutions to survive.

Does the government's current policy mean we're sacrificing or eliminating francophone institutions in Canada?

Mr. Martin Normand: The institutions in our network have always proved that they are resilient, but the fact remains that, without necessarily resulting in the closure of an institution in the short term, a sudden and significant revenue loss could mean the elimination of positions, fewer programs, cuts to the number of spaces in programs and reduced services on campus.

We can't deny that it could very quickly have those consequences. We're talking about revenue declines of 35% to 50% at certain institutions. That's a significant portion of the annual budget that would disappear in a very short space of time.

Mr. Joël Godin: What you're saying is that there's a risk for those institutions, which are also involved in the local economy. This has a significant impact on the local economy.

In that respect, these francophone minority regions are trying to survive. The current economic situation in Canada is not an enviable one.

What could we as a government do in the short term to preserve and safeguard the local economy? Are there any specific, quick measures that we should take?

Mr. Martin Normand: In our view, the first thing to do right off the bat is to make francophone students studying outside Quebec a priority cohort for the purposes of the measure announced last week.

You must understand that news such as this travels very quickly. In 24 to 48 hours, our foreign clientele know that measures will be introduced to limit the entry of international students to Canada. Students might therefore choose to study in other countries that are currently very competitive in the market. In the case of our institutions, we also have to consider Quebec. Mr. Miller clearly said that the province was currently under the cap that it set in this regard.

So we're afraid that francophone students who were considering studying outside Quebec may assume it will be virtually impossible to get a study permit and then decide to study in Quebec. That's a whole potential labour pool that could disappear.

Mr. Joël Godin: What you're in fact telling us is that there's a risk that all the upstream work that has been done for many years could be lost.

• (0930)

Mr. Martin Normand: That's exactly it.

Our institutional network has been actively involved in recruiting foreign students for 10 or 15 years. We've made giant strides, and that work must not be wasted.

Mr. Joël Godin: It's a very competitive sector, as we all know.

The Liberals announced during the election campaign that they would invest \$80 million a year in the action plan for official languages, the APOL. However, according to the announcement made in March 2023, if I'm not mistaken, it would more likely be \$30 million a year.

Have you received that \$30 million?

Mr. Martin Normand: As we all know, negotiations are under way with the provinces to renew the minority language education agreements.

Mr. Joël Godin: Have you received that \$30 million?

As I mentioned, an amount of \$30 million appears to be earmarked for the institutions in the action plan for official languages.

Mr. Martin Normand: That funding will be released on April 1 of this year.

Mr. Joël Godin: As I understand it, you haven't received that funding yet, but you don't mind the wait.

Is that correct?

Mr. Martin Normand: We hope that's resolved soon.

Mr. Joël Godin: We'll come back to that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Normand and Mr. Godin.

The next question comes from the Liberals. Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Normand.

What are the main obstacles that your member institutions are encountering, and what steps are you taking to resolve them?

Mr. Martin Normand: There are challenges in many sectors. Are you thinking of any specific sectors?

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Tell me about the three biggest obstacles.

Mr. Martin Normand: Public funding is obviously the first. The discussion about international students is part of that. Many institutions have turned to us because the percentage of public funding intended for post-secondary education in Canada has been declining for some time. The revenue structure has to be reviewed to ensure that the institutions can carry out their mandates.

For our institutions, there's also—

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Have you consulted the provinces about funding? This is a provincial jurisdiction after all.

Mr. Martin Normand: The ACUFC doesn't have a mandate to negotiate or talk to the provinces. Our members do so directly. I assure you that all our members are in direct and frequent contact with the department concerned with teaching and higher education in their provinces.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: That's great. What about the other challenges?

Mr. Martin Normand: The second challenge, which follows from the first, is that we need to ensure that our institutions continue to attract local and international clientele. To do that, they must have the resources they need to establish new programs that respond to changing socioeconomic situations and sociopolitical realities. They must have the resources in place so they can create new programs, but that also has to be done in co-operation with the provinces, to the extent that they have authority to approve new educational programs.

The third challenge is to continue enhancing the vitality of francophone communities. The communities have great expectations of their post-secondary educational institutions, and that's understandable. They are significant drivers of the local economy. They can also engineer community renewal so that language and identity are transmitted, as well as ongoing specialized workforce training in many fields.

In their ambition to assist the communities, our institutions must work hand in hand with the federal institutions that are responsible for enhancing their vitality.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: What role do your member institutions play in the economic development of francophone minority communities?

Mr. Martin Normand: I noted a number of member initiatives in my remarks.

For example, there are all the laboratories designed to support innovation in many economic sectors in partnership with local businesses and civil society organizations in particular. I'm thinking, for example, of Collège La Cité, which has an artificial intelligence lab and is establishing partnerships with local businesses. A post-secondary educational institution is a major, or even the principal, employer. That generates revenue and economic activity in the region.

Then there are rural institutions such as the Université Sainte-Anne, for example, which is fortunate to be a post-secondary educational institution located in a very small community with perhaps 1,000 students and nearly as many active staff members. This situation can support local shops and provide local businesses with the labour to occupy important positions that would otherwise be left vacant.

● (0935)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Normand.

What tools would you like to acquire to train the labour force?

Mr. Martin Normand: Our institutions would like to have additional resources in order to develop new programs to meet the needs of the market. Obviously, in some cases, new programs must be developed with professional associations. Consequently, negotiations must be conducted with those associations in the case of professions that are subject to standards. That has to be done in co-operation with the provinces.

However, accurate and current data on labour needs in the communities are necessary in order to do this correctly, and I'm not the only person who says so. All civil society organizations and economic actors in the Canadian francophone want data that will help them determine current labour shortages and the sectors affected by them.

With that data in hand, we'll be in a better position to design the strategies that should be used to target local labour needs more accurately.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

I now give the floor to the second vice-chair of this committee, Mr. Beaulieu, of the Bloc Québécois.

You have the floor for six minutes, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you very much for being with us, Mr. Normand.

Scrolling through your website earlier, I saw that Quebec colleges and universities were excluded. However, you say you represent the Canadian francophonie.

Do you think that Quebec isn't part of Canada or the Canadian francophonie?

Mr. Martin Normand: Our institutions wanted to organize a nationwide discussion to examine the realities of minority life. Our institutional network has many connections with Quebec institutions. In particular, we at ACUFC have forged ties with the Université de Montréal, the Université du Québec network and the Secrétariat du Québec aux relations canadiennes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's a good thing that you maintain ties. However, why don't you add the words "outside Quebec" if that's the actual situation?

Mr. Martin Normand: It was our members who decided there should be an association of all minority institutions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You can state that in all your news releases, but the fact remains that 90% of francophones live in Quebec, unless you consider Quebec as already being independent. I think you have to draw a distinction regarding Quebec when you refer to the Canadian francophonie.

Mr. Martin Normand: I'll make a note of your comment. We nevertheless make sure to state that our 22 institutions are located in 8 provinces outside Quebec. We take care to indicate that. However, we cultivate relations with Quebec institutions and establishments to ensure that we exchange messages and expertise.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I think it's always important to note that. Otherwise it's as though you were also speaking on behalf of Quebec's colleges and universities. Having said that, I'm not opposed to the idea of reunification.

With regard to the nationwide introduction of an intake cap on study permit applications, I agree with you that this is a big problem. It could be established, but wouldn't the solution be to exclude francophones from that measure? I also think that could concern Quebec francophones. Nothing would change if the intake cap wasn't introduced in Quebec.

Shouldn't an intake cap for study permits exclude francophones?

Mr. Martin Normand: That's one way of wording what we're proposing. The measure that was announced last week cited the example of master's and doctoral students who are excluded from the measure; that is to say, who are not affected by the cap. ACUFC views them as priority cohorts. That's why they aren't affected by this measure.

This is why we use IRCC's vocabulary. Rather than discuss exclusion, we request that francophones who come to study outside Quebec—I won't speak on behalf of Quebec because we don't represent it—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I was speaking for myself.

Mr. Martin Normand: We ask that francophones who come to study outside Quebec also be considered as a priority cohort. That would have the effect of relieving the provinces of responsibility for determining whether francophone institutions will receive study permits under the established cap.

We haven't discussed this dynamic that was introduced in the measure, by which I mean the fact that the provinces will be responsible for allocating the study permits among the institutions. Our view is that, if this aspect were removed and the federal government remained responsible for issuing study permits to foreign students outside Quebec in order to comply with what was announced in the francophone immigration policy two weeks ago, a lot of issues in the system would be resolved.

Certain actors would be removed from potential negotiations because the situation with the federal government would have been resolved and study permits would be allocated to other types of institutions that would also need them.

● (0940)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: What you're saying is that you would like the federal government to retain responsibility for issuing the study permits and not transfer that responsibility to the provinces outside Quebec.

Mr. Martin Normand: I actually mean that the study permits issued to students who will be studying in French outside Quebec wouldn't be affected by the cap that will be assigned to each of the provinces.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see. Perhaps we should see if you can join forces with Quebec.

The colleges and universities definitely play a crucial role in training economic actors, and they are economic actors too.

I'd like to know how all the universities designed by and for francophones are doing, institutions such as the Université de l'Ontario français, in Ontario, and the francophone universities in western Canada, the Université de Sudbury, for example.

Could you give us a snapshot of the situation? Are they all in trouble? Are they doing well?

Mr. Martin Normand: We aren't experts on the financial situation of each of our institutions. The people responsible for each of them will be able to answer you. The fact remains that there are challenges, and they are known to the public. Some concern the need for institutions to be able to rely on public funding so they can carry out their mission.

However, as I said earlier, our institutions are very innovative and resilient. They find solutions to problems so they can remain attractive despite the existing barriers in the system.

In addition to the international clientele, the local clientele is also very strong, and we need to ensure that the institutions are able to meet its needs first of all. That clientele must feel drawn to its institution and want to study there.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Have you established a network capable of assisting francophone minority communities in their economic development?

Do the colleges and universities have those programs? Is there an interaction with those communities in order to promote economic development as far as possible?

Mr. Martin Normand: Many of our members establish connections with the various local economic development organizations,

just as they do with the economic development agencies within the federal departments.

There's a communication channel, and there have been discussions. All actors understand that the post-secondary educational institutions are part of their community's economic picture. Consequently, they take part in those economic development discussions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Normand.

The next questions will be from the NDP.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for your testimony, Mr. Normand.

Do you know what percentage of the students enrolled at francophone institutions outside Quebec are international students?

Mr. Martin Normand: We conducted a study before the pandemic, and we know that there has been some growth since the health measures were lifted.

Before the pandemic, we estimated that there were approximately 5,000 students at all levels in our institutional network. That's not 5,000 new students in our network every year, but 5,000 students who were studying there. We now assume that the number ranges between 6,000 and 7,000.

We know that, in September 2022, approximately 5,000 study permits were issued for institutions in the Canadian francophone out of approximately 500,000 study permits issued across Canada. That represents approximately 1% to 2% of study permits issued.

The actual number is somewhat unclear because you have to take into account the fact that students won't necessarily go to classes in September just because they have a study permit.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see.

I'd like to go back to the francophone immigration policy that Mr. Miller announced on January 22 last.

If the policy remains as it was when it was announced, do you think francophone colleges and universities will suffer negative consequences such as reduced operations?

Could that possibly jeopardize the survival of those institutions?

Mr. Martin Normand: Once the provinces have determined how to distribute the study permits and the figures have been confirmed, we can say that the policy's introduction could result in a significant decline in the number of international students.

There could be a significant revenue loss for all our institutions, mainly those located in the provinces where the established cap results in specific consequences. I'm thinking here of Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and British Columbia. Those are the provinces that Mr. Miller mentioned in his announcement.

However, there's no guarantee that the provinces where the number of study permits hasn't reached the established cap will continue issuing to francophone institutions a number of study permits equal to the number of permits currently issued to them.

Until we know what the provinces are planning to do about the allocation of study permits, we won't know what that means from a revenue standpoint for the institutions even in the provinces where the cap allows some leeway.

That's why we're saying there's a chance that all our institutions could suffer revenue losses in the very short term.

● (0945)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Earlier you said that this news about the measures Canada has taken regarding international students was quickly spreading abroad.

Have you heard from your organization or the institutions you work with that people abroad, upon hearing the news, have reconsidered their plans to come and study in Canada or to apply for study permits?

Mr. Martin Normand: It's very anecdotal, but yesterday we heard that people were changing their plans to come and study at eight Canadian francophone institutions and that they instead intended to apply for study permits in Quebec because they felt they had a better chance of getting one.

The announcement was made barely a week ago, but the message is already spreading through the international networks. You should never underestimate the speed at which these things circulate. I'll give you an example.

When the Quebec government announced a cut to tuition fees for international students who were going to study specific disciplines in the regions, within 48 hours, recruiters from our institutions on the ground in Africa were being asked, "Why would I study in Moncton if I can get a scholarship to study in Quebec?" So we assume that the news that was announced last week is already out there.

In addition, if someone applies for a study permit on January 23, 24 or 25, that application won't be processed because it isn't accompanied by an attestation letter from the province. None of the provinces has been able to roll out in a few days the new system that IRCC is asking them to create.

That's why we're telling you that there's currently a de facto moratorium on the processing of study permits. Our partners at Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada sent a letter to Mr. Miller this week criticizing that moratorium-like state and asking him to allow continuing processing of study permits.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

We're talking about the decline of French and ways to guarantee its survival in our communities outside Quebec.

As the representative of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, do you think these measures will undermine both the institutions and our ability to resolve the labour shortages in our communities?

Do you think that the issue goes beyond what we're discussing today and that the policy could threaten the survival of French outside Quebec?

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes, I absolutely think that. We'll come back to it later.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the next round of questions.

Go ahead, Mr. Dalton.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much for your testimony, Mr. Normand.

Do you think the government just ad-libbed that announcement?

Mr. Martin Normand: I obviously wasn't in the IRCC offices or that of Mr. Miller during the discussions and so can't determine whether he did. What we know, however, is that a review of the policies and measures pertaining to the international student program has been in the pipeline since last summer.

Together with our partners in the post-secondary education sector, we actively participate in many consultations that IRCC conducts on various measures. The aim is to improve the integrity of the international student program and to maintain Canada's reputation as a premier destination.

That's why measures have been taken in recent months, such as the introduction of a new system for verifying letters of acceptance prepared by post-secondary educational institutions and the development of a framework for trusted institutions to expedite the processing of study permits where institutions are considered good actors. The minimum necessary income was recently increased for people wishing to enter Canada and study at an institution here.

Many things were already happening, and some measures are now being developed, while others are being rolled out. However, we haven't been able to gauge the impact of those measures. We had heard that a cap might be introduced, but we didn't know what it actually might be or the scope it might take. If the cap had been set for September 2023, the situation would have been different, but that wasn't the case. The result is a cap and a 35% reduction.

I admit we had neither heard nor anticipated that before the announcement last Monday.

● (0950)

Mr. Marc Dalton: It seems to have caused some chaos and disarray in the institutions, which are concerned about what's happening and are wondering what they're going to do.

You mentioned funding of \$90 million. Did I understand you correctly? Could you tell us more about that?

How much is the federal government currently granting the institutions?

Mr. Martin Normand: I was alluding to a promise that was made in the Liberal Party's platform in 2021 that there would be a permanent support fund of \$80 million a year for the post-secondary education sector. We expected it to make good on that promise in the 2022 budget, but that didn't happen. We expected it to appear in the action plan for official languages 2023-2028, and provision is made in the action plan for a support fund of \$121 million over four years, but we're now at \$30 million rather than \$80 million, and that's temporary rather than permanent.

Other envelopes are also provided to support post-secondary education through Canadian Heritage, such as the budget for an official languages in education program and those designed to support education infrastructure and other announced projects. However, the permanent support fund falls short of what was promised.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Would you please tell us a little about the inflation problem that post-secondary educational institutions are encountering?

Mr. Martin Normand: I believe inflation is everywhere. It affects our wallets as much as those of the post-secondary educational institutions, which have to take inflation into consideration in planning their budgets from year to year. I must say it's been significant in recent years, but it's levelling off now.

However, as inflation rose, some provinces, for example, froze tuition fees at post-secondary educational institutions. So sometimes measures limit the ability of institutions to generate new revenue to deal with inflation.

Mr. Marc Dalton: The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, the FCFA, has proposed that the francophone immigration target be increased.

If I understood you correctly, you said that approximately 2% of students currently at your institutions are foreign students.

Is that correct?

Mr. Martin Normand: I'm going to correct you there. Actually, 2% of the total number of study permits issued in Canada are issued to francophone institutions. Of the 500,000 international students in Canada, 5,000 are in our institutional network, which represents 1% to 2% of the total clientele. On average, approximately 14% of the clientele of our institutions is foreign students.

Mr. Marc Dalton: How has that number changed in the past 10 years?

Mr. Martin Normand: There has been some relative growth, not the same growth—

The Chair: Pardon me, Mr. Normand.

That's an excellent question, but we will have to come back to it later because time is up.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Drouin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Dalton started talking about numbers and I love numbers.

Mr. Normand, you said that before the pandemic nearly 5,000 international students were attending the colleges and universities that you represent.

Is that correct?

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes, that's correct.

In 2018-2019, according to the latest figures we have, we had approximately 5,000 at our 22 institutions.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I see.

We understand why the minister has reacted in the past few weeks. In Ontario alone, there were approximately 62,000 study permits for the entire college system in 2019, and that number increased to approximately 142,000 in 2022. That's more than double; it's nearly triple that number.

Are your members seeing the same increase? Do you still have roughly 5,000 international students? Has the number increased to 6,000 or 7,000 students, or even more?

• (0955)

Mr. Martin Normand: It hasn't been the same trajectory; I can guarantee you that.

There were 5,000 study permits before the pandemic. In September 2022, there were 5,000 new study permits for our institutional network. However, it's impossible to confirm that 5,000 foreign students wound up at our colleges and universities. That's a figure that would have to be verified with the institutions.

That's why we acknowledge that there has been an increase in the number of foreign students in our institutional network in recent years, but the numbers haven't just doubled in the past two years.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Since the minister's announcement, have you had any discussions with Ontario, for example, to ensure our colleges and universities are protected in the context of this measure?

Mr. Martin Normand: As I said earlier, ACUFC has no relations with the provinces, but our institutions have been in direct contact with Ontario's provincial authorities in recent days to discuss their concerns and to pass on the message that we're giving you today. Francophones should be part of a priority cohort and they should not be subject to the established cap.

That would make it easier for some provinces by removing the number of institutions from the equation, which would enable the other institutions to distribute more study permits.

Mr. Francis Drouin: We know the problem stems more from the private colleges and universities than the public ones. The CBC and Radio-Canada have reported several times on institutions that unfortunately promise certifications that in some instances aren't even accepted in the labour market. That has consequences.

Are you aware of that? Are you preparing more demands to ensure that governments regulate those kinds of institutions?

Even though we're discussing this problem, of which I believe, for the moment, you are somewhat a victim, I know we'll succeed. I very much hope that francophones will be able to be protected in this matter. This situation is being brought to your attention, and we're forced to take it into consideration.

Are you talking to your association's member colleges about the demands they may make to improve regulations and, consequently, the situation?

Mr. Martin Normand: We've been less active on that front. Our colleges have already discussed this with their provincial governments. They know that some actors are tarnishing the colleges' international reputations.

Although we've done less—because we choose our battles—Colleges and Institutes Canada, for example, our national anglophone and francophone counterpart representing the entire college sector, has done a lot of work on the issue to develop measures to deal with those kinds of recalcitrant institutions that undermine Canada's reputation.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Getting back to the main issue of international students, what economic contribution do you think those students make within your network?

Mr. Martin Normand: As I stated in my remarks, based on certain numbers, we can estimate that, in 2018-2019, the economic impact of foreign students amounted to \$300 million at our institutions alone. That seems like an enormous number, but it actually amounts to approximately \$60,000 per foreign student.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Does that \$300 million figure represent tuition fees alone?

Mr. Martin Normand: No, it includes tuition fees and housing expenses, but also the kind of spending generated by the presence of foreign students at our institutions, housing and private businesses.

Since we estimate the impact at \$300 million for 2018-2019, we may assume that it's a bit higher than that since minor growth has been observed in more recent years.

That has a significant impact, not just an economic impact that can be quantified, but also the kind of impact that's made by international students who occupy positions in rural and remote regions that wouldn't otherwise be occupied. We may therefore conclude that some small and medium-sized businesses, or SMEs, wouldn't be able to operate without the presence of foreign students on campuses.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I see.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

Would you please repeat the dollar amount of that impact? Is it \$380 million?

Mr. Martin Normand: It was \$300 million in 2018-2019.

The Chair: Great. Thank you very much.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

According to the last census, 35.3% of students who were eligible to attend francophone schools did not do so. I believe that figure should also take into account immersion schools, which are said to promote assimilation. That definitely has an impact on students who will be continuing their education at colleges and universities.

Is there a study or any data on the number of eligible students who attend colleges and universities?

• (1000)

Mr. Martin Normand: The number we often hear, the one we've previously seen circulating, is the number of graduates from francophone secondary schools in the country—I'm excluding immersion schools here—who then enrol at francophone post-secondary educational institutions in Canada. That number has declined to approximately 50%, for all kinds of reasons. It may be because the institutions are located too far away from students' homes, for example, or because their education would cost them too much.

As we all know, for various reasons, francophone post-secondary students in Canada are more indebted than anglophone students.

If students are faced with too many obstacles, it gets hard for them to choose to study in French at the post-secondary level. That's why programs must be made more attractive.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We're talking about institutions managed by and for francophones.

Aren't we?

Mr. Martin Normand: That's our 22 member institutions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The percentage for the immersion schools must be even lower. Do you think the 35% figure takes immersion schools into account?

Mr. Martin Normand: According to certain data tables prepared by Statistics Canada, that percentage does take immersion schools into account. However, the figure I can give you is the one concerning institutions managed by and for francophones from kindergarten to grade 12.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see.

We know that Quebec's anglophone universities have benefited enormously from the official language support programs. There was a massive imbalance until 1995.

According to certain data, for example, approximately 38% of funding was granted to Quebec's anglophone universities in 2017, including research funding. That's three or four times more than anglophones' demographic weight. Outside Quebec, the only study I have seen shows that the funding rate for francophones is lower than their demographic weight.

Do you use those numbers?

Mr. Martin Normand: We still use them in co-operation with the Association francophone pour le savoir, or Acfas.

The Chair: That's a good question, but your time is up, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I want to go back to the point I raised at the end of my intervention concerning the policy's impact on the future of our communities outside Quebec. I know people who have come to Canada to study in French and who are now contributing to our communities in many ways.

I'm extremely concerned about how the announced measure concerning francophone students will be implemented because I know how much we need people to come here.

What's your view on that subject?

Mr. Martin Normand: You're absolutely right. There are a lot of foreign student success stories. They came to Canada as foreign students, passed through our institutions, now occupy senior positions in the communities and are leaders of their francophone communities.

That's why I'm telling you that, if the number of foreign students falls sharply when classes resume in May or September, that will mean that many fewer graduates may be applying for permanent residence in Canada in two or three years. This is a number that's bandied about, but 90% of foreign students in our institutional network want to remain in Canada. That's a significant percentage, but, despite that, if the basin of origin significantly shrinks, far fewer foreign students will be able to choose that pathway to permanent residence.

I would also note that this is an objective of the francophone immigration policy. One of the performance indicators of that policy is growth in the number of francophone foreign students in Canada outside Quebec relative to the 2023 reference year. If the announced cap is implemented, we'd be starting at 30% or 35% under the measure used as the basic measure for assessing the policy's successes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Would you please repeat ACUFC's demand concerning the announcement that was made on January 22 last?

Mr. Martin Normand: We would like IRCC to consider francophones who wish to study outside Quebec as a priority cohort, as is the case of students at the master's and doctoral levels.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Normand.

There is enough time left for two four-minute questions.

Go ahead, Mr. Coden.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Normand, my colleague Mr. Drouin discussed the exponential increase in the number of immigrants who have come to study in Canada. It has skyrocketed. What impact is that having on francophone immigration? You said there had been an increase, but not as sharp. Can we say it's been a normal increase?

I don't mean to say the other increase isn't normal, but can you explain this to me and give me some numbers or an approximate idea?

Mr. Martin Normand: The most recent figures we have date back to before the pandemic. We don't have accurate figures on the current situation, but we could get them.

Ultimately this means that the more reasonable rate of increase in the number of international students at our institutions is a function of our strict management of the total number of students. Many of our institutions are located in rural or remote areas. They couldn't double, triple or quadruple the number of international students on their campuses overnight because there's no room. There is no established housing or services to accommodate them. This growth has occurred at a rate more consistent with the regular growth of the communities and institutions.

However, we've made great strides. Some 15 years ago, certain institutions had no international students at all, and they've had to establish appropriate structures. Yes, our institutions need to generate own-source revenues; we can't deny that, but they also have to contribute to the communities' economic and demographic development by making their own efforts to welcome students.

Mr. Joël Godin: You're leading me precisely where I wanted to go.

How many more foreign students can the institutions you represent take in? Can they take in 10%, 15% or 200% more? You have to take into account housing, social services and health care, among other things.

Mr. Martin Normand: Based on the numbers from the past two years, many of our institutions feel they have reached the limit of this unbridled growth; there could be slow growth. To contribute to francophone immigration you can't just focus on the number of students who enter the country; you also have to consider the number of students who remain.

We're discussing this with IRCC; you can't throw the baby out with the bath water. We're working together to come up with measures enabling us to ensure we have a better rate of transition to permanent residency for foreign students who remain in Canada. Much work remains to be done on this aspect in our institutional network.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Normand, what impact are all the measures and upheaval caused by IRCC having on economic development in your regions?

We've discussed the institutions, but now I want to talk about what's going on locally for the official language minority communities.

What impact is the policy having on the economic development of these regions? It seems to me these communities are really suffering right now.

Mr. Martin Normand: It's a simple answer. The result seems to be a possible labour shortage in the communities.

Mr. Joël Godin: So there is an impact on local businesses.

Mr. Martin Normand: It can definitely have an impact on local businesses. People have told us that, without the contribution of foreign students at some of our institutions in rural or remote communities, they would be forced to shut down as a result of a labour shortage. So the risks aren't limited to the institutions alone. A sharp decline in the number of foreign students could slow down the economic growth of francophone communities.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Normand.

I have another question for you, but I believe my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Serré, you have the floor for four minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Normand and Ms. Brouillette, thank you for the work you're doing at the national level. I enjoyed your comments.

Earlier you mentioned that francophone post-secondary educational institutions in Canada have done good things in recent years. The percentage of international students is very large because we have systematically focused on labour.

That percentage is different for the anglophone post-secondary educational institutions. In Ontario, 44% of funding for post-secondary educational institutions comes from the government. That's one of the lowest percentages in Canada. The provincial government has frozen funding and has not accepted its share of responsibility.

Earlier Mr. Drouin said that we've taken in an additional 360,000 foreign students in the past two or three years. There are now 900,000 of them. The anglophone post-secondary educational institutions are what are called "puppy mills". There has been fraud. We've heard appalling stories about students who have come to study at private institutions in Ontario but have not earned a diploma, or have received an invalid one if they did. The province has done nothing about it.

Mr. Miller has been clear about that subject since he has been minister.

According to your members, what has been the impact of the underfunding of post-secondary educational institutions in Ontario? I know you're not making any claims on behalf of the provinces seeking to attract more foreign students, but I'd like to hear your observations on the subject.

● (1010)

Mr. Martin Normand: As you said, public funding for post-secondary education has declined. There has been a constant decrease

across the country in the past 10 or 15 years. Ontario is the province that provides the least funding for its post-secondary educational institutions, but there has been a decline across the country, and that has forced institutions to diversify their revenue sources.

In the case of our francophone institutions, there are no bad actors such as those mentioned earlier. There are none in our institutional network. However, our institutions nevertheless recruit actively, transparently, ethically and credibly in francophone pools. They often join forces with civil society organizations that also conduct promotional activities abroad to inform potential students of the reality that awaits them should they decide to come and study in a minority francophone community in Canada.

Considerable assistance and support are provided to ensure that francophone students arriving in a francophone minority community are properly welcomed or received and are aware of what awaits them. These efforts are based on transparent and ethical discussions with the clientele. In certain cases, we obviously contribute to funding for the universities, but we also contribute to the vitality and economic development of the communities that host those institutions and students.

Mr. Marc Serré: The federal government has no idea who the bad actors are because the provinces are responsible for regulating post-secondary educational institutions.

Earlier you noted that the federal government had added \$4.1 billion to its action plan, doubling action plan funding since 2015. That's something that no other party has committed to doing.

Can you briefly tell us about the additional funding that the federal government has granted for infrastructure and post-secondary education?

Our government still has to make good on its commitment regarding the \$80 million. What has the government done so far?

Mr. Martin Normand: Negotiations are under way with the provinces. So we're awaiting the outcome of those negotiations. We hope all that will be resolved promptly so there's no discrepancy in the funding years and the funding provided under the action plan is actually released to the institutions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings this meeting to an end.

Mr. Normand, thank you for taking part in this exercise. Thanks as well to Ms. Brouillette, who was with you.

Just in closing, I want to inform committee members that we will have at least one witness in the first hour on Monday. For the second hour, my letter of invitation is already on its way to the Commissioner of Official Languages. Please note that this is at short notice so we will see what happens. Depending on whether the Commissioner is available or not as a result of this very short notice, in

the second hour, we will have either a discussion on committee business or a meeting with the Commissioner.

Thank you, everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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