

Number of Indian students drops after Ottawa ends spouse work permit program

Marriages linked to immigration to Canada were advertised in Indian newspapers, dating apps: report

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The number of Indian undergraduate students applying to come to Canada has dropped over the past few years, in part because Ottawa ended a program granting the spouses of international students work permits, an internal government communication shows.

The communication discloses how marriages of convenience by some Indian students had enabled their spouses to accompany them to this country to work and to help them pay for their studies.

A 2025 e-mail report, obtained under access to information laws, to immigration department officials from Canada's High Commission in New Delhi discusses a number of integrity issues involving Indian students, including marriages of convenience.

Marriages linked to immigration to Canada were advertised in Indian newspapers and dating apps, according to the report.

But a change in the rules in 2024 by then-immigration minister Marc Miller closed this avenue to Canada for international students' spouses. The communication in March last year, from a Canadian diplomat specializing in migration, says that after Ottawa stopped issuing open work permits to accompanying spouses of most undergraduates in 2024, some Indian students opted instead for countries with such spousal visas, such as Germany.

The e-mail was sent to Sean McLuckie, IRCC director, irregular migration and risk intelligence, and another senior Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship official. It came from Han Duan, first secretary (migration) in Canada's High Commission to India in New Delhi. "Given the high cost of studying and living in Canada, many Indian applicants relied on marriages of convenience to secure financial support in exchange for spousal open work permits. This practice was widely advertised in Indian newspapers and on dating apps," Ms. Duan's e-mail said.

Since the 2024 introduction of restrictions by Ottawa, many Indian study permit applicants "have shifted to countries that still permit spousal visas, with significant increases reported in Germany, Sweden and Finland,"

she added.

The e-mail doesn't include any specific data on this shift. However, according to Ms. Duan, Britain, Australia and New Zealand have reported declines in Indian study permit applications after implementing similar restrictions on visas for spouses of students.

Richard Kurland, an immigration lawyer who obtained the e-mail through an access to information request, said Canada can pick who it wants to come here to study and "that should mean only the people who can afford to study in Canada without working." Study permits "should not be a dating trampoline to Canada," Mr. Kurland added.

The number of Indian study permit holders dropped to 93,840 in 2025 from 188,125 in 2024 and 277,950 in 2023, according to IRCC figures, reducing a key revenue stream for many colleges and universities.

Syed Hussan, executive director at Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, said he thought the drop in numbers was because "people are choosing not to go to countries where they cannot go with their families." He said another reason why study permit applications have dropped is that immigration rules are unpredictable. "Migrants arrive under one set of rules and then those are

changed halfway into their permits," he added.

The federal government tightened rules for international students in January, 2024, including ending most spousal visas for undergraduates. In January, 2025, it further tightened the rules limiting open work permits to spouses of international students who are enrolled in master's programs that are 16 months or longer, doctoral programs or select professional programs.

An open work permit allows spouses to work for any employer in Canada, except those barred for failing to comply with conditions or those offering striptease, erotic dance, escort services or erotic massages. In a statement, IRCC said the government recognizes the role international students play "in supporting research, innovation and economic growth."

"Over the past two years, reforms to improve the International Student Program may have lowered approval rates. These measures were aimed at strengthening the integrity of the International Student Program, and at better protecting genuine students," said IRCC spokesperson Jeffrey MacDonald in a statement.

He said IRCC officers are trained to identify fraud, including in marriages, common-law

and conjugal relationships, with measures to detect non-genuine relationships across a range of immigration programs. He said if an immigration officer is not satisfied that the relationship is genuine, or was entered into primarily to obtain status in Canada, an application would be refused.

"Enforcement action can be taken, which includes issuing removal orders to a foreign national or permanent resident who commits marriage fraud on the basis of misrepresentation. This could in turn lead to their removal from Canada," he said.

Ms. Duan's e-mail report to IRCC raises a number of integrity issues with some Indian students. She said that there had been a drop in not just the number but the quality of Indian students applying to go to Canada after restrictions were introduced to study permits in 2024 and 2025.

She said there were indications that some Indians who had applied for permits to study in Canada did not have the required proficiency in English, despite having language qualifications on paper.

An exercise to test the integrity of the study permit system highlighted "serious concern regarding language testing" among Indian study permit applicants, the e-mail from Ms. Duan said.