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• (1635)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

As René Arseneault noted at our last meeting, he will not be chairing today's meeting. Consequently, I will chair this 67th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

In accordance with Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on April 21, 2023, the committee is meeting to continue its study on increasing francophone immigration to Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format in accordance with the House order of June 15, 2023. Members may attend in person or by using the Zoom application.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I'd like to pass on some instructions to the witnesses and members.

Before speaking, please wait for me to recognize you by name. If you are participating in the meeting by videoconference, click on the microphone icon to activate it. Please mute your microphone when not speaking.

As far as interpretation is concerned, those present by Zoom have a choice at the bottom of their screen between the floor, English and French. Those in the room can use their headphones and select the desired language channel.

Although this room is equipped with an efficient audio system, it can generate feedback that is extremely harmful to the interpreters and can cause them serious injury. The most frequent cause of feedback is a headset that is positioned too close to a microphone. We therefore ask all participants to handle their headsets cautiously, particularly when their microphones or those of their neighbours are switched on. To prevent incidents and protect the interpreters' hearing, I encourage participants to ensure that they speak clearly into the microphones assigned to them and avoid handling their earpieces by placing them on the table, away from their microphones, when not using them.

A reminder that all comments by members should be addressed through the chair.

Members present in the room who wish to speak are asked to raise their hand, and members on Zoom are asked to use the "raise

hand" function, in order to do so. The clerk of the committee and I will do our best to maintain the speaking order.

Thank you for your patience and especially your understanding and cooperation here today, particularly since we have a new chair.

Pursuant to our routine motion respecting the required connection tests, I would like to inform the committee that all the witnesses conducted those tests before the meeting.

Now I would like to welcome our witnesses.

First of all, we have Luisa Veronis, Associate Professor from the University of Ottawa.

From the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, we have Martin Normand, Director, Strategic Research and International Relations. Thanks to you as well for being here.

By videoconference, we have Francesco Viglione, Director General of the Multicultural Association Chaleur Region.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

We will begin with remarks from our witnesses, each of whom will have five minutes.

We will start with you, Ms. Veronis. We are listening.

Dr. Luisa Veronis (Associate Professor, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Good afternoon.

Thank you very much for your invitation. It is truly an honour to be here and to speak with the members of this committee.

I am aware of the importance the Canadian government attaches to francophone immigration and to all investments that have been made in the past 20 years, particularly in the service development area.

I am going to address three main points, which correspond to the three parts of the motion.

The first point concerns support services for persons wishing to file an immigration application. First of all, I congratulate you for opening an immigration office in Cameroon. In one of my speeches last year, I said we needed to open more offices, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nevertheless, candidates wishing to file immigration applications can only do so online. However, the interface may cause problems for filers. The system has become very complicated. Information is available only online and procedures are often long, difficult and confusing. The process may also be a barrier for potential filers. There's also the fact that the information, classes and scoring in express entry are subject to change. It's all confusing.

Incidentally, I conducted an interview for a project earlier this summer in which an agent told me that it was hard to keep up to date and provide information even for an expert like her. Perhaps the department should consider organizing webinars to show and explain to applicants how to prepare and submit their applications, and even make people available to them who can answer questions and meet specific needs. It should also consider employing agents who are trained by the government to prevent scams. I often receive emails from people in Africa who want to come here and who are desperate. They've been scammed several times and have paid a lot of money to unofficial actors. There are problems with the present system and improvements should be made to it.

We should also provide support to those people who are already in Canada on temporary study or work permits. I'm thinking, in particular, of foreign students, who are prime candidates. They encounter many issues, notably the fact that they have to file two applications: one for a post-graduation permit and a second for a resident permit. This process should be facilitated and expedited. Applicants also face unreasonable delays. For example, they must have one year of professional experience in their field when they are students. All of this causes problems. I genuinely think that students who have a Canadian degree are the best suited candidates. Having been a bilingual international student, I can assure you that facilitates matters.

In addition to all that, the government should simply adopt a more radical initiative and completely change the francophone immigration policy system by separating it from general immigration to Canada, which is intended for anglophones and English speakers. That would help vastly accelerate and facilitate everything for everyone. There are other options, such as facilitating and accelerating family reunification, where numbers are lagging, simplifying procedures for economic immigration candidates and having only one class, for example. I've already discussed the student issue.

The second point concerns resources and support in Canada. Pre-departure services are little known and underused. I think we really have to provide better information for people waiting to come to Canada. In the course of my research, many participants told me that they would have benefited considerably from access to those services. However, they were unaware they even existed. The government has invested in this area, and I think it's an outstanding service, but it's underused. I would also propose that support services be expanded for international students, and even to temporary work permit holders, to facilitate and accelerate their transition and integration.

I had intended to discuss some of the recommendations regarding employment, but I don't have much time left.

• (1640)

The final point I want to make is about increasing the rate of applicant approvals. Here I would go back to my suggestion that we create a separate francophone immigration system—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Please wrap up, Ms. Veronis.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I would also suggest that we consider expediting opportunities for international students by granting them direct access to permanent residence upon graduation.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you.

Ms. Veronis, you will be able to continue your remarks when the members ask you questions. I'm unfortunately the timekeeper and have to run a tight ship. You had an additional 25 seconds.

Mr. Normand, you have the floor for five minutes. I'll be as tolerant with you as I was with Ms. Veronis.

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

I want to thank you for your invitation to participate in the committee's work.

Canada has introduced policies that are designed to promote the recruitment and intake of the international clientele of postsecondary institutions and that are warranted by our expectations of the economic and social integration potential of postsecondary graduates. That's equally true for the clientele attending postsecondary institutions in francophone minority regions.

According to a survey conducted in 2020, more than 90% of the international clientele of member institutions of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, or ACUFC, intend to look for employment in Canada upon completing their study programs. That figure is greater than the Canadian average.

This percentage, although impressive, obscures the challenges facing that clientele and those institutions. Just imagine how much more support those institutions, particularly the 22 members of the ACUFC, could provide to the international clientele with their educational plans in Canada and how much more they could contribute to the collective work done on francophone immigration.

At the very start, the government put the granting of study permits on its agenda in response to the concerted efforts of many stakeholders. It was an established fact that the refusal rate of study permits requested by African applicants, particularly those from francophone countries, was far higher than in other recruitment pools.

Some corrective measures have begun to be introduced. At the start of the September 2022 term, the acceptance rate of study permit applications from African countries improved slightly relative to previous years. ACUFC subsequently developed constructive ties with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, in order to coordinate its efforts more effectively with those of the postsecondary institutions. In addition, in cooperation with IRCC and Global Affairs Canada, ACUFC is developing new promotional initiatives for the international clientele and with various teams concerned within the departments in Canada and abroad.

The institutions are also providing many services to the international clientele to support those students in their academic programs. For example, pre-departure support and post-arrival orientation and integration services are now offered, including support in finding housing, achieving academic success and preparing for the labour market. Some institutions also provide support for students wishing to transition to permanent residence.

However, the international clientele still faces many systemic barriers. Many institutions are taking action to expand the scope of their services and to foster ties between the international clientele and the francophone communities, which is one of the keys to an eventual successful integration. To continue retaining a portion of that clientele in Canada, we have to come up with a systemic, coherent, effective and ethnic approach in which the academic paths that international francophone students follow are viewed as part of a plan for society in which ties are established among the educational institutions, community service organizations, employers and the community as a whole.

There are good reasons to invest in these efforts. The postsecondary institutions' international clientele forms a major pool of potential candidates for permanent residence, a pool that can contribute to the francophone immigration objectives of the communities and governments and meet our critical labour needs. Consequently, federal institutions must be called upon and encouraged to adopt various positive measures designed to support postsecondary institutions in their efforts to help expand francophone immigration.

This is why we are making two recommendations today.

First, we recommend that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, develop innovative positive measures to cooperate to a greater degree with minority francophone postsecondary institutions. This effort should expressly acknowledge, possibly in a francophone immigration policy, the role of the postsecondary institutions in achieving government and community objectives, as well as their shared responsibilities for the intake, success and support of the international clientele.

Second, we recommend that the federal government establish a permanent support fund for the francophone minority postsecondary sector the criteria of which should acknowledge the jurisdiction of the provinces, while allowing institutions to use the funding raised to develop foundational measures designed to consolidate and expand their activities.

The vitality of the francophone minority communities depends in part on postsecondary institutions that have the capacity to act in

adequately meeting the needs and addressing any issues that arise. Permanent federal government support for postsecondary institutions is essential to ensuring that strong institutions can serve all communities, which have the resources to assist the federal government in meeting the targets it has set for itself, particularly with regard to francophone immigration.

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Martin Normand: The postsecondary institutions devote considerable time and effort to recruiting, taking in, training, retaining and supporting the international clientele as they settle in the communities. Governments have a collective responsibility to ensure that they can continue this work, particularly in circumstances in which francophone immigration targets will increase.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Normand.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Viglione, from the Multicultural Association Chaleur Region, who is attending by videoconference.

Mr. Francesco Viglione (Director General, Multicultural Association Chaleur Region): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Multicultural Association Chaleur Region to take part in this discussion, which I hope will assist you in forming a clear understanding of the dynamics contributing to rising francophone immigration. I hope I have answers for all your questions.

My team and I experience immigration every day. We play a vital role in integrating newcomers. We work hard to settle and ensure the economic integration of newcomers to the Chaleur region. Our community is growing every day with the influx of permanent residents, international students and temporary workers. Francophone immigration is a source of cultural dynamism that brings with it new traditions, new arts and new perspectives to our already rich and varied cultural landscape.

The Multicultural Association is one of the four centres in Canada that welcome francophone refugee clients who mostly come from Africa. Canada affords refugees the opportunity to build new lives thanks to our collective efforts. The francophone and Acadian communities want to take in, integrate and include refugees whether they speak French or not.

Francophone immigration reinforces our existing communities and offers francophones and francophiles from around the world a land of welcome where they can flourish, make their contribution and form an integral part of our Canadian family. By welcoming more francophones, we invest in the continued existence of the French language and culture in Canada.

My team and I provide support for the intake and orientation services offered to immigrants. We provide employment support, social and cultural integration assistance, family services and emergency support. Our focus is on professional and linguistic integration. In our region, we strive to encourage citizens to open up and discover these new cultures and this new labour force that has come from elsewhere. We establish partnerships with employers to facilitate placements for francophone immigrants in positions consistent with their qualifications.

Francophone immigration also affords undeniable economic benefits. These newcomers are often highly qualified and bring with them invaluable skills that help grow our economy. They establish businesses, innovate and participate actively in our local prosperity.

As an association, we attend Destination Canada forums to promote our regions and francophone immigration to Canada. Through these forums, we promote other provinces where it is possible to live in French outside Quebec. We have encouraged newcomers to settle in our province and start up businesses while retaining the French language.

Together with La Ruche, we also offer a mentoring program staffed with experts. We provide necessary services and tools to jumpstart businesses so that newcomers and students can form a clearer understanding of the Canadian system and thus make a comfortable start.

Thanks to immigration programs such as New Brunswick's strategic initiative component, skilled francophone workers who have the necessary education level and occupational experience can gain access to permanent residence and thus contribute to the province's economy.

Issues do arise, of course. Our clients are currently experiencing credential recognition problems. We have French teachers from Africa who are not allowed to exercise their occupation despite the labour shortage in that sector. A major step forward has been taken for francophone health sector workers, who may now practise their profession as professional nurses thanks to recruitment missions and international agreements. However, most employers are anglophone, and that is also a handicap for francophone newcomers looking for their first jobs.

As I explained, our association assists newcomers even before they arrive and until they are completely integrated. For example, we also have children who enter a new school system and have to get used to a new culture, which may be very different from that of their country of origin. Being an immigrant myself and having lived in various countries, I can say today that Canada is an immigration and integration model. It is important both to raise and maintain the level of francophone immigration.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, francophone immigration to Canada is a good thing, a major asset to our country. However, it requires a thoughtful and balanced approach based on respect for our values and our linguistic heritage. However, delays in the federal government's processing of files should be shorter.

I am certain that, together, we can build a strong, inclusive and prosperous francophone Canada that shines on the international stage.

Thank you very much.

• (1650)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much.

We will now begin our first round.

The four members will have six minutes each for questions and answers. I should inform you right off the bat that, if you have any information or documentation for us, please send it to the clerk, who will forward it to the participants, by which I mean all the members around this table.

We will begin with Bernard Généreux from the Conservative Party.

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

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Veronis, you mentioned a radical option: dividing the Department of Immigration in two. That's a major undertaking you're proposing. The idea would be to treat francophone immigration to Canada differently from anglophone immigration. As you know, for all immigrants to Canada, the number of files still awaiting processing is approximately 1.2 million or 1.5 million. I don't know the exact figure, but we know that 1 million files were submitted last year, and the numbers will have increased, not decreased.

If we remove francophones from the present immigration system, with which we're familiar, with all its faults, what really important changes do you think could be made to the processing of files? What else do you think we should do to make it solely for francophones? That's my first question.

• (1655)

Dr. Luisa Veronis: Yes, it would be a complicated exercise, and I understand the challenge it represents. However, it seems to me that our immigration policy was based and developed on the needs of Canada as a whole. That policy actually does more to serve the anglophone or English-speaking communities. The needs are very different. Those of the francophone communities are essentially demographic, cultural, linguistic and so on. However, the immigration system focuses on economic needs, which raises barriers.

Francophone immigration is based on classes, needs, criteria and eligibility. That's true of the system as a whole, which raises barriers. Consequently, there are delays. If we want to expedite and increase immigration, we'll have to facilitate the process.

The needs of different. I think the key is to develop a system that's consistent with needs. I don't think the present system meets the needs of francophone communities.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: In what I would consider an ideal world, what would that look like, based on what organization chart? Do you think there should be two immigration departments or only one that would have two branches independent of each other but that would pool services in certain cases?

I understand your point of view, and I'm not necessarily opposed to it, but I'm trying to see what it would entail. If we conducted that exercise—which seems to me unlikely, even though I think it's important to explore it—there would be some kind of duplication, or the department would be divided in two, whereas it's already under stress, particularly as a result of the number of immigrants entering Canada. However, there are fundamental immigration and service elements on both sides.

What main elements do you think that one branch should have but not necessarily the other?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: This wouldn't be a duplication. We're talking here about the immigration part, applications and their processing. With regard to problems that arise, I could cite, as an example, what has happened to international students from sub-Saharan Africa. The problem is actually that one component isn't aware that francophone immigration is taking place. Consequently, those applications are denied for whatever reason. It's already clear that there's a problem and that things aren't working.

So the idea isn't to duplicate anything. There could simply be a francophone immigration class that would function differently.

I haven't thought about an org chart, about who would do what or about responsibilities. The idea would actually be to do away with classes that don't apply to francophone immigration.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Normand, what do you think about that idea? Do you think the separation between anglophone and francophone immigration would improve the processing of study permit applications for people wanting to study at your colleges?

Mr. Martin Normand: I find the idea interesting, but I think there has to be a pre-established system for international students that would have credibility abroad and, at the very least, entail some coordination in application processing. Yes, we could imagine a system that would give precedence to the processing of study permit applications from francophone students. However, the international postsecondary education market is very competitive and we shouldn't get to a point where some applicants may view the possibility of establishing a separate system for francophones as a practical opportunity that might open the door to fraudulent practices.

I completely understand that this will be part of the conversation, but let's be frank: there's a lot of concern about fraud in study permit applications to Canada. We at ACUFC are aware of this, and our colleagues at other postsecondary sector associations are as well. At the very least, we have to ensure that the processing of study permit applications is coordinated and, especially, that departmental authorities are able to conduct an intradepartmental dialogue to prevent those problems.

• (1700)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Normand.

I now give the floor to Marc Serré from the Liberal Party of Canada.

Go ahead, Mr. Serré.

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

I'd like to welcome our three witnesses. Thank you for contributing to our deliberations on the federal government's role in improving francophone immigration.

Thank you, Mr. Normand and the 22 members of your association, for the work you're doing in the colleges and universities across the country. My first questions are for you.

You made two recommendations. You mentioned positive measures and the permanent support fund for the francophone minority postsecondary sector. We heard a lot about positive measures during our study of Bill C-13 and in the course of the Treasury Board's work.

Do you have any specific recommendations for us regarding positive measures? You mentioned pre-departure support and post-arrival orientation and integration services as well as retention and a whole series of ways to attract students.

Would you please tell us more specifically about the positive measures that we should take based on what you've heard from your members?

Mr. Martin Normand: Of course.

You have to understand that postsecondary institutions are called upon to play many roles in welcoming foreign students, ranging from recruitment to support for study permits, intake, housing, integration and even fitting in with the communities to ensure that the students have an enriching academic experience on our campuses. That may also include support in transitioning to permanent residence.

However, IRCC should consider certain positive measures. First, the department should reconsider the possibility of temporary residents using institutional services reserved for permanent residents. In Canada, virtually all those services are reserved for permanent residents, which constitutes a barrier to the proper integration of foreign students in communities. Those services are not available to foreign students who might have questions about their pathway to potential immigration and who would like to improve their meshing or integration in the community or find contacts with employers or community organizations. Some services are offered at our institutions, but the range of services is not always equivalent to what's offered at anglophone institutions. So there are some barriers. Summing up, to overcome this first obstacle, we should allow temporary residents, at least francophone students, to use certain services reserved for permanent residents.

The second positive measure might be highly technical in nature, but our institutions would be delighted to have it: the government should ensure that data is continuously shared between IRCC and our institutions. The study permit issue has received a lot of coverage. IRCC has a lot of data on the processing of study permits that doesn't reach the institutions. In many cases, an institution learns that the study permit of a potential student has been denied when it sees, in September, that the student is absent. This complicates student body planning. For our institutions, which plan for the numbers of foreign students they will be taking in over the long and even medium terms, it's frustrating to have that planning disrupted by decisions that immigration officers make. It complicates matters for our institutions. Consequently, data on study permits should therefore be communicated more directly and continuously before their studies begin.

Data on the number of graduates who apply for and are granted permanent residence should also be shared more freely once they've completed their studies. Institutions aren't informed, after students graduate, as to whether their immigration efforts have been successful. If they were informed, the institutions could determine whether their programs are appropriate or whether any changes should be made to ensure that permanent residence applicants aren't put at a disadvantage by the fact that they've studied at a francophone institution. Could certain changes to their academic programs facilitate approval of their applications? Our institutions would also welcome this continuous data-sharing.

• (1705)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

Ms. Veronis, you said that the immigration office that was opened in Cameroon was a positive step, but you also mentioned that immigration applications are filed solely online, over the Internet, and that this causes problems.

Do you have any specific recommendations regarding application processing? Should we establish a hybrid system, since the fact that everything is done online causes problems? Do you have any specific recommendations on that?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: My understanding is that all immigration applications are filed online. Information is also available online. I receive information requests from individuals in Africa. When I browse the site, I constantly come back to the same point. There's a kind of loop, and I can't go any further. I don't think I could file my application today because it's done online. So just imagine what it's like for African applicants.

People in Africa don't do business over the Internet. They communicate with each other orally. Even credentialed people like doctors and engineers have trouble finding information because of the way the site is built. The same is true of certain immigration officers here. The person I spoke with, and who helps people from there, couldn't find all the information.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much, Mr. Serré.

Now it's the turn of Mr. Beaulieu from the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to our guests.

My first question concerns recruitment, which you discussed at length. It seems to me that a lot of work has to be done in this area. Also, for social and workplace integration purposes, isn't it easier for francophone immigrants to settle in regions with strong francophone communities and jobs in French, as well as institutions that operate at least partly in French?

Mr. Martin Normand: If the overall objective, as outlined in the Official Languages Act, is to increase the demographic weight of francophones, we'd have no business choosing the communities that deserve an increase in demographic weight.

I understand that successful integration often depends on institutional completeness. However, if the problem in certain communities is a shortage of French-language institutions and services for the purpose of taking in and integrating newcomers, the first step is to solve that problem and to ensure there's a range of appropriate services with which to welcome and integrate them. That way, everyone can benefit from the collective efforts made to increase the demographic weight of francophones in Canada.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I absolutely agree.

The objective is to provide support across the country. Consequently, we can't choose the place. Certain communities may be better off than others, but it's precisely the ones that are less well off that are more in need.

There are other options, such as pre-departure services. We need more matching. I think employment is the major challenge, especially in the small communities where there are no institutions where people can work in French, for example. Consequently, immigrants should have access to pre-departure services before arriving here so they can avoid all the issues that delay integration, such as excessive rents, the cost of living and so on.

There's also the language issue. Applicants should be given more information about what the communities are really like. I think family reunification, particularly in less well off communities, could also be a support because people arriving thus already have someone. That can facilitate employment in the family business, for example.

So there are many measures that can be introduced on a case-by-case basis, and surprises can occur. That's the beauty of immigration: people's creativity, the way they adapt and their results, like those that Mr. Viglione mentioned.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In that case, would you consider promoting family reunification for francophone immigrants as well?

• (1710)

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I definitely think it should be supported.

We know from various studies that family separation harms people, both here and in their home country, for all kinds of reasons. Family reunification should therefore be reinforced, expedited and simplified. Instead of raising complications and delaying files, simplifying the process could create the best integration conditions for families that are reunited. That would also help avoid problems such as living in a community that lacks services and institutions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's excellent.

I understand the distinction you're making, to the extent that we don't want to harm places that have no francophone institutions. However concentrating francophone immigration in regions where there are more francophones and francophone institutions could strengthen those regions without however excluding regions where there are fewer people. That might nevertheless spill over to other regions and facilitate matters.

I don't know whether you agree with me.

The other thing?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Beaulieu, but Mr. Viglione would like to answer your question.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: All right.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): In that case, the floor is yours, Mr. Viglione.

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Thank you very much.

I just wanted to add that there's considerable ignorance outside Canada. I'm an immigrant, and, before arriving in Canada, I thought that people spoke French only in Quebec.

Today we do a lot of prep work for arrivals because, as an association, we really want newcomers to integrate in the best conditions. We also try to prepare people on topics such as rents, taxes and so on.

Many people outside Canada really believe that French is spoken solely in Quebec. So a considerable amount of linguistic promotion work also has to be done in the recruitment forums.

I really wanted to say that. I'm a direct witness of that belief. I thought that no one in Canada spoke French outside Quebec.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In 30 seconds, that'll be tough.

On this matter, there's the territorial model, under which linguistic planning is based more on individual rights. Sooner or later you sort of return to a kind of territorial model because it can't be denied that French is more likely to be viable where there are concentrations of francophones.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: We could?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): That's kind of you, Ms. Veronis, but we're running short of time. You may be able to answer that question during Mr. Beaulieu's next round or in responding to someone else.

Ms. Ashton, welcome. You have six minutes.

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

Welcome to all the witnesses.

Ms. Veronis, you said the francophone immigration system should be separated from the anglophone system. Would you please explain to us why you think that would be a good idea?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: As I said, the immigration system is made very complicated by the complexity of society today and the fact that Canada is an attractive country for many people wishing to build new lives through new opportunities. However, there are fewer francophones in the world than people who speak other languages. A complicated immigration system isn't necessary, particularly since, as I said earlier, the needs of francophone immigrants are different from those of immigrants in general. Complex general immigration criteria are being applied to a group with a different profile and needs. So there's a kind of discrepancy between the two.

What does that kind of system look like? I admit I hadn't thought about it. You could establish a simplified class, as in express entry, but for francophones, by doing away with the points system and all that. I think the process is so complex that it can definitely be simplified in one way or another. You have to look at needs and the applicant pool, then facilitate it all so that it works.

• (1715)

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see. Thank you very much.

Mr. Normand, we're aware of the lack of funding in your sector.

Would you please explain to us how that lack of funding has affected your ability to assist international students in settling in Canada and addressing the labour shortage at francophone postsecondary education institutions?

Mr. Martin Normand: Thank you.

I referred in my remarks to a poll conducted in 2020, according to which 90% of the clientele wanted to stay in Canada. In that same study, international clients were asked about the types of services they had received from their postsecondary institutions. The vast majority of them fortunately said they wanted to stay in Canada because they felt they had been well received, welcomed and supported by their postsecondary institutions, but there are still deficiencies that must be addressed, with regard to cultural competencies, for example. We have to ensure that the range of services is well suited to certain cultural realities.

With regard to modes of communication—Ms. Veronis referred to this a little earlier—not everyone uses the Internet in the same way. Certain methods of communication may not be systematically available to the international clientele. In short, certain improvements should be made within our institutions.

Despite all their goodwill, there are problems associated with the public funding of postsecondary institutions. That's true at all institutions and all the more so at francophone institutions, which are disadvantaged as a result of funding formulas. All institutions have to make tough investment choices. As I said, despite all their goodwill, they don't always have the necessary resources to develop the range of services they would like to offer, including services to their international clientele.

Some types of services may cost more to develop or provide. I'm thinking, for example, of immigration consultants, who could help international students obtain permanent residence once they've graduated. That kind of service is very costly, and very few of our institutions currently offer it. Some can because they've received additional funding from their province to do that work. It's nevertheless a very costly service.

You can imagine others, but there will be limits on what they can offer as long as permanent additional funding is unavailable to postsecondary institutions.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see. Thank you.

I'd like to question Ms. Veronis and Mr. Viglione on the issue of gender.

We talk a lot about welcoming families or people who come to work in fields subject to labour shortages. Sometimes, however, we attract only one member of the family, in particular, the father. There's no support for meeting the personal or professional needs of the woman. We're experiencing this kind of situation in my region.

Do you think we need to include a gender perspective in the work we're doing to welcome and support immigrants?

Is Canada currently doing what's necessary in this area, or should it do more?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: Here's a quick answer to your question.

I think the gender issue is important, particularly because families come from different cultures. What I wanted to mention to Mr. Beaulieu a little earlier was the idea that many immigrants settle in a community together precisely in order to establish a community.

Now I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Viglione.

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Canada is already doing a good job.

As an association dedicated to integrating immigrants, we try to establish support groups. The people we help come from different ethnicities and cultures. Since we also work with a refugee clientele, we take in women who have been battered or raped and who are accompanied by their children. With the help of federal government support, we really try to create that inclusion.

I think we have a very good base, and we have to preserve it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much, Ms. Veronis, Mr. Viglione and Ms. Ashton.

We will now begin the second round of questions, and you will see that things will go a little more smoothly.

The first two speakers will have five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Dalton.

• (1720)

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Many thanks to the witnesses for providing us with this information.

Mr. Viglione, you mentioned competencies. Newcomers can't make use of their skills by working in fields for which they haven't been trained. For example, 20,000 doctors and 30,000 nurses aren't working in their fields. You also said that French-language teachers, for example, are unable to teach in Canada.

What should the federal government do? The provinces, associations and unions, taken together, already represent a lot of bureaucracy. How can we move this issue forward? These people have come to Canada because of their skills to practise their professions and because they are francophones, but they're unable to practise their professions here.

I'll ask Mr. Viglione to answer that question first, followed by Ms. Veronis.

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

I would say that, for those people, we should expedite recognition of the credentials they've earned in their countries. French-language teachers are still French-language teachers, both here and in France.

I can understand why it's a little more complicated for doctors. These days, we're taking in a lot of people who have completed studies in the health field. They were professional nurses and physicians in their countries but now find themselves working as attendants in nursing homes.

As regards the vitality of francophone hospitals, New Brunswick has taken a major step by conducting a recruitment mission. Some physicians have agreements with foreign schools to hire people who, in 18 days, can be accredited and practise as professional nurses.

Where I think we could really simplify the approach is in the professions that are regulated in New Brunswick, but that aren't regulated elsewhere in the country. I'm really focusing on certain workers, such as language teachers.

In addition, as regards international students, Canada invests in recruitment forums in Africa and Europe. Once they've completed their studies, those students aren't even allowed to start up a business.

There are 300 international students in Bathurst, New Brunswick. Every year, students earn their degrees but aren't even allowed to start up a business and are thus forced to go and work in major cities if they want to earn a living.

I think we really need to review these procedures so that it isn't as frustrating to integrate these people. As I previously said, they are frustrated, despite the fact that they're aware of the conditions they face in Canada. Those conditions must be improved.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

We are listening, Ms. Veronis.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: One of the recommendations would be to recognize degrees and international experience. In recent interviews, participants told us that this is very costly and takes a lot of time. The World Education Services organization, which validates degrees, has recently introduced a process for francophones. The government should support credential recognition.

The situation of professions such as engineering and medicine is complex. For jobs and professions that aren't regulated, we should consider providing unpaid internships or supplementing practice with theoretical content. I very much believe in matching with employers and in internships. Internships often enable employers and immigrants to get to know each other and the latter to gain Canadian experience, which is a major challenge.

• (1725)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

I want to go back to the question that our Bloc Québécois colleague asked earlier regarding integrating francophones in non-bilingual communities. I'm going to ask it in a different way because I think it's important to continue demonstrating Canada's bilingualism. That means we should also strengthen the minority language communities.

My colleague suggested that it was a bad thing to integrate francophones in non-bilingual communities and that it might cause problems. I have a different take on this.

Ms. Veronis, don't you think it's a good idea to continue strengthening minority language communities and for bilingualism in Canada to endure. I'd like you to comment on that.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I agree absolutely. Immigrants are often drawn to regions that are quiet, near nature and in small tightly knitted regions, somewhat like village communities where everyone knows, speaks to and supports everyone else. Those communities have a lot to offer.

This gives me an opportunity to talk about the idea of forming immigrant groups. The idea isn't to have single, isolated individuals settling in these communities. Instead, we should consider involving an entire community, a group of 100 persons, for example. We've seen this in the case of the Syrian refugees when an entrepreneur brought in 100 refugees.

So we should create communities. That of course raises challenges. I'm speaking theoretically here; I don't know how this can be implemented. Instead of having one family that's all alone and

doesn't know what to do, you have to have a group and do what was done during the resettlement of the Syrian refugees when people mobilized. Sponsoring, support and networks all worked well. I think we can draw on the example of New Brunswick and the refugees it took in. We should expand that type of support to all francophone immigrants.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: It would be a very serious mistake not to reinforce capacities in minority-language communities.

Mr. Normand, what percentage of all francophone immigrants does your student body represent?

Mr. Martin Normand: The most recent figures that we have date back to before the pandemic. Based on what we've heard from our institutions, the situation has vastly changed since September 2022. We'll have to conduct a new data collection.

However, although I don't know the exact percentage offhand, there are approximately 5,000 international students in our network of 22 institutions every year, which represents a lot of graduates annually. We're talking about 1,000 to 2,000 international students who graduate per year.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Do you know what percentage of those francophone immigrant students are African students?

Mr. Martin Normand: I'm talking about students who have been accepted at our institutions. We don't have data on those who apply for permanent residence. That's harder to determine once they've left our institutions.

However, the vast majority of international students in our institutional network come from Africa. The main countries that the international students at our institutions come from are countries such as Senegal, Congo, Cameroon and Ivory Coast. France and the entire European pool are very far down the list of francophone international students who come to study in our institutional network. We're told that francophone European students are more inclined to come to Canada to learn English. Consequently, it's more difficult to attract them to our institutions, even though it's possible to learn English there. Once again, the vast majority of international students are African.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: We should also note that the largest pool of francophones in the entire world is in Africa. I don't have much time left, but I'm going to ask you another question. What resources do you have at your disposal to help students succeed and continue living in French?

Mr. Martin Normand: As Ms. Veronis suggested a little earlier, once they arrive on campus, our first job is obviously to make potential applicants aware of the reality of our institutions so they understand the reality of the communities where they will be settling—

• (1730)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Mr. Normand, please wrap up.

Mr. Martin Normand: All right.

The institutions do it and we can come back to that. I noted the support we provide for academic success and employability in my remarks. The international student clubs on our campuses can also do a lot of support work.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Kayabaga.

Now it's the turn of Mr. Beaulieu, who has two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'd like to go back to what my Liberal colleague said. We discussed the importance of targeting immigration where there's a concentration of francophones. That doesn't mean there'll be no francophone immigration elsewhere. Research, such as that of Charles Castonguay, has shown that, outside New Brunswick and in eastern and northeastern Ontario, francophone immigrants are quickly being anglicized starting in the first generation because they wind up in anglophone communities. What do you think of that?

In any case, the new language bill provides for a form of territoriality for federally regulated private businesses. It's already in force in Quebec and will help promote French. Strong francophone regions will be designated outside Quebec. I think that's necessarily what we're coming to. I don't want to start a fight, but I think it's having very real consequences, and, if you remain dogmatic, you'll see what happens: a decline in French everywhere.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I think anglicization is hard to avoid because English is often the language of work. In my opinion, you have to retain French as the spoken language of the family and community participation. You can't avoid English.

I've often advocated francization for anglophones. That's the way to go. Anglophones are more open today. You can see that in the popularity of immersion programs.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: However, the data somewhat contradict that. There is virtually no increase in the number of anglophones who speak French. Bilingualism is increasing mainly in Quebec.

I have a brief question. Quebec is still a major market for francophone culture and a significant source of teachers. If you promote francophone immigration outside Quebec, you undermine francophone immigration to Quebec. Won't that be counterproductive?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: That's a tough question. You also have to acknowledge the ties among immigrants. Some arrive in Quebec and then settle in Ontario, in our region, while other francophone immigrants arrive in Ontario and settle in Quebec. Once they're here, they're free.

As for having separate francophone immigrations, Quebec can also serve as a model. Perhaps francophone immigration should be controlled by the provinces rather than the federal government.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Veronis.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to talk about education, a sector where, as we know, labour is in considerable demand. Early childhood and the primary and secondary grades are affected. I live in western Canada, where there are waiting lists everywhere for day care centres, immersion and French-language education. Families

that want their children to be educated in French are desperate. The options aren't what they should be as a result of the labour shortage.

Do you think that the immigration system, in its present state, is able to address those issues?

Since this committee is focusing on recommendations that we can make to the federal government, I'd like to know what you think we should do to improve coordination and provide a more appropriate response to this situation, which is of considerable concern to the country, particularly in western Canada.

Mr. Normand, perhaps you can be the first to answer. Ms. Veronis could do so as well.

Mr. Martin Normand: Yes, I can answer your question. Thank you.

First, I would suggest that we make sure a language lens is included in IRCC's immigration programs. I'll explain why. In recent years, during the pandemic, a program was available under which the transition from temporary to permanent residence could be expedited. The program included very narrow criteria under which certain professions could be excluded. We're talking here about professions that, in the case of communities, were facing significant labour shortages, but that weren't necessarily affected by the same shortages in the anglophone communities.

A national assessment of labour needs was conducted but didn't consider the linguistic context, thus excluding certain professions. The profession of early childhood educator is one of those that was excluded. People who were working in that field here in Canada and who held a temporary permit were unable to access permanent residence under the program. That situation was due, in particular, to issues involved in creating the programs.

Furthermore, you might think that, to increase the number of teachers who teach French or who teach in that language, you'd have to rely on the support of postsecondary institutions. However, the provinces often limit the number of students who may be admitted to certain programs or faculties. Those programs are therefore subject to quotas. To increase the number of international students in those disciplines to address labour shortages, you have to ensure that there are spaces at the institutions and adequate funding to increase the number of spaces there.

● (1735)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you.

If any other members wish to ask you questions, you may answer them later, Ms. Veronis.

I now turn the floor over to Ms. Goodridge, for five minutes.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Good evening, everyone. Thanks to the witnesses.

I'd like to mention that the Conservative leader has proposed adopting the so-called "blue seal" standard, which would serve as a national standard. The credentials of persons who practise a health profession and were trained outside Canada could thus be recognized sooner. I'm now coming to my question.

Mr. Viglione, do you think that a national examination standard such as the "blue seal", would enable a larger number of franco-phone immigrants to settle in Canada and practise their professions?

Mr. Francesco Viglione: That could be a very good solution.

As I said earlier, people are being blocked even if they have the credentials. So I definitely think that a standard like the "blue seal" would be useful in the case of individuals trained in the medical field outside Canada. Yes, I believe that would increase franco-phone immigration to Canada.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you very much.

You mentioned the dynamism of francophone immigration in the minority communities. I'm a francophone who first enrolled in French immersion and then went on to postsecondary studies in French in Alberta. Many people don't know there's a dynamic francophone community in Alberta, Saskatchewan and across the Prairies in general. You mentioned that in one of your answers.

How do you think the Government of Canada could do a better job of spreading out the francophone minority population?

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Personally, I'm very much in favour of promoting francophone immigration. Consequently, I believe that awareness and information campaigns should be introduced to attract qualified francophone immigrants to minority communities. I'm opposed to the idea of concentrating all francophones in one place and all anglophones in another. On the contrary, I'm very much in favour of mixing the two.

Two weeks ago, I went to a francophone conference that drew attendees from all Canadian provinces, and we discussed at length ways of attracting large numbers of francophones to minority communities. Our association is therefore doing some serious thinking so we can present something to the federal government.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Do you have any specific suggestions to make? If we had all the money in the world and a magic wand, how could we improve matters?

• (1740)

Mr. Francesco Viglione: As a foreigner and an immigrant, I lived in Luxembourg, where they speak three languages. I also lived in Switzerland, where they also speak three languages. What shocks me the most in Canada today is that you have to choose between anglophone and francophone schools, whereas citizens of other countries speak two or three languages, study English and mathematics in English, history in French, geography in Italian and so on. As an immigrant, I find it shocking at times when people in Canada tell me they can't mix anglophone and francophone children, particularly in day care facilities. I find that quite disturbing.

I think we already have a potential solution. We should explore ways to reunify anglophones and francophones rather than continue to separate them.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you.

Ms. Veronis, you talked about having two immigration classes. Every day in my riding office, I hear people talk about extremely long waits for immigration files to be processed.

Do you think that creating those two systems would help solve the problem of these extremely long delays?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: Yes. One of the reasons for simplifying the process is that it would facilitate access to support in preparing applications for those wishing to file them. At the same time, if the criteria are different, that could facilitate and expedite file assessment while avoiding problems. A simplified process could also be rigorous, competitive and all that, but it wouldn't be the kind of competition that we currently have in the context of express entry, for example.

Mr. Norman talked about educators who have no access to the expedited program, for example. So I think that would facilitate matters.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much.

I now turn the floor over to the father of Léo-Xavier Drouin.

Go ahead, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. You're very good at your job.

I'll go first to Mr. Normand, who comes from the beautiful community of Hawkesbury. I like to repeat that since it's our home town, for both of us, even though Mr. Normand is smarter than I am.

You mentioned the barriers to the professional associations and the limits that the provinces set on the number of new students who may be admitted to colleges and universities. Do you know whether your members have partnerships with universities in Africa, for example, to break down the barriers associated with credential recognition, among other things? We know there's a shortage of teachers in the French-language primary and secondary schools in Canada, for example.

Are the members of your association working on that?

Mr. Martin Normand: As an association, we don't do that type of work. In some instances, our members have mobility agreements with foreign institutions, and sometimes we can even delocalize certain curricula to facilitate upgrading. So that kind of work is done. We also do promotional and recruitment work at specialized fairs for certain disciplines.

In response to your question, I'd like to emphasize another point regarding credential recognition here. We've discussed national standards two or three times. The professional associations are under provincial jurisdiction. They will have to be at the table to consider the issue of credential recognition. Our institutions have tried to work in this area to provide supplementary training and to reserve spaces for foreign students in certain programs, for example. However, it's the business of the professional associations, which fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces, to manage that issue.

I would add that not all the professional associations are sensitive to the language issue. So it's not because credential recognition work is done for the majority that it necessarily works for francophones seeking to have their credentials recognized. They may have to obtain translations of degrees and curricula in countries where English is not even a working language. Consequently, it may be very hard to complete this process, even where one has been established.

• (1745)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Francophones work in a minority setting even at the international level. Is it up to us to break down those barriers? We're talking about labour mobility and the importance of establishing partnerships among francophone countries, even though, at times, it may be frustrating to deal with the various orders of government and the provinces in Canada. Do you think it's up to us to move forward and not wait?

We are francophones working in an anglophone majority setting. With regard to the professional associations, is it up to us to take action to break down those barriers, since we're the ones who ultimately pay the price? There are labour shortages in early childhood, primary education and medicine. There are shortages everywhere. The impact of those shortages is significant, especially for our minority language communities across Canada, but they even exist in Quebec today.

Mr. Martin Normand: Even though the professional associations are under the jurisdiction of the provinces, I believe that the federal government can be a leader on an issue such as this. It can challenge the provinces on the issue of credential recognition. It can ensure that the language issue is taken into consideration in the work that the professional associations do and that there is fair access to training material that provides access to certain disciplines.

There are a host of actions that the federal government could take to demonstrate its leadership. It must start by understanding its responsibilities regarding the vitality of the francophone communities. It will be difficult to enhance the vitality of francophone communities in the context of a shortage in which people are unable to have their credentials recognized or find ways to complete the training that would enable them to access the professions. That work should be started.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Ms. Veronis, I heard you say we need to open more embassies and processing centres for immigration applications from francophone African countries. Would you please tell us more about that?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): A brief response, please, Ms. Veronis.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: Yes, I suggested mobile clinics, which don't need to be permanent and which can move around, or webinars.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Drouin, and thanks to your son for being here today.

Now it's the turn of Bernard Généreux, who has five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you know, a new Official Languages Act has just been passed. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration has new authorities under that act which it will have to apply and implement.

With regard to what Mr. Samson discussed and what we heard during previous testimony, I want to go back to what you said, Ms. Veronis. Instead of dividing the department in two, couldn't we create, within the department, a francophone department that, to a certain degree, would have to implement the new act, oversee coordination and ensure respect for equality between English and French and the entire interdepartmental and intergovernmental relationship with the provinces?

I've been thinking about this since you said it. It seems to me it's like cutting a tree in two with a fork. It's almost impossible to think that it can be done one day. Instead of imagining things and hoping, couldn't we create, within the department itself, an agency that would specifically ensure that the act is implemented? I'm going to side with Mr. Samson here. That would be an attractive recommendation. What do you think of it?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: The idea isn't to divide the department but rather to create an organization, an agency. As was pointed out earlier, the francophone communities aren't sovereign. They don't have authority over immigration, unlike Quebec, for example.

One could imagine the provinces creating other entities. We know that candidates from the provinces function very well. Francophone immigration could be transformed that way. I think there are many options. Perhaps we don't need to implement them all at once because that would complicate matters.

• (1750)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: To my mind, on a perfect organization chart, that agency would report directly to the office of the minister to ensure a quick reaction or greater agility.

What do you think about that, Mr. Normand? My question is also for Mr. Viglione.

Mr. Martin Normand: I'll be brief because I want to give Mr. Viglione a chance to answer the question.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada already has a francophone immigration directorate. The problem is responsibility. You said so yourself: If that office were placed higher on the org chart and reported directly to an assistant deputy minister who had interdepartmental responsibilities, real work could be done within the department to ensure that the francophone lens is applied everywhere, not only in matters under the responsibility of the francophone immigration directorate.

I think that's the path to take.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: What are people thinking in New Brunswick, Mr. Viglione?

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Personally, I would separate immigration in Quebec from that in the rest of the provinces. It also has to be said that far more files regarding immigration to Quebec are being processed than those concerning francophone immigration to the other provinces. I wouldn't create two departments, but I would separate the files of people wishing to immigrate to Quebec from those of francophones wanting to immigrate to other provinces.

Personally, I'm a francophone, and the federal government took two years to process my immigration file.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Welcome to the club.

Ms. Veronis and Mr. Normand, you've been working in this field for many years. Do you get the sense there's been an improvement? Obviously, the act has just been passed; so it hasn't really been systematically implemented.

According to the testimony we've heard for many years—I've been sitting on this committee for eight years—we don't always get the impression that things are truly moving forward. Do you have the impression there have been any significant advances?

It has to be said that the Liberal government invested an enormous amount of money during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even before that. Have you seen a real difference?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: To a certain extent, I think that, yes, there has been a major difference. When I was an international student, it was virtually impossible to become a permanent resident. Now it's already working much better for students.

Yes, there have been enormous investments. However, all immigration has increased. To my mind, the present challenge is to raise the francophone percentage target. If we had maintained the previous figures, we might have reached or exceeded the target, but all immigration has increased.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Veronis.

Before we continue, I would simply like to repeat my colleague's words: "cutting a tree in two with a fork".

Ms. Lecomte, from the Library of Parliament, should note that down to inspire us in future.

Mr. Samson, you have five minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for their expertise and suggestions regarding this extremely important field.

According to a government publication on immigration, today: "Immigration accounts for almost 100% of Canada's labour force growth, and, by 2032, it's projected to account for 100% of Canada's population growth." When I was young, Acadians had 9, 10 or 11 children, but they don't have as many today. So immigration will be the key.

Ms. Veronis, you're proposing a separate, independent and different structure. Mr. Généreux asked you some questions about duplication. You clearly explained that duplication wasn't the desired effect and that we should look for specific characteristics based on the needs of the communities. I believe that Africa is where we'll find the largest number of francophones.

You've told us a number of very important things. We can have the students who are already here permanently sooner. Mr. Normand proposed that the colleges and universities play a role. I believe that my colleague from New Brunswick discussed the refugees that we could recruit. That gives us an attractive playing field.

If you were the minister and had two suggestions to make for the new policy that's to be put in place in June 2024, what would you propose?

My question is for all three witnesses, and they have approximately 40 seconds each in which to respond.

• (1755)

Dr. Luisa Veronis: Family reunification, which I discussed—

Mr. Darrell Samson: I want to know what you would include in your francophone immigration policy if you were the minister and were drafting that policy.

Dr. Luisa Veronis: You say "policy"?

Mr. Darrell Samson: It has to do it, so what are the two most important things the government can do to turn quickly on a dime?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: The government can facilitate applications—as I was saying earlier concerning the way the procedure is in place—and then aim to select a certain group, or even simplify procedures or target certain categories.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Very good, thank you.

Mr. Normand, do you want to add anything?

Mr. Martin Normand: I have two suggestions. The government could provide separate programs for francophone immigration—that is, programs that specifically meet the needs of francophone communities—rather than general Canada-wide programs.

In addition, it should have a policy that also targets immigrants' socioeconomic success to ensure that the message received abroad clearly explains that, when you immigrate to Canada, you're welcomed, you're well integrated and you can succeed here in French.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Great, thank you.

I yield the floor to my colleague from New Brunswick.

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Thank you very much.

In two points, we need a targeted immigration policy to encourage francophone immigration, and settlement support for all immigration programs, not just for permanent residents.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Great.

Mr. Normand, could you tell us briefly what you would do if universities and colleges received funding to develop a strategy to better integrate francophone students? There's a Canada-wide strategy, but we're looking for a strategy for francophones.

Mr. Martin Normand: In the case of our institutions, closer collaboration between IRCC and our institutions would free up time for officers and our members' internationalization case managers. They could then focus their efforts on recruitment and partnerships with institutions abroad. There would be a greater capacity for work.

If additional funding was provided, as I said earlier, we could imagine setting up other services to ensure that, when a student leaves the institution, they have all the tools needed to obtain permanent residence status.

Some obstacles may remain. Fluency in English may be one, or, according to some officers, the course of study is not necessarily interesting or does not suit the needs of the market as assessed. In such cases, work permits or permanent residence are refused after graduation. So we need to have services in place at our institutions to ensure that students seeking permanent resident status have the right track record to get it.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Can't they apply for permanent residence before completing their studies?

Mr. Martin Normand: No.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Samson.

I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: When the action plan on official languages was announced, the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne, or ACUFC, noted that \$32 million was earmarked per year for four years, whereas the Liberals had promised \$80 million per year.

What are the implications of this difference? Is \$32 million still enough?

Mr. Martin Normand: The first implication is financial because, in terms of available money, this is half of what had been promised. Our institutions had allowed themselves to dream about what could be done with such an amount. For example, we planned to improve access to programs and services, or offer incentives to attract new clients. Many things could be imagined with these funds. Clearly, with less than half the money planned, the level of ambition will be reduced.

However, this promise is not just about money. It's also about permanence, and that's the key to this dynamic. It's a four-year program—the criteria aren't all known yet—but it's expected to be small, one-off initiatives that respond to urgent requests rather than structuring initiatives that tackle the root problems that have been documented and that the post-secondary sector is going through.

These four years may seem long to many, but four years is the length of a bachelor's degree. We're not going to change the post-secondary sector in the time it takes to get a bachelor's degree. We need to be able to plan for our institutions over the long term, and give them the benefit of a permanent program that enables them to imagine structuring solutions and that is sufficiently endowed to respond to the issues we documented as part of the national dialogue on post-secondary education in a francophone minority context. There are 32 recommendations for structuring the post-secondary sector. One of them specifically concerns international students.

With this money, we'll be able to respond to most of the recommendations made.

● (1800)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That said, for the time being, you don't have it, and it's not permanent.

Mr. Martin Normand: Let's just say that the impermanence issue is going to make things difficult for institutions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You say that francophone universities are disadvantaged by the funding methods.

Could you briefly give us an example of how these funding methods could be improved to restore equity?

Mr. Martin Normand: The starting point is that economies of scale are not the same in small institutions as in large ones.

Take the example of a computer system. It will cost the same whether the institution is large or small, yet the funding structure is not the same to pay the same bill in the end. That's why we need permanent measures to bridge the gap.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Normand.

Ms. Ashton now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: My first question is for Ms. Veronis.

Ms. Veronis, you said more services were needed in Africa, for example. We've already heard concerns on the ground about the lack of consular services, as well as the use of visa application centres, which are for profit.

Do you think the use of these centres improves our immigration system? On the contrary, does it create a system in which only those with resources can submit an immigration application? In other words, is the lack of resources a barrier, particularly for African families who want to come to Canada?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: The current system does seem unfair to me, given that the centres are concentrated and, as a result, in many countries, candidates sometimes have to travel for interviews, among other things. That said, a certain part of the process is now done online. So the current system puts some people at a disadvantage.

It must be recognized that the immigration system is unfair. Those who can afford the application fee manage to immigrate here, and others can't. Highly educated people are also targeted. There's the whole issue of brain drain, for example. So there are a lot of challenges. We're trying to address our shortages and meet our demographic needs through these people's immigration. I believe that having more consular services can make immigration more accessible, which on the other hand can accelerate the brain drain. As Mr. Normand or Mr. Viglione said, maybe we can recognize the richness of the francophonie more by creating links between francophones here and there.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay, thank you.

I want to come back to the issue of federal leadership in the context of the early childhood education labour shortage. My own family experience has made me aware of this. An entire generation is losing the opportunity to learn French. There are labour shortages in many sectors, but education goes to the very heart of our committee's daily concerns.

So let's talk about the labour shortage in education and the leadership that needs to be shown by the federal government, while absolutely recognizing that education comes under provincial jurisdiction, up to a point.

What concrete action can the federal government take to address this labour shortage in education?

Mr. Normand, would you like to add anything?

Mr. Martin Normand: I'll do it very quickly, to let my colleague finish.

In the white paper on the reform of the Official Languages Act—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Mr. Normand, I forgot to let you know that you had less than 30 seconds left. I ask that you wrap it up.

Mr. Martin Normand: I will let Ms. Veronis wrap up.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): It was the chair's mistake, not watching the timer.

So, Ms. Veronis or Mr. Normand, please wrap up.

Mr. Martin Normand: This white paper put forward the idea of establishing an immigration corridor for education. We have yet to see how this announced measure will unfold.

We've heard that there has also been targeted guidance for candidates. So it would seem that an IRCC officer could guide candidates who wanted to come and teach in Canada, for example, to facilitate the transition.

• (1805)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Normand.

I thank you all for this round of questions and answers.

I now give the floor to Marc Dalton for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

Ms. Veronis, you mentioned the opening of the immigration office in Cameroon. That's all very well, but the problem is that many applications are submitted online, and we seem to go around in circles when navigating the IRCC website. This makes things difficult. Here in Canada, I often find it difficult to do things online. It's a real problem.

Do you have any idea how many people give up on applying for immigration because of these problems?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I have no idea. I don't know if it's even measurable. One could imagine calculating the number of applications by country of origin; that would give a percentage of people who did not manage to apply.

On the other hand, there are other repercussions. People don't give up. They work very hard. I've been surprised by the number of people from Africa who have been ripped off and contacted me. In that context, they may no longer have the money to submit a legitimate application.

Unfortunately, I can't give you a better answer. I can't measure what you're talking about. I haven't done the work.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Do people have the option of calling in and receiving help over the telephone?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: No, there is no telephone assistance.

I don't think people can call unless they've submitted an application, received a number and been assigned an officer. Otherwise, there's no one to interact with.

Mr. Marc Dalton: You've also had problems with this, haven't you?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: I went to the website, as I was trying to help someone who asked me about the categories and how to apply. So I went to see for myself. I was clicking and going around in circles.

The other difficulty is the number of categories that exist: permanent, temporary, student, this kind of a permit, that kind of a permit. It's very complicated for someone from Africa, who operates differently and doesn't have the same information culture.

Mr. Marc Dalton: That's right. We really need to simplify this.

You also talked about pre-departure services. Can you tell us more about that?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: The government has invested an enormous amount of money to make these services available to people who have obtained permanent residence, but are waiting for visas, papers or the time when they will leave their country.

Many are unaware that pre-departure services exist. Sometimes there's a time lapse before arriving in the country. For example, during the pandemic, people couldn't come right away. So they waited, but they didn't know these services existed. These services are fantastic. I've interviewed people who have told me that, had they known, they would have prepared their Canadian resumé or taken workshops on how to do interviews before coming here.

As I understand it, people receive a message or a letter. At the very bottom of the document, in small print, it says that they have access to pre-departure services, but a lot of people don't see that. By the time they receive the letter, they're preoccupied with selling their house, disposing of their belongings, filling out paperwork, enrolling in school, and so on. There are so many things to do, but they don't see that part. I didn't receive this letter. I don't know what it looks like.

The fact that there are pre-departure services should be communicated much more clearly. This can help people prepare before they come here where they start paying rent and wait to find a job. There's also the issue of the Canadian experience and the challenges of the job market.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I think this program could be used to support the system.

Mr. Viglione, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Francesco Viglione: I wanted to add to Ms. Veronis's information.

I received an email regarding pre-departure services. It clearly explained that, while the visa office was preparing to issue my visa to arrive in Canada, I could start taking advantage of pre-departure services. Even from abroad, I was able to attend virtual job fairs. So I was able to take advantage of services before arriving.

I have to say that the email does provide good explanations.

• (1810)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

Mr. Normand, can you tell the committee how francophone immigrants can be taught to live and work in an anglophone environment without being pressured to focus on English?

Mr. Martin Normand: Well, our institutions take in temporary residents, not immigrants. We can't just ignore English; that would be impossible.

Take, for example, someone studying in a co-op program or for a regulated occupation that requires an internship. It's reasonable to expect those candidates to be fluent in English once they're in the job market to complete an internship, whether it's because most of the clientele speaks English or because the employers are anglophone and those are the only internships available.

For international students from a country where English is not spoken who come to minority communities in Canada, provisions

must be made for them to achieve a certain level of competency in English so they can achieve successful economic integration.

One thing to keep in mind is that, in addition to enabling these students to learn English, our institutions also have to support employers, the public sector and community organizations and help them understand the added value that bilingual professionals bring to their workplaces, which may serve disadvantaged individuals or clients they wouldn't otherwise be able to connect with.

That support has to be available to international students, but it also has to be available to the host community to ensure successful economic integration.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Mr. Viglione, how do you think the Government of Canada can help encourage entrepreneurship among francophone immigrants?

Mr. Francesco Viglione: Here in New Brunswick, we have an organization called La Ruche, which is part of our association. Experts there offer mentorship programs to newcomers who want to start a business. We provide the tools and services they need to understand the Canadian system and get off the ground faster.

I think it's a very good tool. Since April 2023, we've been helping seven francophone immigrant entrepreneurs, including former students, start businesses in the region. I think our program, which is also available in four other regions around the province, is a very good tool.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

Ms. Veronis, what specific measures could the Government of Canada implement to help francophone immigrants in minority communities learn and retain French?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: If they're francophone immigrants, I would imagine their French is already pretty good. I'd like to add to my response earlier. If we want to make sure that francophone immigrants can maintain or improve their French, we need to enable them to live and receive services in French. We need to ensure institutional completeness.

During the pandemic, lots of people who had learned French lost it because of the circumstances. It all ties into the earlier discussion about the territorial aspect and communities. If the conditions are right for people to live their lives in French, they'll participate and maintain their language. Sometimes a job in English is inevitable, but these people can live their lives in both languages. Francophones in minority communities live in both languages. Nobody tells them not to speak English or not to work in an English-speaking workplace.

People talked about bilingualism. The idea is to make sure people have the opportunity to live in both languages.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Let's start the fourth round of questions. The Conservative Party and the Liberal Party will get three minutes each; the Bloc Québécois and the NDP will get a minute and a half each.

Mrs. Goodridge, you have three minutes.

• (1815)

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you very much.

My first question is for Mr. Normand.

When you testified at the Senate Committee on Official Languages, you talked about the high rate of denial for permit applications from francophone international students, especially those from African countries.

Since then, do you think IRCC has made any progress when it comes to eliminating certain administrative barriers?

Mr. Martin Normand: For sure. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about it.

As I said in my speech, in September 2022, we observed an improvement in the acceptance rate for study permit applications from African applicants. That increase was more apparent in Quebec than in other francophone institutions in Canada, so we have to figure out what accounts for that difference. There has been progress, though. We don't have the numbers for this school year yet, but I'll work with the IRCC to get that information. On the ground, however, our institutions seem to think things have improved again this year.

One reason for the difference might be that the agents who make decisions to grant visas don't all know our network of institutions. That should be very easy to remedy. As I've said elsewhere, study permits have been denied because agents didn't think people had legitimate reasons for wanting to pursue post-secondary studies in French outside Quebec.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you. I understand what you're saying. I myself studied in a minority context at Campus Saint-Jean in Edmonton, and lots of people didn't know there was a francophone neighbourhood.

How do you promote francophone institutions outside Quebec?

Mr. Martin Normand: In recent years, we've provided lots of training to IRCC and Global Affairs Canada staff. In an international education context, Global Affairs Canada has to be part of the equation. We offered training about our network of institutions, and we think that had an impact on the study permit application approval rate. We know there have been directives within IRCC to ensure people are familiar with our institutions. Just last week, I delivered two training sessions to education trade commissioners in Europe to ensure they're familiar with our network of institutions. If they have any questions about it, they all have my email now.

This kind of one-off initiative can have a huge impact on the entire public service, which makes decisions and promotes post-secondary education in Canada.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mrs. Goodridge. You're out of time.

Thank you, Mr. Normand.

Mr. Serré, over to you.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I only have three minutes, so I'll be quick.

Mr. Normand, in your presentation, your second recommendation was about creating a permanent support fund whose criteria respect provincial areas of jurisdiction.

Can you tell us about those criteria and the process you have in mind?

Mr. Martin Normand: As we see it, many of the activities that take place within post-secondary institutions come under federal jurisdiction. We think a permanent fund of this kind could apply to those activities, one of which is francophone immigration, a shared responsibility. The federal government wants to play a lead role on that. A new permanent fund would be one way to take action on that front. For example, what would enable post-secondary institutions to boost their capacity to bring in, retain and train international clients?

The Government of Canada has set targets for individual bilingualism. Studies clearly show that the rate of retention for French is better among people who attend francophone post-secondary institutions, so let's make sure there are post-secondary institutions that function in French. That's one way to help people maintain and function in French in a professional context once they exit post-secondary institutions.

Those are just two of many examples. There are other federal jurisdictions in which the government wants to take action. For example, it wants to do something about the teacher shortage. Canadian Heritage has programs for that even though it's a provincial responsibility. The federal government defined it as a provincial responsibility, but there are probably other areas where that kind of action could be contemplated.

• (1820)

Mr. Marc Serré: Mr. Normand, as you know, at the end of June, the Province of Ontario rejected the Université de Sudbury's "by and for" vision. Yes, that's a provincial file, but what solutions would you recommend to the federal government concerning the Université de Sudbury's plans to create a "by and for" institution in Ontario's near north?

Mr. Martin Normand: I won't comment on Sudbury in particular, but I will say that the federal government could set up federal-provincial-territorial round tables with post-secondary institutions to help all levels of government and those institutions coordinate their francophone post-secondary education efforts.

Currently, there's no way for the provinces, the federal government and the institutions to talk about francophone post-secondary education. That would be a really great way for all parties to coordinate their efforts and avoid some of the unpleasant surprises that could crop up along the way.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Mr. Beaulieu, you have a minute and a half.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Earlier, you gave an example of how to improve funding structures in favour of francophone universities. You talked about how the biggest universities benefit from economies of scale.

Have you come up with other suggestions for criteria?

Mr. Martin Normand: One consideration is teaching materials. In many ways, it's more expensive for post-secondary institutions to operate in French. Teaching materials are one example of that. In general, textbooks in French cost more than English ones.

Francophone post-secondary institutions generally advertise in French and English. Anglophone institutions don't advertise in French—very little, anyway. There are many such differences. Even getting provincial accreditation for new programs requires teaching materials to be translated to ensure evaluation is based on—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So, for example, there couldn't be a bonus for Canadian research funding allocated to francophone universities.

Mr. Martin Normand: We're not going to get that sorted out in 30 seconds. Research is another one of my files at ACUFC, but there are all kinds of things to look at in terms of positive measures to support research in French in Canada.

I'll stop there for now.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you.

Do you have any other questions, Mr. Beaulieu? You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: No.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): I'll give the rest of your speaking time to Ms. Ashton.

We'll conclude this round of questions with Ms. Ashton. You have 90 seconds.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I wanted to give Ms. Veronis a chance to answer a question about the education sector specifically.

What advice do you have for us? What can the federal government do to address our needs in this sector specifically?

Dr. Luisa Veronis: One thing to consider is jobs for international students. We discussed the English issue. I believe my colleague, Mariève Forest, who was here on Monday, told you about the barriers. Employers are hesitant to hire international students for all kinds of reasons. That makes job hunting harder for them too.

I would agree with what Mr. Normand said about setting up employment-focused settlement, reception and support services.

Improved access to English language training for international students is important too. I think that can encourage bilingualism and make it easier for people to transition to permanent residence. That's not for the education sector per se, but I think it's more focused on international students. I agree with all the examples Mr. Normand provided earlier.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much, Ms. Veronis.

That concludes our questions and witness statements.

I would remind the witnesses that, if they have additional information or documents for us, they can send them to our clerk, who will get them to us.

Ms. Veronis, thank you for being here and participating.

Mr. Normand, it's always a pleasure to see you.

Mr. Viglione, thank you for participating in our meeting via video.

Hon. colleagues, I'll let you know that, during the first hour of our next meeting, we'll continue our study on increasing francophone immigration in Canada. During our second hour, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship will be joining us.

Now I'll check with the committee members to see if they want to adjourn the meeting.

It looks like they do.

The meeting is adjourned.

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