

Attracting and retaining talent is the key to Montreal's future

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With a new mayor, talk of a special status for Montreal within Quebec, and a wealth of engaged citizens, a Montreal renaissance is in the air.

A key factor to renewing this city for the next generation will be attracting and retaining top international talent — especially students.

On a world scale, Montreal has much to offer — stability, nature, culture to burn. That's why the city already does well at attracting young talent. Our excellent post-secondary institutions educate more people than any other Canadian city — more than a quarter million, including some 26,000 international students. Yet we hire among the fewest graduates. We are effectively training workers for other cities.

Today's students are tomorrow's highly mobile workforce. Recent graduates are no longer simply looking at Montreal or Toronto as a place to settle and start a career. Today, it's Montreal or Shanghai. Tel Aviv or Silicon Valley.

In an uncertain job market with incredibly varied opportunities, we have to market the experience of settling in Montreal better to young people. That means making it easy, making it affordable and making it fun.

To attract and keep the planet's best and brightest, I have four proposals.

First, we must make newcomers feel special and welcome.

Today, our city's biggest draw is our reputation, and our biggest welcome mat is our web presence. When a potential immigrant visits our websites, it would be great if they felt as if we were reaching out from the computer screen to shake their hand and welcome them.

Pretend you are trying to move to Montreal and are searching for information online. It's not as easy as you would hope. Cities that embrace immigration entice newcomers by making this first step user-friendly.

Montreal represents half the Quebec economy and receives 85 per cent of the province's immigrants. In addition to improving our information to align with our open attitude, it makes sense to allow Montreal some considerations when it comes to immigration. These should be granted as part of the special status Mayor Denis Coderre is currently seeking from the government of Quebec.

Second, let's create financial incentives for international students to stay here.

Even for out-of-province and international students, Quebec has the lowest post-secondary tuition rates in Canada.

But imagine how much more students would want to stay after graduating if, through a tax rebate, they could have that tuition knocked down to our unbeatable in-province rates. Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia all have such tax relief in place.

This proposal would provide visitors a strong incentive to stay, but cost us nothing if they do not.

Third, we need to provide newcomers the tools to stay here.

The richness of Montreal's language and culture are a great draw. Yet unless a new graduate speaks French, finding a job here is tough.

Quebec does offer good immersion programs. But as a society, we need to go further. Instead of a maze of unco-ordinated language and culture options, we need to show students a well-lighted pathway toward French competency.

I suggest post-secondary students follow a coherent, well-organized "Discover Québec" program during their entire course of study, not just for a summer. It could teach newcomers about Quebec's language, history and culture. It could also arrange co-op placements in francophone workplaces. And it could lead to tangible benefits — perhaps residency status, or a job offer. A place in Quebec society.

Fourth, we should broaden the responsibility for welcoming immigrants.

For example, the non-profit organization La Vitrine will soon start a pilot project to give new international students a \$50 credit toward any cultural event — Montreal's music, theatre, fine art, dance and more. Such cultural connections are often the glue that keeps people here.

Perhaps we can all do something similar. Just as you would shake hands and offer to help a new neighbour settle in, whatever line of work you're in, you can help in this grand project. Integration, logically, requires an integrated approach — all hands on deck.

Finally, more than ever, we need to focus on the quality of daily life on the Island. Today's model cities, from Copenhagen to Melbourne to New York, are being planned on a human scale.

Imagine going to the gym, enjoying dinner and music with friends, then picking up your groceries on your way home — all on foot. The urban design elements that appeal to youth will keep us all young.

Every major city around the globe — our competition — is looking to attract top talent. Executing these ideas is in our skill set and in our interest. We are already in the race. We had better do our best to compete

This is an edited excerpt of a speech that Alan Shepard is giving at noon Thursday to the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Montreal.

Alan Shepard is president and vice-chancellor of Concordia University.

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