

• C A N A D I A N • Diversity

THE EVOLVING ROLE, CHALLENGES, AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Resetting Canada's Immigration Plan and Program for a New Era



VOLUME 21 | NO. 2 | 2025

 **Metropolis**
Institute - Institut

CANADIAN DIVERSITY IS PUBLISHED BY



ACS • AEC

Association for Canadian Studies • Association d'études canadiennes

**ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES
BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

CATRINA TAPLEY
Chair

FARID ROHANI
Treasurer

JANE BADETS

DR. SRILATA RAVI

NICHOLAS BAKOPANOS

DR. PAUL BRAMADAT

DR. JEAN-PHILIPPE WARREN

NEELAM SAHOTA

XIAOYI YAN

SAMINA SAMI

FARIBORZ BIRJANDIAN

JOHN MILLOY

Canadian Diversity is a quarterly publication of the Metropolis Institute. Opinions expressed in articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the ACS or sponsoring organizations. The Metropolis Institute and the Association for Canadian Studies is a voluntary non-profit organization. It seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about Canada through teaching, research and publication. The ACS is a scholarly society and a member of the Humanities and Social Science Federation of Canada.

LETTERS

Comment on this edition of Canadian Diversity?
We want to hear from you!

Canadian Diversity / ACS
850-1980 Sherbrooke Street West
Montréal, Québec H3H 1E8

Or e-mail us at general@acs-aec.ca

• C A N A D I A N •
DIVERSITÉ
C A N A D I E N N E

PUBLISHER
JACK JEDWAB

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
International Students in Canada's Higher Education Ecosystem JACK JEDWAB	
Breaking Down Barriers for Newcomer/International Students: Advancing Equitable Internationalization DR BENJAMIN DENG, NEETIKA AIRE, PRISCILLA IDEHENRE	9
Stalled Futures: Canada's Immigration Plan and its Impact on International Student Mental Health HARMEET SANDHU	14
International Students, Institutional Incentives, and Canada's Policy Recalibration JACK JEDWAB	18
Invisible and At Risk: Confronting Barriers Faced by Women International Students PRABHJOT KAUR, SUMEET SHERGILL	25
Finding and Securing Employment: Experiences of Alumni International Students in Canada NANCY MANDELL, LARRY LAM, LARRY, SUTAMA GHOSH, JANA BORRAS, MERCEDEH SAFARIAN	30
From Crisis to Contraction: Linking International Students Experience of COVID-19 to Canada's Post Pandemic Reductions in Temporary Migration DR. DAVID FIRANG, PROF. J. MENSAH, SAMUEL OWUSU OKYERE, MOHAMMED ABDULAI	35
Struggling to Find a Home in a Tight Rental Market in a Medium-Sized Canadian City: International Students and Post-Pandemic Housing Realities in Peterborough DR. DAVID FIRANG, LEWIS ABOAGYE-GYASI	43
Strengthening Pathways to Integration: Cross-Sectoral Collaborations for Immigrant and Newcomer Women and Families in Canada PUNAM DALAL, GURPREET KAUR	52
Talent, Cashcows, Scapegoats, or All of the Above? Reflections on researching international student flows to Canada YAZHU (EVELYN) LIN	57

International Students in Canada's Higher Education Ecosystem

Jack Jedwab

Jack Jedwab is President and CEO of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Canadian History from Concordia University. Prior to 1998, he served as executive director of the Quebec branch of the Canadian Jewish Congress. He is an author and contributor to academic publications, government reports and newspapers across the country in the fields of immigration, multiculturalism, diversity, human rights and official languages. Following three decades of wide-ranging research on public opinion and demographics, he is regularly consulted by media and government bodies alike for his expertise and insights on issues of import in the public sphere. He has taught and lectured at McGill University, the Université du Québec à Montréal and Concordia University, offering courses ranging from public policy to the history of immigration and minority groups, to sports in Canada.

The essays in this collection examine the changing place of international students in Canada at a time of major policy reversal, declining foreign student reductions as part of a wider public debate around immigration levels. Together, the student number reductions have demonstrated the importance of their contribution to the sustainability of Canada's higher education ecosystem, not only because of the tuition revenue they generate, but also because of their representation in various labour markets, community life, and Canada's long-term demographic strategy. At the same time, the essays reveal a troubling contradiction: international students have been recruited, welcomed, and financially relied upon by governments and institutions, yet many have experienced financial precarity, discrimination, housing insecurity, mental health strain, employment barriers, gendered vulnerability, and uncertainty about whether Canadian education will still function as a pathway to permanent residency. The collection of essays thus asks not only what has happened to international students in Canada, but also who bears responsibility for the instability now facing students and institutions alike.

Dr. Benjamin Denga, Neetika Airi, and Priscilla Idehenre's essay, "Breaking Down Barriers for Newcomer/International Students," foregrounds the lived experiences of international students within academic and student-facing services. Based on a mixed-methods study involving more than 600 students and alumni at an Alberta community college, the essay shows that international students face overlapping barriers related to immigration uncertainty, academic adjustment, language, mental health, financial stress, racism, and belonging. Its central contribution is to shift attention away from student "deficits" and toward institutional and systemic responsibility. The authors argue that colleges must move beyond symbolic diversity and toward equity-centred, anti-racist, and decolonial forms of internationalization. International students, in this account, are not simply revenue sources or temporary migrants; they are community members whose success depends on whether institutions build inclusive systems capable of recognizing their realities.

Harmeet Sandhu's "Stalled Futures" focuses on the mental health consequences of Canada's immigration policy changes, particularly for South Asian international students. The essay explains that many students from India and other South Asian communities come to Canada because of a combination of push factors in their home countries and pull factors associated with Canada's reputation for education, safety, opportunity, and immigration. Sandhu emphasizes that students often arrive with family expectations, financial obligations, and hopes for long-term settlement. When immigration targets are reduced and pathways become more uncertain, these students experience not only practical disruption but psychological distress. The essay is especially important because it frames international student policy as a mental health issue: uncertainty, debt, isolation, family pressure, and stalled mobility can produce anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. Sandhu argues that if Canada benefits from international students' tuition and labour, it must provide clearer pathways, culturally competent support, and protection from fraud and exploitation.

My essay "International Students, Institutional Incentives, and Canada's Policy Recalibration" provides a crucial bridge between the lived experience of students and the policy and institutional structures that produced the current contraction. The essay argues that the federal government's decision to sharply reduce study permit targets reflects legitimate concerns about sustainability, housing, infrastructure, and system integrity, but also exposes a deeper problem: Canadian universities and colleges had become financially dependent on international tuition revenue. I highlight the rapid rise and then dramatic decline in study permit holders, with the fall in students from India especially significant because it revealed the risks of overconcentration in one recruitment market. The essay also introduces public opinion data showing that Canadians assign responsibility not only to governments, but also to post-secondary administrators and recruitment agencies, while placing less blame on students themselves. Its most important ethical contribution is the argument that institutions that publicly uphold academic integrity and social responsibility became participants in a market-driven recruitment system that often linked education to permanent residency aspirations without sufficiently clarifying the uncertainty of those pathways. It is contended that any simple assignment of blame: government policy triggered the contraction, but institutional incentives, aggressive recruitment, high tuition, and dependence on international students helped make the correction politically and administratively inevitable.

Laadliyan's essay, "Invisible and At Risk," brings necessary attention to the experiences of women international students, particularly South Asian women in the Peel Region. It shows that women international students face risks that are often hidden in broader policy discussions, including workplace exploitation, unpaid training, unsafe housing, sexual harassment, coercion, legal illiteracy, and fear of reporting abuse because of temporary immigration status. Drawing on Laadliyan's community-based programming and research, the essay demonstrates that vulnerability is intensified when gender, migration status, financial pressure, and lack of trusted information intersect. The essay's importance lies in showing that international student policy cannot be gender-neutral. Women students require culturally responsive, multilingual, legally accurate, and community-based support systems. Laadliyan's work illustrates how legal education, peer-informed resources, mentorship, and wraparound support can reduce harm and increase institutional accountability.

Nancy Mandell, Larry Lam, Sutama Ghosh, Jana Borrás, and Mercedeh Safarian's "Pathways to Employment" examines the difficult transition from international student status to employment in Canada. Based on interviews with international student alumni in the Greater Toronto Area, the essay shows that graduation does not automatically lead to secure work, stability, or integration. Alumni encounter limited institutional support, discrimination, lack of Canadian work experience, language and accent bias, precarious legal status, financial hardship, and mental and physical strain. The essay argues that resilience should not be understood as an individual burden alone. Instead, successful employment transitions require universities, employers, settlement agencies, professors, peers, and communities to work together. This essay is especially relevant to the broader theme of permanent residency because employment is often central to immigration pathways. If alumni cannot access meaningful work after graduation, then the promise of education as a pathway to settlement becomes far more fragile.

David Firang, J. Mensah, Samuel Owusu Okyere, and Mohammed Abdulai's essay, "From Crisis to Contraction," links international students' experiences during COVID-19 to Canada's post-pandemic reductions in temporary migration. The essay argues that the pandemic exposed the structural vulnerability of international students, who faced academic disruption, financial hardship, mental health challenges, social isolation, employment instability, and uncertainty around immigration pathways. Although Canada introduced flexible measures during the pandemic, including changes related to online learning and post-graduation work eligibility, these measures did not remove the deeper insecurity associated with temporary status. The essay uses a neoliberal framework to show how international students have been treated as sources of revenue, labour, and human capital, while remaining socially vulnerable. It warns that recent reductions in study permits may damage Canada's reputation as a desirable study destination, especially among students who had understood Canada as a place where study, work, and settlement could be connected.

In a second essay, Firang along with Lewis Aboagye-Gyasi's examine housing challenges for international students in Peterborough, one of the most politically charged issues in the current debate: the relationship between international students and Canada's housing crisis. Focusing on a medium-sized city, the essay shows that international students are not simply contributors to housing pressure; they are also deeply affected by unaffordable, unsafe, and discriminatory rental markets. Students face high rents, low vacancy rates, lack of guarantors or credit history, racism, gendered assumptions by landlords, employment restrictions, and limited institutional housing support. Using the Social Ecological Model, the authors show that housing precarity is shaped by individual circumstances, social networks, institutional responses, and broader structural forces. The essay challenges public narratives that blame international students for housing shortages and instead argues that governments and institutions must align recruitment, immigration, and housing planning.

An essay from the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association essay, "Strengthening Pathways to Integration," broadens the collection by showing how cross-sector collaboration can support immigrant and newcomer women and families. Although not limited to international students, the essay is relevant because many international students eventually become part of Canada's broader newcomer and immigrant ecosystem. CIWA's model demonstrates that integration requires more than employment support; it requires language training, childcare, mental health services, financial literacy, housing support, credential navigation, family services, culturally responsive care, and partnerships with employers, educational institutions, health systems, and community organizations. The essay offers a practical corrective to the fragmented systems described elsewhere in the collection. It suggests that integration succeeds when responsibility is shared across sectors and when newcomer women and families are treated as whole persons rather than isolated clients moving through disconnected services.

Yazhu Evelyn Lin's reflection, "Talent, Cashcows, Scapegoats, or All of the Above?" provides a powerful conceptual frame for the entire collection. Lin argues that international students in Canada have been understood differently by different actors: as talent by federal immigration policy, as cash cows by financially pressured institutions, and as scapegoats in public debate about housing and affordability. This framework captures the central contradiction of Canada's education-migration system.

International students were encouraged to come because they could supply human capital, tuition revenue, and demographic renewal. Yet when the system became politically controversial, they were also positioned as symbols of excess migration and public policy failure. Lin's essay emphasizes that the crisis cannot be understood through one institution, one government, or one group of students alone. It requires attention to the fragmented relationship between federal immigration policy, provincial higher education funding, institutional recruitment strategies, and public discourse.

Taken together, these essays show that Canada's international student system has reached a moment of reckoning. The decline in enrolments did not occur by accident, nor can it be explained solely as a federal immigration decision. It resulted from the interaction of rapid enrolment growth, weak federal-provincial coordination, institutional dependence on international tuition, uneven recruitment practices, fraud concerns, public anxiety about housing and infrastructure, and a policy correction that arrived suddenly after years of expansion. In this sense, the contraction was both predictable and disruptive. It was predictable because the system had become financially and politically overextended; it was disruptive because students, institutions, employers, and communities had organized their expectations around continued growth.

Some corrective action was therefore justified. A system that charges international students very high tuition, relies heavily on private recruitment channels, concentrates enrolment in a small number of source countries, and fails to align admissions with housing, employment, and support capacity cannot be considered sustainable. Governments had reason to respond to fraud, affordability pressures, and public concern about the scale of temporary migration. Yet the manner of correction matters. A blunt reduction in study permits may reduce numbers, but it does not by itself repair the ethical, financial, and institutional weaknesses that produced the crisis. Worse, it risks placing the cost of correction on students who acted in good faith, invested heavily, and made life decisions based on the opportunities Canada appeared to offer.

The question of permanent residency is central to this breach of trust. Many international students did not come to Canada only for a credential; they came because Canadian education was widely understood as part of a broader pathway to work, settlement, and possible citizenship. Governments promoted international students as desirable future immigrants, institutions benefited from that message, and recruiters often amplified it. Even if no guaranteed promise of permanent residency was formally made, a powerful expectation was cultivated. When policies changed and pathways narrowed, many students experienced not simply disappointment, but a sense that the terms of their bargain with Canada had shifted after they had already paid the price of entry. That is where the breach of faith arises: not necessarily in a legal contract, but in the gap between the hopes Canada encouraged and the uncertainty it later imposed.

Responsibility for the current situation must be assigned across the system. The federal government is responsible for immigration settings, study permit approvals, work rules, post-graduation work permits, and permanent residency pathways. Provincial governments are responsible for higher education funding, tuition regulation, institutional oversight, and coordination with housing and labour market planning. Colleges and universities are responsible for recruitment ethics, program quality, student services, housing planning, mental health supports, and honest communication about immigration uncertainty. Recruitment agents and placement offices are responsible for accurate information and fair dealing. Employers and landlords are responsible for exploitation, wage theft, discrimination, unsafe housing, and harassment. International students themselves are the least responsible for the structural crisis, though they have often been made its most visible symbol and have borne many of its harshest consequences.

The correctives proposed throughout the collection will work only if they address root causes rather than symptoms. Caps may reduce pressure in the short term, but they will not create a sustainable higher education system. Stronger verification may reduce fraud, but it will not restore trust if students continue to receive unclear information about immigration pathways. Improved mental health services are essential, but they cannot compensate for unaffordable tuition, unsafe housing, precarious employment, or uncertain status. Better career services are needed, but they must be

matched by employer accountability and realistic labour market opportunities. Gender-responsive and culturally competent supports are vital, but they must be embedded in broader institutional responsibility rather than left only to community organizations.

A sustainable model of international education would begin from a different premise: international students are not simply revenue sources, labour market inputs, or political symbols. They are learners, workers, tenants, neighbours, family members, and potential future citizens. If Canada continues to benefit from their presence, it must also accept responsibility for their protection and success. That means aligning admissions with housing capacity, ensuring that institutions are not financially dependent on unchecked international tuition growth, regulating recruitment practices, diversifying source countries, providing transparent information about immigration pathways, and building cross-sector systems of support that include educational institutions, governments, employers, municipalities, settlement agencies, and community organizations.

The future of international education in Canada should not be a retreat from global engagement. International students remain essential to Canada's intellectual life, institutional vitality, economic development, cultural diversity, and demographic renewal. But the system must be rebuilt on more honest and sustainable foundations. The choice facing Canada is whether international students will continue to be treated as talent when needed, cash cows when budgets are strained, and scapegoats when politics become difficult, or whether they will be treated as members of a shared educational and civic community. The essays in this collection point toward the latter vision: one grounded in transparency, fairness, mutual responsibility, and genuine student success

Breaking Down Barriers for Newcomer/ International Students: Advancing Equitable Internationalization

Dr Benjamin Denga, Neetika Aire, Priscilla Idehenre

Benjamin Denga is an educator and equity advocate in Alberta, Canada. At NorQuest College he supports educators, and educational leaders integrate anti-racist pedagogy in their practice. He leads research and other initiatives advancing inclusive internationalization, student integration, and culturally responsive mental health. His work focuses on transforming policy and practice to promote equity and belonging for marginalized students, workers and newcomers.

Neetika Airi is an international student in Canada from Punjab, India, currently studying Supply Chain Management at NorQuest College. Coming from a diverse cultural background, she is passionate about inclusivity and student advocacy. She believes in amplifying student voices and contributing to meaningful, positive change within academic and community spaces.

Priscilla Idehenre is an alumna of NorQuest College and a passionate career counsellor supporting newcomers adjusting to life in Canada. With a background in HR and community engagement, she facilitates empowering workshops that build confidence and essential skills. Having moved to Canada from Nigeria, she deeply understands the barriers to integration and believes that with the right support, everyone can thrive.

This paper presents insights from a research project aimed at advancing equitable outcomes and addressing the integration and settlement barriers faced by international students in both academic and student-facing services. Conducted by a faculty member and a diverse team of four student research assistants at one of Alberta's largest community colleges, the mixed-methods study was framed using an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDID) lens. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys from over 600 students and recent alumni revealed findings that affirm and extend our understanding of international students' challenges and contributions within the Canadian higher education landscape. The results inform actionable recommendations for meaningful and measurable change, with implications for mobility justice and equity among postsecondary education migrants.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Canada's evolving immigration landscape, international students play an increasingly vital role in shaping the country's demographic, social, and economic future. As Canada recalibrates its immigration plans for a new era, it is essential to examine the barriers and contributions of international students—particularly those studying in community colleges, who often remain understudied in policy and research. This paper reports on an applied research project that explores the experiences of international students in academic and student-facing services at a major Alberta community college. By centering student voices and applying an EDID lens, the study provides empirical insights into the inequities, opportunities, and policy gaps that affect students' ability to thrive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature documents how international students contribute significantly to Canada's economy, cultural diversity, and innovation ecosystem (Crossman et al., 2021; ICEF Monitor, 2024; Legusov et al., 2023; Universities Canada, 2024). At the same time, these students often face a range of barriers—including financial strain, academic adjustment difficulties, mental health challenges, racism, and limited access to relevant services (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022; Campus Mental Health Canada, 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023).

These issues are compounded in community college contexts, where student populations are more diverse, programs more vocationally oriented, and institutional resources often more constrained. Although universities have been the primary focus of research on international education in Canada, colleges—especially community colleges—play a unique and growing role in attracting and retaining international students. College international students may be more likely to come from under-represented or Global South countries and to transition directly into the Canadian labour market or immigration pathways (Choi, Crossman, & Hou, 2021). However, they may also face heightened precarity due to shorter program durations, reduced access to academic support, and less visibility in national and provincial policy discourses.

There is a growing recognition of the need for more inclusive and justice-oriented approaches to international education. Scholars such as Stein (2019), Bhandari and Blumenthal (2011), Sheller (2018), and Brunner (2023) advocate for critically engaging with issues of power, coloniality, and racialized borders in internationalization practices. Sheller's concept of mobility justice highlights how unequal access to movement and belonging is shaped by histories of colonialism and racialized borders. Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2021) further explore how higher education perpetuates a modern/colonial global imaginary and emphasize the need for decolonial critique that reimagines institutional purpose and engagement. This study builds on that work by grounding its analysis in students' lived experiences and connecting institutional practices to broader questions of mobility justice and racial equity.

Furthermore, anti-racist and decolonizing approaches are necessary to address the systemic barriers international students face, particularly within colleges (Henry & Tator, 2010; Dei, 2017). An EDID framework offers a critical perspective for evaluating how academic and student services either support or marginalize international students, emphasizing the need for structural transformation and inclusive policy development.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach that combined the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. An online survey gathered responses from 607 students and recent alumni (2021-2024); the response rate was 71% (431) for currently enrolled international students and 29% (131) for recent international alumni out of over 6000 participants in the college database who received an invitation to participate in the anonymous survey. Multiple critical narrative inquiry interviews with six students captured more nuanced experiences and perceptions. research was conducted collaboratively by a college faculty member (Principal Investigator) and four student research assistants with diverse backgrounds, reflecting a participatory ethos and a commitment to research equity. A senior statistical research analyst supported analysis of the statistical data using SPSS software.

Data collection and analysis were framed through an EDID lens, enabling the team to identify systemic inequities as well as opportunities for reform. The study design integrated elements of critical policy analysis and applied research, aiming not only to generate knowledge but also to support actionable institutional and policy changes. Key findings are summarized below.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Challenging Immigration Pathways

Of the 607 students surveyed, 72.5% found post-graduation immigration pathways “stressful and difficult.” A fifth (20%) also reported experiencing challenges and uncertainty around work permits and on-campus or off-campus work restrictions.

2. Academic and Language Barriers

While 79% of the students surveyed were happy with the quality of learning resources and assistance provided to them, about 1 in 5 (20.6%) of the 607 students surveyed felt that these services were either fair or poor. The students who were not satisfied reported difficulty adjusting to Canadian pedagogical styles, expectations around independent learning, participation, and assignment structures amongst others. Furthermore, students with English as an additional language faced compounded challenges due to limited academic writing support.

3. Mental Health and Well-being

Almost a third of students surveyed (29%) reported experiencing mental health challenges, yet most international students had not accessed the College’s wellness services. Reported barriers included cultural stigma, a perceived lack of culturally responsive care, and unawareness of available resources.

4. Financial Stress

Students cited tuition fees, high rent, and restrictions on work hours as major stressors – experiences that are consistent with the literature. Some engaged in unauthorized or precarious work, risking immigration status just to meet basic needs.

Overworked and Underpaid: Several students interviewed believed that they were experiencing discrimination in compensation received at their workplaces. In one example that captured several other experiences a student lamented: “It’s tough living here without a family and the discrimination in the society, especially students, I feel used and cheated. Let students be paid for the work they do.”

5. Racism and Exclusion

Students reported experiences of microaggressions both on campus and in the broader community. Some felt “otherized” by faculty or peers based on their accents, clothing, or perceived foreignness. One student confirmed this experience in their words: “Yes, I’ve been told my name is too hard and I should get a Canadian name.” At the same time, more students reported experiencing racism off campus (25%) than on campus (20%).

6. Desire for Belonging and Recognition

Despite challenges, students expressed strong motivation to contribute and a desire for genuine inclusion - not just celebration of difference. Many appreciated faculty who made visible efforts to support international learners. Several student participants' sentiments were reflected in this student's comments: "We invest our time, money and everything we have. Hope we feel that we are important from the school and government." Another suggested: "International students are treated like a burden after being welcomed as customers. That has to change."

7. International-Indigenous Student Relations

There is limited but growing attention to the relationship between international and Indigenous students, with a need to build stronger connections, kinship, and cross-cultural solidarity between both student populations. In line with this, a student captured several elements of other participants' expressions when they suggested that: "Cultural exchange events, shared learning activities, and open dialogues about traditions and histories can help build stronger connections and mutual understanding."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The foregoing findings affirm that international students in Canadian colleges are navigating overlapping systems of exclusion shaped by race, immigration status, policies and institutional culture. The persistent gap between the rhetoric of diversity and lived experience of marginalization among international students reveals the need for more critically informed and justice-oriented institutional practices. More equitable policy-mediated practices are also

Importantly, the EDID framework allowed the research team to trace challenges not just to student deficits but to systemic structures—including Eurocentric curriculum, under-resourced services, and restrictive immigration policies. Brunner (2023) reinforces this analysis by arguing that Canada's education-migration system must be restructured through a lens of justice rather than efficiency. This research also supports a growing body of scholarship calling for a shift from transactional internationalization toward ethical, reciprocal, and inclusive models of student engagement (Sheller, 2018; Stein, 2019; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2021).

CONCLUSION

International students in Canadian colleges face a range of intersecting challenges that call for more intentional, equity-centered policy and practice. As Canada rethinks its immigration strategy in response to global pressures, applied research like this provides critical insight into the realities of those impacted by the policies. By centering student voice, confronting systemic exclusion, and embracing mobility justice as a guiding principle, institutions and governments alike can support more inclusive, resilient, and equitable higher education systems.

This research highlights the urgent need to recalibrate international education policy and practice in ways that better support college-based international students. As Canada resets its immigration strategies for the future, it must center equity, recognize the heterogeneity of student pathways, and commit to dismantling systemic barriers that constrain international student integration and success. Community colleges are critical sites for advancing this vision, and applied research that centres students participation and voices can play a powerful role in driving transformation from within.

REFERENCES

- Bhandari, R., & Blumenthal, P. (Eds.). (2011). *International students and global mobility in higher education: National trends and new directions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brunner, L. R. (2023). Towards a more just Canadian education-migration system: International student mobility in crisis. *Studies in Social Justice*, 16(1), Article 2685. <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v16i1.2685>
- Campus Mental Health Canada. (2023). *Financial vulnerability among international students. Toolkits: International students*. Campus Mental Health Canada. <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/international-students/>
- Campus Mental Health Canada. (2023). *International students' mental health. Toolkits: International students*. Campus Mental Health Canada. <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/international-students/>
- Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2022). *The Student Voice: National results of the 2021 CBIE International Student Survey*. https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBIE_2021_International_Student_Survey_National_Report.pdf
- Choi, Y., Crossman, E., & Hou, F. (2021, June 23). *International students as a source of labour supply: Transition to permanent residency (Economic and Social Reports)*. Statistics Canada. <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202100600002-eng>
- Crossman, E., Choi, Y., & Hou, F. (2021). *International students as a source of labour supply: A summary of recent trends. Economic and Social Reports*. Statistics Canada. <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202100700005-eng>
- Dei, G. J. S. (2017). *Reframing blackness and Black solidarities through anti-colonial and decolonial prisms*. Springer.
- Henry, F., & Tator, C. (2010). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian society* (4th ed.). Nelson Education.
- ICEF Monitor. (2024, July 10). International students contributed \$31 billion to Canadian economy in 2022. ICEF Monitor. <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/07/international-students-contributed-31-billion-to-canadian-economy-in-2022/>
- Legusov, O., Jafar, H., & Bégin-Caouette, O. (2023). International students at Canadian community colleges: Emerging trends. *Journal of International Students*, 13(3). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i3.5019>
- Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility justice: The politics of movement in an age of extremes*. Verso.
- Stein, S. (2019). Critical internationalization studies at an impasse: Making space for complexity, uncertainty, and complicity in a time of global challenges. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(9), 1771–1784. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1704722>
- Stein, S., & de Oliveira Andreotti, V. (2021). Higher education and the modern/colonial global imaginary: Possibilities for a decolonial critique. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 21(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616672>
- Universities Canada. (2024). *Supporting international education*. <https://univcan.ca/priority/supporting-international-education/>
- Worae, J., & Edgerton, J. D. (2023). A descriptive survey study of international students' experiences at a Canadian university: Challenges, supports, and suggested improvements. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation comparée et internationale*, 51(2), 16–67. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v51i2.14223>

Stalled Futures: Canada's Immigration Plan and it's Impact on International Student Mental Health

Harmeet Sandhu

Harmeet Sandhu is a registered psychologist practicing in Calgary, Alberta. She holds a master's degree in counselling psychology from University of Calgary. She is experienced in supporting diverse populations and ages across a broad range of mental health concerns. Over the past six years, she has worked closely with the South Asian community, providing culturally responsive therapeutic care.

Considering the immigration plan changes in Canada, this article explores the experience and mental health challenges that South Asian international students face. Additionally, it delves deeper into what motivates an international student, particularly from India to study abroad, by observing the factors that impact the decision to migrate. Drawing from clinical observations and literature, the psychological impact of migration, financial strain, cultural adjustment, and uncertainty around immigration transition and settlement pathways experienced by international student is discussed. Policy and community level recommendations are made surrounding regulation and support services for international students.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's Immigration Plan

To manage population growth, create sustainable infrastructure, and strategically fill labour shortages, Canada has put forth an immigration plan that aims to reduce temporary resident targets to less than five percent of Canada's population (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025). This target significantly reduces the number of international students that Canada will be admit in the coming years. Students from India hold approximately 40% of all study permits in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2025). Given these numbers, it is important to acknowledge that the South Asian international student population will naturally be disproportionately impacted by the changes to Canada's immigration plan. During the time I spent reflecting on these statistics and several policy changes, I found myself wanting to understand the psychology behind what motivates an individual to become an international student and how their mental health is impacted. It is important to consider the individuals behind the numbers. What is the international student experience and why is migrating for education so enticing?

South Asian International Students in Canada

Regardless of their country of origin, international students face several barriers and hardships throughout their journey to long term settlement. Restricted study programs, high tuition costs, scams promising permanent residency, job market realities, and substantial financial investment prior to migration are a few of the many difficulties international students face. Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) discussed push and pull factors as they examined what contributes to an individual's pursuit of international study. Push factors originate in the home country and contribute to the consideration of international study. These factors include the inability to easily access high quality educational programs, the experience of personal and financial stagnation, long-term settlement for a higher quality of life, and the idea that an international degree is often viewed to be of higher prestige. On the other hand, pull factors draw the individual to the host country for international study. Countries like Canada have had a long-standing positive reputation for immigration which makes migration inviting. The idea of creating a secure future in a country that is frequently idolized is compelling, especially in contrast to precarious conditions in one's home country.

Many international students born in India, have narrated their journey to me in our therapy sessions. They mention that Canada has consistently been described as a country where one can achieve a high quality of life and make something of themselves. Lack of safety in one's home country is often mentioned as a factor supporting migration, but additionally, many students experience personal stagnation and do not wish to carry on how past generations have. For this reason, and several others, studying abroad and long-term settlement seems like a dream opportunity. The reality of being an international student comes clear once an individual has migrated and is working to settle down. In sessions, clients frequently mention that as grateful as they are for the ability to study internationally, they did not expect just how complex and challenging their settlement journey would be.

Impact on Mental Health

International students, just as many groups of migrants do, experience elevated risks of mental health concerns (Singh, 2025). Migration itself brings significant change and disruption which requires active adjustment both physical, socially, and psychologically. Leaving social support networks and familiar environments back home, can decrease protective factors (Shankar, Quo, & Siddiqui, 2024). Chronic stress can stem from a pressure to settle and have something to show for the sacrifices and investments one makes when migrating as an international student. Being from a collectivist community, Indian international students are not dissolved from the personal and household responsibilities they still may hold in their home country. Isolation, cultural, and communication barriers combined with limited access to culturally competent health care, increases an international student's risk factors when it comes to mental health concerns. In therapy, when I ask a client what they do to take care of themselves, they often mention not having the time. Many international students have just enough time to go to school, filling most of their remaining time working to pay the exorbitant amount of tuition fees that are required to study as an international student. Living in a suspended state of survivor mode and uncertainty regarding settlement and stability can easily contribute to chronic stress, depression, or anxiety.

Immigrants have historically been looked at as the backbone of our country, but little is offered in means of resources and supports systems to help individuals experiencing mental health crisis. Many international students experience a cultural shock as they navigate a new country. Due to the vast differences in how things are in host countries, there is an innate pressure to fit in or risk standing out and being treated differently. Culturally competent services to navigate such cultural and practical differences are extremely limited. Financial instability resulting from having to pay five times more tuition fees than their Canadian born student counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2023), barriers to housing and an increased vulnerability to exploitation contributes to an increased susceptibility to depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns which often go left undetected and untreated.

Stalled Futures

With significantly decreased admission targets for temporary residents (Statistics Canada, 2025) and limitations on what programs an individual can study and gain settlement in, policies and settlement pathways are creating stagnation and lowering chances of generational mobility. Stalled or limited settlement pathways in Canada will create prolonged states of temporary status and uncertainty in international students which will elevate mental health distress. In South Asian collectivist communities, studying in a country abroad often means having the opportunity to bring your remaining family over to the host country and settle long term in multi-generational home settings. This stems from limited opportunities in home countries where the family may not experience income security or future growth. Decreased opportunity for international study and difficult to navigate immigration transition pathways will prevent unification of families and generational growth and mobility. If international students are contributing to Canada's educational institutions, economy, and working to fill labour shortage gaps, increased care in supportive resources, realistic immigration pathways, and preventative measures to avoid exploitation for both international students and the government should be refined.

Policy and Community Level Recommendations

To ensure both international students and governments are protected, regulation, communication, sustainable policies, and supportive services should be assessed. Educational institutions that international students are applying for in Canada should be assessed to ensure legitimacy and regulation. Regulation can promote standardization and safety against scam or fraud for both international students and the Canadian government. If international students will be encouraged to fill labour shortage gaps, streamlined communication regarding programs that can provide a predictable settlement pathway would be helpful. Stronger detection of fraud against the buying and selling of labour market impact assessments will further protect a vulnerable international student looking to gain permanent residency, and government agencies looking to prevent fraud.

CONCLUSION

Canada has a reputation for being a host country that welcomes and supports immigration, and in return has thrived from the contributions provided by a diverse set of immigrant populations. Titrating and adjusting temporary resident target admissions and policies overtime may have mitigated the social, economical, and psychological impact that this drastic immigration plan change will have on international students amongst other temporary residents. Temporary residents play a crucial role in Canada's economy in a multitude of ways and will continue to do so as they fill labour shortage gaps. Supporting international students with areas such as mental health, social support services, culturally competent programs, predictable immigration transition pathways, reasonable tuition fees, and safety from fraud would be mutually beneficial for a host country and an international student. Canada can work to sustain a stable and supportive immigration plan. However, it is important to account for the lived experiences of immigrants, establish predictable immigration transition pathways, and ensure adequate support in exchange for addressing labour market gaps.

REFERENCES

- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2025). Annual report to Parliament on immigration 2025. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2025.html#annex>*
- Shankar, J., Quo, J., & Siddiqui, R. (2024). Employment precarity and immigrant mental health in Canada. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 15.*
- Singh, G. P. (2025). Migration and its Impact on Mental Health. Journal of Mental Health and Human Behaviour, 30(1), 9-12.*
- Statistics Canada. (2025). Table 37-10-0086-01 Postsecondary enrolments, by status of student in Canada, country of citizenship and gender [Data set]. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710008601-eng>*
- Statistics Canada. (2023). Tuition fees for degree programs.*

International Students, Institutional Incentives, and Canada's Policy Recalibration

Jack Jedwab

Jack Jedwab is President and CEO of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Canadian History from Concordia University. Prior to 1998, he served as executive director of the Quebec branch of the Canadian Jewish Congress. He is an author and contributor to academic publications, government reports and newspapers across the country in the fields of immigration, multiculturalism, diversity, human rights and official languages. Following three decades of wide-ranging research on public opinion and demographics, he is regularly consulted by media and government bodies alike for his expertise and insights on issues of import in the public sphere. He has taught and lectured at McGill University, the Université du Québec à Montréal and Concordia University, offering courses ranging from public policy to the history of immigration and minority groups, to sports in Canada.

Canada's reduction of international study permits reflects growing concerns about the sustainability of temporary migration and the pressures associated with rapid enrolment growth. This article argues that the current contraction is not solely the result of government policy but also of institutional reliance on international tuition revenue and concentrated recruitment practices. It examines the ethical and financial tensions within Canada's international education model and highlights the need for a more sustainable approach that balances economic benefits, student welfare, and public confidence.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada's decision to significantly reduce international study permit targets marks a major shift in the country's approach to international education and temporary migration. Announced as part of the federal budget and the Immigration Levels Plan, the policy reduces allocations for new international study permits from the 2025 target of 305,900 to 155,000 in 2026, followed by 150,000 annually in 2027 and 2028. (*Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Supplementary Information for the 2026–2028 Immigration Levels Plan," Government of Canada, 2025*)

These reductions form part of a broader effort to lower the number of temporary residents in Canada—including both international students and temporary foreign workers—from 673,650 in 2025 to 385,000 in 2026 and 370,000 in each of the following two years.

Government officials have framed the policy as a necessary step to restore sustainability to Canada's immigration system. Rapid growth in temporary migration over the past decade has been widely perceived as placing increasing pressure on housing supply, healthcare services, and public infrastructure.

At the same time, the government has emphasized that the country remains committed to attracting highly skilled immigrants and international students who contribute to research, innovation, and economic growth.

Yet the reduction in international study permits is not simply an immigration policy adjustment. It also exposes structural tensions within Canada's international education model—particularly the growing dependence of universities and colleges on income from international tuition.

Over the past decade, many institutions expanded international recruitment aggressively, charging tuition fees that were often prohibitively high for students especially those from developing countries while simultaneously promoting narratives that linked education in Canada to eventual permanent residency. When policy tightened and visa approvals declined, the vulnerabilities of this model became visible.

The current policy shift therefore raises a broader question: to what extent are governments alone responsible for the reduction of international student admissions, and to what extent did institutional practices contribute to the conditions that made federal intervention politically and administratively inevitable?

Canada’s International Student Boom and Policy Reversal

For more than a decade, Canada positioned itself as one of the world’s most attractive destinations for international students. A combination of high-quality education, relatively accessible study permits, and post-graduation immigration pathways made Canada particularly appealing compared with competing destinations.

As a result, international student numbers grew rapidly. Between 2019 and 2023 the number of study permit holders in Canada increased dramatically, reaching a peak of nearly 681,000 in 2023. However, this rapid expansion soon began to raise concerns among policymakers and the public about sustainability and oversight.

The contraction that followed has been equally dramatic. Between 2024 and 2025 alone, the number of study permit holders declined from approximately 514,915 to 383,905—representing a reduction of more than 25 percent. This decline followed another significant reduction in the previous year, marking a sharp reversal after more than a decade of expansion.

The table below illustrates these changes across major source countries.

Study Permit Holders	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Canada	400,570	255,530	443,500	548,010	680,795	514,915	383,905
India	138,590	80,870	169,300	225,665	277,965	188,175	94,605
China, People's Republic of	84,140	57,695	55,735	51,585	58,025	56,175	49,125
Nigeria	7,505	5,830	9,510	16,085	37,475	26,445	25,570
Philippines	6,330	4,355	14,345	25,235	33,745	24,675	20,000
France	14,510	7,930	19,985	16,600	15,385	13,695	13,430
Vietnam	11,605	9,355	9,220	9,900	10,735	10,510	9,805
Iran	9,680	6,965	11,910	13,445	14,725	10,900	9,155
Korea, Republic of	16,990	10,925	10,590	11,455	10,460	8,455	8,765
United States of America	6,680	4,235	8,190	6,910	7,685	6,780	8,525
Mexico	6,255	3,645	9,695	10,315	11,355	8,325	7,975
Algeria	2,640	2,040	3,030	5,205	9,330	9,235	7,730
Ukraine	1,520	975	1,395	6,650	6,110	5,010	6,630v

Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2026). Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders – Monthly IRCC Updates [2015-2025]. Government of Canada Open Government Portal. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>

Concentration Risk: The Dominance of Indian Students

One of the most striking patterns in the data is the disproportionate decline in students from India. Study permits issued to Indian nationals fell dramatically between 2024 and 2025, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the total reduction in international student numbers.

Other countries experienced reductions as well, though on a smaller scale. China, the Philippines, and Iran saw declines of roughly one quarter, while Nigeria experienced only a modest decrease. France and South Korea saw relatively little change, and the United States actually recorded an increase in study permits.

This geographic concentration reveals a structural vulnerability that had developed within Canada’s international education system. Over time, institutions increasingly relied on a limited number of recruitment markets—particularly India—where demand for overseas education was strong and where the possibility of immigration to Canada made studying abroad especially attractive.

The risks of this concentration became apparent when immigration authorities tightened visa scrutiny and introduced additional verification measures. Reports indicated rising rejection rates for applicants from India as well as the discovery of fraudulent letters of acceptance in some recruitment channels. In response, the federal government implemented stricter verification procedures and higher financial requirements for applicants.

While these measures were intended to restore integrity to the system, they also exposed how dependent Canadian institutions had become on a single source country for international enrolment and tuition revenue.

Public Perceptions of Responsibility

Public opinion research suggests that Canadians view the contraction in international student admissions as the result of shared responsibility among several actors. Governments are widely seen as the primary decision-makers, but institutions and recruitment intermediaries are also perceived as having contributed to the problem.

When thinking about recent reductions and caps on international student admissions in Canada, who do you believe is most responsible for the situation that led to these cuts? Combined two picks

When thinking about recent reductions and caps on international student admissions in Canada, who do you believe is most responsible for the situation that led to these cuts? Combined two picks	Total
The federal and provincial governments	77%
Universities and colleges administrators	52%
International students themselves	23%
Student recruitment agencies or placement offices	45%
Other	3%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies. October 24-26, 2025.

These findings indicate that Canadians recognize institutional responsibility alongside government policy decisions. Although immigration rules and visa approvals ultimately fall under federal authority, universities and colleges played a central role in shaping the scale and structure of international enrolment.

Importantly, public opinion distinguishes between institutions and students themselves. International students continue to be viewed relatively positively by Canadians compared with other migrant groups.

This distinction is important because international students themselves are not responsible for the policies or recruitment strategies that shaped the system. The responsibility instead lies primarily with governments, institutions, and recruitment networks that structured the incentives guiding international education.

Net Trust	Total	Immigrant	Non-immigrant	White	Not White	South Asian	Chinese
Net Trust	Total	Immigrant	Non-immigrant	White	Not White	South Asian	Chinese
Immigrants -	46%	47%	45%	46%	44%	53%	55%
Refugees	36%	28%	38%	39%	26%	30%	32%
International/foreign students	44%	44%	45%	45%	42%	39%	47%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies. October 24-26, 2025.

Institutional Incentives and the Ethics of Recruitment

While government policy created the regulatory environment within which international education expanded, universities and colleges made strategic decisions that intensified the system’s vulnerabilities.

As mentioned above, over the past decade, many institutions increasingly relied on international tuition fees as a central component of their financial models. Because international students often pay tuition rates several times higher than those charged to domestic students, they became an indispensable source of revenue. In those provinces where domestic tuition was frozen and public funding of higher education declined, international enrolment effectively subsidized institutional budgets.

However, this financial dependence also created powerful incentives for aggressive recruitment.

Many universities and colleges marketed Canada not only as a place to study but also as a place to settle permanently. Although Canada does offer seamless pathways from international study to permanent residency, these

pathways are competitive and subject to changing labour market and policy conditions. In practice, some recruitment narratives conveyed the impression that permanent residency was a likely or expected outcome after graduation.

For prospective students and their families, the decision to invest tens of thousands of dollars in Canadian higher education was therefore shaped by expectations that extended beyond academic opportunity. Education became intertwined with migration aspirations.

At the same time, the tuition fees charged to international students were often extraordinarily high relative to their economic circumstances. Many students incurred substantial debt or relied on family resources in order to finance their studies. Rising housing costs in major Canadian cities further compounded these financial pressures.

The result was that many international students found themselves in precarious financial situations. When labour market opportunities failed to materialize, immigration policies tightened, or educational programs failed to deliver expected outcomes, some students struggled to sustain themselves economically.

A small number attempted to remain in Canada through additional programs of questionable value or by filing asylum claims despite lacking justification for refugee protection. Although such cases represent only a small fraction of total asylum applications, they have attracted significant media attention and contributed to public perceptions of system abuse.

The Irony of Institutional Ethics

The role of universities and colleges in this system raises an important ethical paradox.

Higher education institutions frequently present themselves as guardians of ethical standards in research, teaching, and public discourse. Academic integrity, fairness, and social responsibility are core principles that universities publicly champion. Yet the financial incentives created by international tuition revenue encouraged practices that sometimes blurred ethical boundaries.

Aggressive recruitment strategies, heavy reliance on private agents operating abroad, and messaging that emphasized immigration pathways all contributed to a system that placed many students in vulnerable financial situations. Institutions that uphold rigorous ethical standards in academic life were simultaneously participating in a market-driven recruitment environment that exposed students to significant risk.

This irony does not imply that universities intentionally exploited international students. Rather, it highlights the structural tension between the commercial pressures facing modern universities and the ethical values they seek to uphold.

Universities are, in many respects, complex organizations that must balance academic missions with financial realities. Yet the experience of the past decade suggests that the financialization of international education can generate incentives that undermine the ethical principles institutions claim to champion.

Toward a More Sustainable Model

The recent reductions in international study permits represent both a policy correction and a cautionary lesson. They demonstrate how quickly a system built on rapid expansion can reverse when structural vulnerabilities accumulate.

Moving forward, Canada's international education model will likely require substantial recalibration.

Diversifying recruitment markets could reduce dependence on a single source country and mitigate financial risks. Clearer communication about immigration pathways would help ensure that prospective students understand both the opportunities and the uncertainties associated with studying in Canada. Stronger oversight of recruitment agents could improve transparency and protect students from misleading information.

At the same time, universities and colleges will need to reconsider the extent to which their financial stability depends on income from international tuition. Greater investment in student housing, support services, and program quality could help ensure that international enrolment growth does not exacerbate affordability pressures or undermine student well-being.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Canada's decision to reduce international study permits reflects growing concern about the sustainability of recent migration levels and the pressures associated with rapid expansion. While governments ultimately control immigration policy, the dynamics that produced the current contraction were shaped by a complex interplay of policy incentives, institutional strategies, and recruitment practices.

Universities and colleges bear part of the responsibility for creating a system that became heavily dependent on international tuition revenue and concentrated recruitment in a limited number of source countries. Aggressive recruitment practices and messaging that emphasized immigration pathways contributed to expectations that were not always matched by economic or policy realities.

The irony is that institutions that proudly uphold high ethical standards in academic life became participants in a market-driven system that sometimes placed the very students they recruited in precarious circumstances.

The lesson is not that Canada should retreat from international education. International students remain an important source of intellectual and cultural capital and economic vitality. Rather, the challenge moving forward is to rebuild the system on more sustainable foundations—ones that balance financial realities with ethical responsibility, transparency, and genuine student success.

Invisible and At Risk: Confronting Barriers Faced by Women International Students

Prabhjot Kaur, Sumeet Shergill

Sumeet Shergill is the Program Manager for Mentorship and Chapter Initiatives at Laadliyan, where she leads mentorship programming, university chapter development, and community partnerships that empower South Asian women and girls. She holds a Master of Social Work from York University and is a Registered Social Worker with the OCSWSSW. Sumeet has been part of the Laadliyan community since 2020, drawn to its mission of creating spaces where South Asian youth can grow, connect, and lead. She is passionate about community mental health and mentorship as a tool for breaking down barriers and building confidence in the next generation. Sumeet Shergill is the Program Manager for Mentorship & Chapters Initiatives at Laadliyan.

Prabhjot Kaur is the Operations Manager at Laadliyan, bringing over eight years of experience in community service with a focus on youth empowerment, leadership development, and strengthening South Asian communities. She holds a Diploma in Social Service Work and also serves as Director of Administration at the World Sikh Organization. Prabhjot has contributed to the BMJ scoping review on the health of international students in Canada and has presented at the 8th Metropolis Identities Conference. Prabhjot's journey with Laadliyan began in 2018 as a Social Service Work placement student. Inspired by the organization's mission and the welcoming space it created for girls like her, she continued volunteering before joining the team. She credits Laadliyan with helping her grow from a quiet introvert into a confident leader and is passionate about creating that same sense of belonging and opportunity for others. Outside of work, Prabhjot enjoys reading, watching lighthearted Turkish shows, and exploring hands-on crafting projects.

Canada's post secondary education system relies heavily on international students, yet their lived realities, particularly those of women, remain underexamined in policy and practice. Drawing on Laadliyan's community-based programming, funded research initiatives, and focus group findings in the Peel Region, this article examines the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by women international students, including workplace exploitation, housing precarity, sexual harassment, and legal illiteracy. It highlights how temporary immigration status, gendered power dynamics, and limited access to trusted information compound risk. The article further outlines culturally responsive practices, such as multilingual legal education and peer-informed digital resources, that can strengthen institutional accountability and student protection in Canada's evolving immigration landscape.

INTRODUCTION

International Students in Canada's Evolving Immigration Landscape

Canada's reputation as a culturally diverse and safe country coupled with a well established and globally recognized education system has made it a destination of choice for many prospective international students (Esses et al., 2018; Netierman et al., 2022). In recent years, international students have also become increasingly central to Canada's labour market and immigration strategy. However, as tuition costs rise, work-hour restrictions tighten, and housing affordability declines, many international students face mounting financial and social pressures.

For women international students in particular, these pressures are compounded by gendered vulnerabilities that remain largely invisible within institutional responses. Balancing academic demands with employment and settlement responsibilities, many women encounter exploitative working conditions, unsafe housing, and heightened risks of harassment, all while navigating precarious immigration status. This article draws on Laadliyan's community-based research and programming to examine these challenges and identify best practices for more equitable engagement with women international students.

Organizational Context: Laadliyan and the Udaari Program

Laadliyan, Celebrating & Empowering Daughters is a Canadian non-profit organization with a mission to inspire South Asian daughters of all ages to become empowered individuals through education, engagement and awareness. Laadliyan delivers culturally responsive programming for daughters of all ages such as the Laadli to Laadli Mentorship Program, Laadli Care Packages, and the Udaari program, each designed to meet diverse needs of South Asian daughters across Canada.

The Udaari Program was developed in response to the growing needs of women-identifying international students, particularly those navigating financial, employment and housing precarity, limited social support, and unfamiliar legal systems. As students increasingly juggle education, employment, and rising costs of living, some engage in unauthorized or exploitative work arrangements to survive (Kahlon, 2021). Udaari seeks to address these realities through a wrap-around support model that centers safety, legal literacy, and community connection. Laadliyan's engagement with international students initially began in 2019 during the COVID-19 pandemic through providing emergency financial support for essential items such as hygiene products and groceries. As needs became clearer, the Udaari program quickly expanded into a comprehensive wrap-around model. The program now offers system-navigation support to ensure students had access to resources related to settlement, mental health, food security, and more. In addition to direct services, Laadliyan partners with academic institutions and employers, offering workshops on safety and legal rights, while also building institutional capacity to better serve international students. The Udaari Program further supports students through mentorship opportunities and professional development.

Evidence of Exploitation: Community-Based Research Findings

In 2022, Laadliyan received funding from the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement to examine and address employment-related exploitation experienced by international students in the Peel Region. Community consultations revealed deeply concerning patterns of exploitation, harassment, manipulation, and blackmail. Many students reported limited awareness of their rights as tenants, employees, as well as the legal responsibilities of employers and landlords. These gaps in legal literacy, combined with the precarious nature of their temporary resident status, leaves International students vulnerable to exploitation by employers, landlords, community members, and intimate partners. Students often refrain from reporting harms or illegal activities in fear of jeopardizing their status in Canada. These findings underscored the urgent need to strengthen and understand international students' legal capacity and informed Laadliyan's commitment to further addressing systemic vulnerabilities faced by newcomer students.

These insights led to a project called Enhancing Legal Capacity of Women International Students, funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario. The goals of this initiative were two fold; to identify and educate. Firstly, we wanted to understand the international student experience to identify major challenges for these students. Secondly, with this information we hoped to create 15 educational videos on legal topics to educate international students, particularly young women in Peel Region who are at greater risk of exploitation by employers and landlords. Ultimately, our hope was that this will lead to a decrease in the exploitation faced by women international students and build their capacity to access appropriate support in the community. Focus groups with women international students revealed consistent challenges related to employment and housing. Participants described difficulty finding work, pressure to accept unpaid training, and employers deliberately scheduling hours beyond legal limits while withholding pay. One participant shared:

"So it was like really hard to find a part time job and when I got one I had to do the training that is for about like 2 weeks. The free training that was like a hard part, but there was nothing else to do. it was like hectic schedule for me because I used to go for this training and after this training because our doctor (Boss) came to know that we had the college only from 6:00 right, so he still used to take advantage of that. So it's like we can only get 20 hour pay. Means 20 hours pay per week, so he used to ask us to come like the other days too, but we can't take that money and he's not ready to give us"

Others described experiences that pointed toward sexual harassment and coercion during job searches. One participant recounted being asked to provide personal photographs for a receptionist position and being told that physical appearance was a requirement for employment. Such accounts revealed gendered forms of exploitation that extend beyond labour violations into sexualized control and intimidation.

Notably, multiple discussions also raised concerns related to sex trafficking, an issue not initially anticipated in the project design. These findings highlighted the ways in which gender, migration status, and economic vulnerability intersect to create heightened risk for women international students.

Translating Knowledge into Accessible Resources

In response to these findings, Laadliyan developed a series of short educational videos addressing key legal topics, including employment rights, housing standards, immigration considerations, and personal safety. Content development was informed by an analysis of existing social media resources for international students, which showed higher engagement with conversational, concise, and culturally relatable formats.

Scripts were reviewed by legal and human resources professionals drawn from Laadliyan's Laadli to Laadli mentorship network to ensure accuracy and relevance. In July 2024, Laadliyan launched Laadliyan's Survival Guide for International Students on YouTube. The playlist includes 19 videos, each approximately two minutes long, designed as entry points for legal awareness rather than exhaustive instruction. 15 videos were created around legal topics but an additional 4 videos were also developed to cover this sex trafficking.

All videos are presented in English with Hindi and Punjabi captions, and each includes links to trusted community and legal resources. A culturally relevant resource list was also developed and made available on Laadliyan's website.

Best Practices

Through our work, we have noticed that the best practices for supporting this community include: facilitating access to community supports and services, ensuring accountability and transparency at work, and promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity.

We have found that system navigation has been a key support for many international students, as most are unaware of what resources are available to them. At Laadliyan, we collaborate with workplaces, academic institutions, religious organizations, and community groups to make it easier for students to access these supports and services. We've also observed that clearer employment contracts help students better understand their legal rights and responsibilities, promoting transparency in how to report workplace harassment. Lastly, workplaces that provide cultural sensitivity training create environments where students feel more comfortable, as employees/colleagues gain a deeper understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds.

By consistently applying these three practices, access to supports, clear accountability, and cultural sensitivity, we can ensure that students receive comprehensive, wraparound support to thrive academically, socially, and professionally

CONCLUSION

Implications for Policy and Practice

Laadliyan's work with women international students reveals how exploitation and harm often occur in plain sight, normalized by power imbalances and institutional blind spots. While international students are increasingly framed as economic contributors, their protection remains fragmented and reactive. Community-based, gender-responsive interventions offer critical insight into how legal education, culturally relevant resources, and early engagement can mitigate harm.

As Canada reassesses its immigration and international education policies, greater attention must be paid to the lived realities of women international students. Protecting students requires not only individual awareness but systemic accountability across educational institutions, employers, and policymakers. By centering student voices and community-based knowledge, Canada can move toward an international education system that is not only globally competitive, but also just and humane.

References

- Esses, V., Sutter, A., Ortiz, A., Luo, N., Cui, J., & Deacon, L. (2018). *Retaining international students in Canada post-graduation: Understanding the motivations and drivers of the decision to stay*. CBIE Research in Brief, 8.
- Kahlon, B. (2021). *The realities for international students: Evidenced challenges*. One voice Canada.
- Netierman, E., Harrison, L., Freeman, A., Shoyele, G., Esses, V., & Covell, C. (2022). *Should I stay or should I go? International students' decision-making about staying in Canada*. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 23(1), 43-60.

Finding and Securing Employment: Experiences of Alumni International Students in Canada

Nancy Mandell, Larry Lam, Larry, Sutama Ghosh, Jana Borrás, Mercedeh Safarian

Nancy Mandell is a Professor of Sociology at York University. Her research and teaching interests include gender, aging, intergenerational relations and migrant settlement. Recently, she has published articles and book chapters on rising income inequality in Canada, economic insecurity among senior immigrant families, intergenerational transnational exchanges in later life families, and critiques of aging.

Lawrence Lam is Emeritus Faculty, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, Arts, York University. His areas of research include migration and refugee resettlement, race and ethnic relations, and qualitative and quantitative methodology.

Sutama Ghosh is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Ryerson University. She is interested in exploring the development of immigrants as socio-cultural-political and economic citizens of Canada, understanding their unequal access to housing and employment, and the impact of such inequality on their social identities and levels of integration into Canadian society.

Jana Borrás is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, at York University. Her research interests include migration, precarious legal status, care work and the incorporation of temporary migrants in Canada. Her dissertation examines the impact of precarious legal status upon arrival on the economic mobility of health care workers.

Mercedeh Safarian is a PhD Student in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, at York University. Her research interests include settlement and integration, inequality, and mental health and well-being. Her dissertation will examine the impact of social media on the mental health of Canadian youth.

Many international student alumni experience barriers as they transition from school to work. This research examines the university-to-work transitions of 19 international student alumni who attended university in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Our research looks at the constant and varied challenges alumni face at two levels— institutional and individual—including discrimination based on race and immigrant status, accent and language barriers, social isolation, job insecurity, and underemployment, resulting in poor mental health. To secure stable employment commensurate with their skills and training, international students activate their personal and social networks.

INTRODUCTION

Many international student alumni experience barriers as they transition from school to work in Canada. This transition is difficult, uneven, and not always successful. Economic, social and cultural challenges often mark the process of finding and securing employment. Many are confronted with daily challenges related to the high cost of living (food and housing), financial setbacks such as job loss and income reduction, and limited social connections. These challenges are further compounded by discrimination, language difficulties, mental and physical health strains, job insecurity, and precarious immigration status (CBIE, 2023; El Masri and Khan, 2022).

Between 2023 to 2024, a team of researchers from York University and Toronto Metropolitan University undertook a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project to examine the employment barriers alumni face at two levels— individual and institutional—and the strategies they employ in seeking employment in Ontario. Specifically, we examined four research questions: a) what are the challenges facing international student alumni seeking full-time employment post-graduation?; b) what institutional supports (universities, employers, and agencies) are available?; c) what individual strategies do individuals employ in seeking employment?; and d) what role do social connections (friends, family, professors, employers, coworkers, community agencies) play in helping international students secure permanent employment? Our findings reveal the importance of building social connections and collaborative efforts between post-secondary institutions, employers, and settlement agencies in identifying barriers and helping international students find full-time employment after graduation.

METHODS

We recruited international student alumni who graduated within 3 to 5 years prior via snowball sampling and the university's alumni network. The inclusion criterion (graduation time frame) was established to ensure that alumni can meaningfully reflect on challenges and successes they face in their employment experiences and career trajectories.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 19 international student alumni. Participants were diverse in gender, age, and country of birth. The majority are aged 25 to 29. Participants were mainly from East Asia (5), South Asia (4), Europe (3), South America (2), Africa (2), North America (2), and the Caribbean (1). Participants arrived between 2012 and 2016 and lived in Toronto upon arrival. Academically, these participants came from a mix of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and BHASE (Business, Humanities, Health, Arts, Social Science, and Education) backgrounds. Participants graduated between 2018 and 2022. At the time of the interview, 17 of the participants were employed. Moreover, the legal status of the group varied, including: 1 citizen, 10 permanent residents, and 4 post-graduation work permits.

Limited Institutional Support from Educators and Employers

International student alumni stated that the advice and information they received from university career centres was basic and, for the most part, already available from online resources. As one participant said, “I think the advice [staff] had given me was stuff that I already found from googling. I said I already knew that stuff. I thought they would have given me more, but they didn’t” (Mary, arrived in 2016 from the British Virgin Islands, age 25-29, BHASE alumni). Limited job search assistance from the university leaves participants feeling unprepared and unsupported. Participants resort to individual strategies (e.g., online job board applications, job opportunities through word of mouth) and their social connections to navigate the challenges of transitioning from school to work.

Managing Employment and Health Challenges

International student alumni experience mental and physical health decline due to the challenges of finding full-time employment in their field. “Whenever people would ask the question of ‘so how’s the job search going?’, my heart would sink because the answer was always the same. It got to a point where I would limit social interaction because I wanted to run away from that question...I think there’s a lot of stigma for a lot of international students because they all came here expecting to find jobs” (Mark, arrived in 2014 from Kenya, age 25-29, BHASE alumni).

Unemployment and underemployment can lead to a lack of funds for groceries, housing costs, and other living expenses. These financial challenges, coupled with other health and social issues, lead to feelings of fear, stress, and uncertainty, which have a negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of participants.

Managing Discrimination

International student alumni face discrimination and prejudice. Participants stress they face discrimination against their temporary legal status, nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, age, language skills, and accents when looking for employment and when on the job. For example, participants with temporary legal status are ineligible for certain employment opportunities, which makes it difficult to find permanent employment without permanent residence (PR) (Fang et al., 2022). Periwinkle explains that “the relations between Russia and the West at that point were pretty bad”, which “created a sort of the bias against me as I was looking for positions, especially in the private sector” (arrived in 2016 from Russia, age 25-29, BHASE alumni).

Other participants recounted encounters of accent and language discrimination. For example, Peter, an online part-time tutor, talked about how his clients became frustrated with his English skills, often commenting, “I don’t understand what you mean” (arrived in 2014 from China, age 25-29, BHASE alumni). These comments leave participants feeling discouraged about their language skills and anxious about their long-term career prospects.

Overcoming Challenges through Social Connections

Even though alumni international students often lack family members or friends upon arrival in Canada, their families “from afar” provide ongoing instrumental, emotional, and financial support. For example, Alex (arrived in 2015 from Pakistan, age 25-29, STEM alumni) received full financial assistance from his parents, enabling him to meet the high tuition fees facing international students who are ineligible for domestic financial aid (e.g., Ontario Student Assistance Program). Without family and friends in Canada, international students work extremely hard to strengthen their social connections, which offer emotional support and local information on how to access housing, jobs, emergency aid, health, and legal services.

International students also share resources among themselves, such as money, clothes, or household goods, and provide help with childcare or temporary housing (Bottrell, 2009; Mandell et al., 2022). Local social connections may enhance employment opportunities when participants seek career advice from professors, exchange job search strategies with peers, build connections on social media platforms, and improve their job-seeking skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research challenges the neoliberal idea that settlement and integration is an “individual affair” by calling attention to the critical role of different social institutions in facilitating pathways to permanent residency and readiness to enter the Canadian job market (Preston, Shields, and Akbar, 2022). Successful settlement and integration “takes a village”; universities, government, employers, friends, family, coworkers, and community members must work together to promote international student success (Radiamoda et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

We provide insights into the lived experiences of international student alumni, highlighting the role of individual and institutional supports in helping alumni overcome barriers in securing employment after graduation. We asked participants for recommendations on how to improve the experiences of international students seeking employment after graduation. For universities, our participants recommended the following: improving the career centers by offering accessible locations; hiring multi-lingual staff to assist with various questions related to job search; offering internships or job placement opportunities; extending networking events with business and community experts; and increasing access to mental and physical services on campus since international students do not qualify for provincially funded health services.

For employers, participants recommended: promoting equitable hiring practices (e.g., do not use legal status to restrict and disqualify international students from employment opportunities); reassessing the requirement for Canadian work experience; offering bias training in the workplace; introducing mentorship programs where senior employees guide junior employees through early stages of their career; and providing mental health support in the workplace.

Participants offered suggestions for incoming international students, including: building social connections by joining clubs on campus, attending social events, and doing a semester abroad; participating in community activities to enhance social networking; beginning job searches within their field of study at least one year before graduation; finding summer jobs to gain Canadian work experience; and prioritizing physical and mental well-being.

Given the importance of international students to the growth and strength of Canadian society, there is a need for a robust collaborative effort among various institutions, including universities, employers, and settlement agencies, to ensure that international students receive meaningful support during their transitions from university to work.

REFERENCES

- Bottrell, D. (2009). *Dealing with disadvantage: Resilience and the social capital of young people's networks*. *Youth & Society*, 40(4), 476-501.
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). (2023). *International student survey*. <https://cbie.ca/infographic/>
- El Masri, A., & Khan, N. (2022). *International students' lived experiences: A review of literature*. https://source.sheridancollege.ca/cgei_resources/1/
- Hall, P., & Lamont, M. (2013). Introduction. In P. Hall & M. Lamont (Eds.), *Social resilience in the neoliberal era* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge University Press.
- Fang, T., Xiao, N., Zhu, J., & Hartley, J. (2022). *Employer attitudes and the hiring of immigrants and international students: Evidence from a survey of employers in Atlantic Canada*. *Canadian Public Policy*, 48(S1), 17-37.
- Mandell, N., Phonepraseuth, J., Borrás, J., & Lam, L. (2022). *South Asian and Chinese international students in Canada: The role of social connections in their settlement and integration*. *Comparative and International Education*, 51(1), 75-91.
- Preston, V., Shields, J., & Akbar, M. (2022). *Migration and resilience in urban Canada: Why social resilience, Why now?*. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 23(3), 1421-1441.
- Radiamoda, R. B., Chuang, H. H., Pernia, R. A., & Borazon, E. Q. (2024). *Investigating resilience of international students at a public university in Southern Taiwan and its implications for the New Southbound Policy*. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 106, 103001.
- Zhang, X., English, A. S., Li, X., Yang, Y., Stanciu, A., & Shuang, W. (2023). *International students' collective resilience in crisis: Sense of community reduced anxiety via social contact and social support during lockdown*. *Heliyon*, 9(4).

From Crisis to Contraction: Linking International Students Experience of COVID-19 to Canada's Post Pandemic Reductions in Temporary Migration

Dr. David Firang, Prof. J. Mensah, Samuel Owusu Okyere, Mohammed Abdulai

David Firang is an Associate Professor at Trent University's Social Work department. He holds a cross-appointment with Graduate Programs in M.A Sustainability Studies and PhD in Interdisciplinary Social Research. His research focuses on international students' mobility, immigrant transnationalism, Black African experiences, child welfare and Canadian social policy. His academic contributions have been recognized through competitive research grants, including SSHRC. He has published widely on issues affecting international students and immigrant communities. He is the Principal Investigator (P.I.) of this SSHRC project - International Students Lived Experience and Resilience During the COVID Pandemic

Joseph Mensah holds a Full Professorship at the faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York University, Toronto. His specialties are in migration and population geography, critical development theories and research methods. Prof. Mensah is a recipient of numerous competitive research grants from the likes of Gates Foundation, ILO, GDN, IDRC and SSHRC. He is a co-investigator to this SSHRC project- International Students Lived Experience and Resilience During the COVID Pandemic

Samuel Okyere Owusu is a graduate of Trent University's Master of Arts in Sustainability Studies program and currently serves as a Research Assistant on this SSHRC-funded project. He also holds a master's degree in mathematics, bringing strong quantitative expertise to this interdisciplinary research. Through the integration of mathematical rigor and social science inquiry, his scholarly work employs advanced statistical and quantitative methodologies to examine complex social issues, including international migration and the social impacts of global crises in Canada.

Mohammed Abdulai is a PhD student and sessional faculty member at Trent University's School of Business. He is also a graduate of Trent University's M.A. in Sustainability Studies program. His research focuses on international migration, labour market integration, and international graduate employment outcomes in Canada. He contributed to this SSHRC-funded project as a Research Assistant, supporting data collection and analysis.

As Canada is changing course in reducing temporary migrants, this paper presents the results of quantitative data analysis of a SSHRC funded research project on the experience of international students in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic and connects these findings to the Canada's reductions in international students' targets. The findings indicate that during the pandemic, international students faced academic disruption, financial hardship, social isolation, and uncertainty surrounding immigration

pathways. As Canada now tightens temporary migration levels, these challenges shape how international students perceive stability and long-term opportunities in Canada. By analyzing students' experiences of the pandemic, the paper highlights the impact of COVID-19 on students' well-being and examines how the new immigration policy may damage Canada's reputation as a desirable study destination for international students.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Canada increasingly positioned itself as a preferred destination for international students by promoting high-quality education and accessible pathways to permanent residency. International students became central to Canada's immigration and economic strategies because of their significant contributions to socio-cultural diversity and economic development (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Firang, 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022). Consequently, international student enrolment increased dramatically from approximately 400,000 in 2016 to over 640,000 in 2019 (Global Affairs Canada, 2019), and nearly one million by 2024 (CBIE, 2025). This growth was largely driven by immigration and labour market policies such as the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP), Express Entry, and Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs), which expanded employment opportunities and facilitated permanent residency pathways for graduates. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted international mobility and forced major policy adjustments related to study permits, online learning, and post-graduation work eligibility, significantly shaping international students' experiences in Canada (Varughese & Schwartz, 2025).

CONTEXT

Although Canada adopted flexible immigration measures during the pandemic, international students remained highly vulnerable because of their temporary immigration status, economic insecurity, and limited access to social protections (Chen et 2020; Firang, 2020; Varughese & Schwartz, 2025). Existing research has consistently shown that international students experienced academic disruption (Firang, 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022; Olatunji et al., 2023), financial hardship (Firang, 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022; Olatunji et al., 2023), and mental health challenges (Chen et 2020; Firang, 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022; Wang & Liu, 2024) during the pandemic. Many students worked in precarious sectors such as hospitality, retail, and food services that were severely affected by lockdowns, intensifying financial precarity and housing insecurity (Firang & Mensah, 2022; Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024). Social isolation, uncertainty regarding immigration pathways, and separation from family members abroad further contributed to emotional stress and psychological distress (Firang, 2020). Despite the growing body of research on international students' pandemic experiences, limited studies have linked these experiences to Canada's recent shift toward reducing temporary migration targets.

OBJECTIVE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our study addresses that gap by exploring how the lived experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic intersect with Canada's recent post-pandemic reductions in temporary migration and international student admissions. To achieve its objective, we address two major research questions:

- **What are the lived experiences of international students in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- **How do international students' lived experiences intersect with the recent reductions in Canada's temporary migration targets?**

Theoretical Framework Many theoretical perspectives offer explanatory framework of international students' mobility including the neo-classical economic (Massey et al., 1994), push-pull model (Robinson, 2005), and neo-liberal framework (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Harvey, 2005). This study is anchored in neo-liberal theory, which examines how market-oriented policies shape higher education and international migration, and immigration policy. Neo-liberalism conceptualizes education as an economic commodity and positions international students as sources of revenue, skilled labour, and human capital within global competition (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024). In the Canadian context, international students became central to the financial sustainability of post-secondary institutions and broader economic growth strategies (Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024). However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the precarious conditions underlying this system, as many international students experienced financial hardship, employment instability, and limited institutional support. Canada's post-pandemic reduction in international student admissions further reflects the conditional logic of neo-liberal governance, where migrant populations are managed according to shifting economic and political priorities. This framework, allows us to explore how the pandemic experience of international students connects to Canada's subsequent immigration policy contraction in international education

METHODOLOGY

In addressing the above questions, the study employed a quantitative research design using survey questionnaires administered to 487 international students attending six post-secondary institutions across Ontario between March 2024 and December 2025. Participating institutions included Fleming College, Sheridan College, St. Clair College, Trent University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Windsor. The questionnaire collected socio-demographic information and data related to academic challenges, financial hardship, mental health, institutional support, resilience, social capital, and transnational ties. Data analysis was conducted using univariate descriptive statistics and multivariate logistic regression models to assess predictors of mental health outcomes and resilience.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

The univariate descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 demonstrates that the study’s sample was socio-demographically diverse across gender, age, race/ethnicity, nationality, and institutional background. Male participants represented 56.1% of respondents, while females accounted for 43.5% and other gender identities represented 0.4%. Most respondents (58.4%) were between 20 and 29 years old, reflecting the traditional age range of international students in Canada, while 19.1% were aged 30–39 years. In terms of race and nationality, Asian students constituted the largest racial group (52.8%), followed by Black students (36.0%),

White students (4.4%), and other racial groups (6.9%). Indian students formed the largest nationality group (40.4%), followed by Nigeria (16.6%) and Ghana (14.5%), while students from Bangladesh, Nepal, China, Iran, and other countries were also represented. Participants were relatively evenly distributed between universities (53.5%) and colleges (46.5%), strengthening the representativeness of the sample and allowing for comparison across institutional contexts. These findings reflect broader demographic trends within Canada’s international student population (CBIE, 2025).

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	270	56.1
Female	209	43.5
Other	2	0.4
Total	481	100
Age (years)		
Below 20 years	56	11.6
20–29 years	281	58.4
30–39 years	92	19.1
40–49 years	22	4.6
50–59 years	30	6.2
Total	481	99.9
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	254	52.8
Black	173	36.0
White	21	4.4
Other	33	6.8
Total	481	100

Table 1
Source: Questionnaire survey data (2024 -2025)
Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Also, percentage (%) totals are based on each frequency count totals, and doesn't include missing values.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Nationality		
India	194	40.4
Ghana	70	14.5
Nigeria	80	16.6
Bangladesh	38	7.8
Nepal	23	4.8
China	14	2.9
Iran	14	2.9
Other	48	9.9
Total	481	99.8
Post-secondary Institution Type		
University	259	53.5
College	225	46.5
Total	484	100
Academic Institution		
University of Toronto	94	19.4
Trent University	95	19.6
University of Windsor	77	15.9
Fleming College	104	21.5
Sheridan College	62	12.8
St. Clair College	52	10.7
Total	484	99.9

Table 1 (cont.)

International student experiences, resilience and institutional support

Experience	<i>N</i>	Low <i>n</i> (%)	Moderate <i>n</i> (%)	High <i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Missing <i>n</i>
Academic Challenges	480	71 (14.8)	130 (27.1)	279 (58.1)	2.12	0.64	7
Financial Challenges	480	83 (17.3)	115 (24.0)	282 (58.8)	2.41	0.77	7
Mental Health	474	42 (9.0)	109 (23.0)	322 (68.2)	2.86	0.70	13
Physical Health	471	51 (10.8)	155 (32.9)	265 (56.3)	2.22	0.62	16
Intersecting Vulnerability (Academic, Financial, Mental and Physical)	476	96 (20.1)	100 (21)	280 (59)	2.02	0.66	11
Other Challenges	475	82 (17.3)	89 (18.7)	304 (64.0)	2.01	0.60	10
University Support	483	283 (58.6)	109 (22.6)	91 (18.8)	1.60	0.79	2
Resilience	480	57 (11.9)	190 (39.6)	233 (48.5)	2.28	0.66	7
Social Capital	487	23 (4.7)	169 (34.8)	293 (60.2)	2.30	0.55	0
Transnational Ties	482	29 (6)	44 (9)	409 (85)	3.23	0.72	5

Table 2

Note: Low = 1, Moderate = 2, High = 3. Percentages are calculated based on valid responses (*N* excludes missing values). *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Transnational ties were recorded from how often participants maintain ties with family and friends from the country of origin

Source: Questionnaire survey data (2024 -2025).

Table 2 summarizes international students lived experiences and resilience during the pandemic. The findings reveal that international students experienced severe challenges and intersecting vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of respondents reported high levels of academic challenges (58.1%), financial difficulties (58.8%), mental health concerns (58.0%), and physical health challenges (56.3%). Similarly, intersecting vulnerability (56.9%) and other challenges (64.0%) were commonly reported, indicating that the pandemic created multiple, simultaneous stressors affecting students' educational, social, and personal well-being. Institutional support was perceived as inadequate, with 58.6% of students reporting low levels of support and only 18.8% indicating high support from their institutions. These findings suggest that although Canada maintained flexible immigration measures during the pandemic, many institutions were unable to adequately respond to international students' social and emotional needs.

Despite these difficulties, the study also identified important protective factors and sources of resilience. Nearly half of respondents (48.5%) reported high resilience, while 60.2% reported high levels of social capital and 85% maintained strong transnational ties with family and friends in their countries of origin. Digital technologies such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and social media platforms might have enabled students to sustain emotional support networks across borders during periods of lockdown and social isolation (Hari et al. 2023; Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024). These transnational relationships might have played a critical role in helping students cope with uncertainty, stress, and psychological distress during the pandemic. The findings therefore demonstrate that resilience among international students was shaped not only by individual coping strategies but also by social relationships and transnational support systems (Hari et al. 2023; Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024).

Predicting International Students' Mental Health

Predictor	Level	OR	CI Lower	CI Upper	p	VIF
Institution Type	College (Ref)	1	1	1		1.192
	University	0.554	0.291	1.03	0.066	1.192
Academic Challenges		3.889	2.241	6.892	<0.001***	1.429
Financial Challenges		1.606	1.126	2.326	0.010*	1.315
Physical Health		4.276	2.75	6.925	<0.001***	1.155
Resilience		0.364	0.191	0.673	0.002**	1.312
Institutional Support		0.275	0.184	0.397	<0.001***	1.46
Transnational Ties		0.659	0.139	0.852	0.003**	1.046

Table 3

Source: Questionnaire survey data (2024 - 2025)

Notes:

OR is Odd Ratio - measures how a predictor variable affects the odds of the outcome occurring

CI - confidence interval - gives a range of values within which the true effect (e.g., OR) is likely to lie.

CI Lower → Lower bound

CI Upper → Upper bound. For this study, CI is reported as 95%

P - probability value tests whether the relationship between a predictor and the outcome is statistically significant. $p < 0.05$ → Statistically significant (commonly used threshold)

VIF - Variance Inflation factor - measures multicollinearity (how strongly predictors are correlated with each other).

The logistic regression analysis (Table 3) further identified key predictors of mental health outcomes among international students. Academic challenges emerged as a strong predictor of adverse mental health outcomes (OR = 3.889, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students experiencing greater academic difficulties were nearly four times more likely to report poor mental health. Physical health challenges also significantly increased the likelihood of psychological distress (OR = 4.276, $p < 0.001$), while financial hardship was another significant predictor (OR = 1.606, $p = 0.010$). These findings reinforce existing literature showing that financial insecurity, educational disruption, and deteriorating health conditions intensified psychological vulnerability among international students during the pandemic. Although institutional type was not statistically significant, students attending universities demonstrated lower odds of negative mental health outcomes compared to college students (OR = 0.554, $p = 0.066$).

The regression analysis also identified several protective factors. Resilience significantly reduced the likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes (OR = 0.364, $p = 0.002$), demonstrating the importance of adaptive coping capacities during crisis situations. Institutional support emerged as one of the strongest protective factors (OR = 0.275, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that effective support services can substantially improve student well-being during periods of uncertainty. Likewise, transnational ties reduced the likelihood of poor mental health outcomes (OR = 0.659, $p = 0.003$), highlighting the significance of maintaining social and emotional connections across borders. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.046 to 1.460, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity and supporting the reliability of the regression model.

DISCUSSION

Linking Pandemic Experiences to Immigration Contraction Policy. In our discussion section, we attempt to situate the findings of this research within Canada's changing immigration policy environment. Prior to the pandemic, Canada pursued an expansionist approach toward international education and temporary migration, viewing international students as future economic migrants capable of addressing labour shortages and contributing to economic growth. During the pandemic, the federal government introduced flexible immigration measures, including allowing online learning to count toward PGWP eligibility, extending work permits, and creating temporary resident-to-permanent resident pathways in 2021 (IRCC, nd). These measures signaled Canada's continued commitment to attracting and retaining international students despite global border closures and travel restrictions.

However, the study argues that these policy measures did not eliminate the structural vulnerabilities associated with temporary immigration status. International students continued to experience financial insecurity, housing instability, precarious employment, social isolation, and mental health stress throughout the pandemic (Morris et.al., 2023; Statistics Canada, 2024). The findings suggest that international students occupied a precarious position in which they were economically valued but socially vulnerable. This contradiction became more visible after the pandemic when international student numbers increased rapidly following the reopening of borders. By 2022–2023, Canada hosted more than 800,000 international students, and by 2024 the number surpassed one million permit holders (CBIE, 2025; IRCC, 2024). Rising public concerns regarding housing affordability, inflation, healthcare access, and infrastructure pressures subsequently intensified political debates surrounding temporary migration and international student admissions.

In response to these pressures, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) introduced major policy reforms beginning in 2024, including a two-year cap on new study permits and approximately a 35% reduction in study permit approvals (IRCC, 2024). We argue, in this paper, that these contraction policies may deepen uncertainty among international students already affected by pandemic-related hardship. These international students who experienced financial instability, academic disruption, and mental health stress during COVID-19 may now face renewed anxiety regarding immigration opportunities, employment prospects, and long-term settlement pathways in Canada. Such policies may weaken Canada's global competitiveness as a destination for international education and raise broader questions concerning equity, belonging, and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

We conclude in this study that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant structural vulnerabilities among Canada's international students. This population group experienced extensive academic, financial, social, and mental health challenges during the pandemic, while resilience emerged through transnational family ties, social support networks, and personal coping strategies (Hari et, al. 2023). At the same time, recent reductions in study permit approvals and temporary migration pathways may intensify insecurity among international students who originally arrived under an expansion immigration framework promising long-term settlement opportunities. The paper therefore argues that if Canada continues to treat international students primarily as economic resources while simultaneously limiting opportunities for inclusion and permanent settlement, it risks undermining its commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as damaging its reputation as a welcoming global destination for international education.

REFERENCES

- Canadian Bureau for International Education (2025). *International students in Canada. Annual Report, CBIE, Ottawa*
- Chen, J. H., Li, Y., Wu, A. M., & Tong, K. K. (2020). The overlooked minority: Mental health of international students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 102333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102333>
- Firang, D. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international students in Canada. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 820–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820940030>
- Firang, D., & Mensah, J. (2022). Exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students and universities in Canada. *Journal of International Students*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.2881>
- Friedman, M., & Friedman, R. (1980). *Free to choose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. New York
- Global Affairs Canada. (2019). *Building on success: International education strategy 2019–2024* (pp. 1–18). <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies-sei/Building-on-Success-International-Education-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf>
- Hari, A., Nardon, L., & Zhang, H. (2023). A transnational lens into international student experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Networks*, (23)14 - 30 <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12332>
- Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2024). 2025 – 2027 Immigration Level Plans: Government of Canada announces cap on international student permits. Government of Canada. - <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/10/20252027-immigration-levels-plan.html>
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). (nd) “COVID-19: A guide for international students in Canada arriving from abroad.” Retrieved from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Website. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugeescitizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/guide-internationalstudents-arriving-abroad.html>
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). (2022). *Canada's Study permit holders with a valid permit on December 31st by country of citizenship, 2000 – 2022*. Retrieved from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Website. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee>
- Judge, N. A., & Walton-Roberts, M. (2024). Transnational lives interrupted: The Canadian state and Indian international student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Population, Space and Place*, 30, e2832. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2832>
- Massey D. S. et al., (1994) *An Evaluation of international migration theory: The North American case*. *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 20, Issue 4.
- Morris, A., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G., & Hastings, C. (2023). International students struggling in the private rental sector in Australia prior to and during the pandemic. *Housing Studies*, 38(8), 1589–1610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2021.1961695>
- Olatunji, E. A., Ogunsola, A., Elenwa, F., Udeh, M., Oginni, I., Nmadu, Y., & Callaghan, T. (2023). COVID-19: Academic, Financial, and Mental Health Challenges Faced by International Students in the United States Due to the Pandemic. *Cureus*, 15(6), e41081. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.41081>
- Robinson R. (2005). *Beyond The State-Bounded Immigrant Incorporation Regime: Transnational Migrant Communities: Their Potential Contribution to Canada's Leadership Role and Influence in A Globalized World*. Ottawa: North-South Institute,
- Statistics Canada (2024, May). *Housing international students: Housing suitability across municipalities*, Statistics Canada's Economic Report, Ottawa. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024005/article/00001-eng.htm>
- Varughese, A., & Schwartz, S. (2025, August 19). The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of international students in Canada. *Carleton News*. <https://carleton.ca/news/story/pandemic-international-students-vulnerability/>
- Wang, Y., & Liu, J. (2024). The impact of COVID-19 on international students: A Qualitative synthesis. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72(6), 805–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2374077>

Struggling to Find a Home in a Tight Rental Market in a Medium-Sized Canadian City: International Students and Post-Pandemic Housing Realities in Peterborough

Dr. David Firang, Lewis Aboagye-Gyasi

David Firang is an Associate Professor at Trent University's Social Work department. He holds a cross-appointment with Graduate Programs in M.A Sustainability Studies and PhD in Interdisciplinary Social Research. His research focuses on international students' mobility, immigrant transnationalism, Black African experiences, child welfare and Canadian social policy. His academic contributions have been recognized through competitive research grants, including SSHRC. He has published widely on issues affecting international students and immigrant communities. He is the Principal Investigator (P.I.) of this SSHRC project - International Students Lived Experience and Resilience During the COVID Pandemic

Lewis Aboagye-Gyasi is a graduate from Trent University, holding a Master of Arts in Sustainability Studies. Lewis served as Research Assistant to Professor David Firang. His research continues to explore contemporary global issues including housing, education and immigration, to support evidence-based policy discussions.

This paper explores the post-pandemic housing experiences of international students in Peterborough, Ontario. It situates these experiences within Canada's broader housing affordability crisis and the country's expanding international education sector. While international students are increasingly valued as economic contributors and potential permanent residents, their everyday realities—particularly access to safe and affordable housing—remain insufficiently understood, especially in medium-sized Canadian cities.

Drawing on the Social Ecological Model (SEM) and using qualitative data from two focus group discussions with twelve international students, the paper demonstrates that international students face housing precarity tied to their socio-demographic characteristics, limited social supports, inadequate institutional responses, and broader structural constraints such as restrictive immigration policies and tight housing markets. The paper conclusively argues that international students occupy a paradoxical position in Canada: they are actively recruited for their economic value yet remain structurally marginalized within housing systems. Addressing their housing insecurity requires coordinated interventions across institutional, municipal, and national levels.

INTRODUCTION

International education has become central to Canada's immigration agenda over the few past decades. The expansion of international education in Canada reflects broader neoliberal transformations in higher education and immigration policy, whereby international students are viewed as economic commodities - sources of revenue and skilled labour within global competition (Del Paggio, 2025; Kang, 2020). Beyond contributing billions of dollars annually to the Canadian economy through tuition revenue, international students also address Canada's labour shortages and aging populations (Global Affairs, 2019). This dual positioning of international students—as both students and future economic migrants—has intensified recruitment efforts across Canadian institutions, leading to surge in international students' population across the country. The surge in international student enrolment has reshaped both major and mid-sized Canadian cities, with these students playing a critical role in sustaining local economies and helping post-secondary institutions remain financially viable (Canadian Bureau of International Education) [CBIE, 2025]. However, the recent increased of international student population has occurred at the time Canada is experiencing housing crisis. Rising rental costs, low vacancy rates, inflation, and low housing supply have intensified housing precarity across the country (CMHC, 2023b).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly deepened these housing challenges for Canada's international students, who also experienced widespread job losses, social isolation, and uncertainty regarding immigration pathways (Morris et al., 2020). In medium-sized cities such as Peterborough, where rental housing supply was already constrained prior to the pandemic, international students became vulnerable to housing insecurity in the local housing market.

Although public debates surrounding Canada's housing crisis increasingly place the blame on rising temporary migrants, including international students, limited scholarly attention has focused specifically on how international students experience housing precarity in medium-sized urban contexts. Existing research often concentrates on large metropolitan cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, leaving smaller and medium-sized cities underexamined despite their growing international student populations. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the post-pandemic housing realities faced by international students in a medium-sized city of Peterborough, Ontario.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper has two objectives:

- **To explore the post-pandemic housing experiences of international students in Peterborough, Ontario, within the context of a constrained rental market and Canada's broader housing affordability crisis.**
- **To understand how individual, community, and structural-level factors shape housing precarity among international students in Peterborough.**

To achieve these objectives, the research questions below guide the study:

- **What are the post-pandemic housing experiences and challenges of international students in Peterborough, Ontario?**
- **factors influence international students' access to safe and affordable housing?**
- **How do individual (micro), social and institutional (meso), and structural (macro) What are the policy implications of the contradiction between international students' economic value and their limited access to safe and affordable housing**

Peterborough provides an important case study because over the last few years it has experienced rapid immigrant population growth, including international students (Statistics Canada, 2024) and persistently low rental vacancy rates (CMHC, 2023a), making access to affordable housing especially difficult. By focusing on international students housing needs in Peterborough, this paper contributes to broader discussions of Canada's post-pandemic housing precarity, and temporary migration in smaller Canadian cities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students and Housing Precarity in Canada.

While studying in Canada provides opportunities for educational advancement and cultural exchange, international students also encounter numerous socio-economic challenges which impact international students' well-being and settlement experiences. Existing research has documented issues related to financial insecurity, language barriers, labour exploitation, social isolation, and mental health difficulties (Firang, 2020; Morris et al., 2023; Wang & Liu, 2024). More recently, scholarship has also increasingly focused on housing insecurity as a critical issue affecting international students' well-being at the study destination (Berg & Farbenblum, 2019;). These challenges and vulnerabilities became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023).

Existing studies demonstrate that during the pandemic many international students struggle with high rental costs, overcrowded housing conditions, exploitative landlord practices, and discrimination within rental markets (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023). Unlike domestic students, many international students lack family support networks within Canada, face employment restrictions linked to their immigration status, and experience exclusion from various social support programs. Temporary immigration status may further limit students' bargaining power within housing markets, particularly when students lack Canadian credit histories, guarantors, or familiarity with local housing systems. Racialized international students are most likely student group who experience discrimination based on race, nationality, religion, or accent (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024).

To navigate the housing market, some studies indicate that international students rely on informal housing arrangements and social networks to secure accommodation (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Morris et al., 2023; Sotomayor et al., 2022). Shared bedrooms, overcrowded apartments, and substandard housing conditions are increasingly common among students attempting to reduce living expenses in expensive rental markets (Sotomayor et al., 2022). These housing arrangements may negatively affect students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being.

International students in Peterborough, Ontario, were no exception to this housing crisis. Located approximately 125 kilometres northeast of Toronto, Peterborough has experienced significant population growth and housing pressures in recent years (CMHC, 2023a). The presence of Trent University and Fleming College has contributed to a growing student population, including international students.

Notably, the literature suggests that international students' housing experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting factors rather than a single issue. International students' housing challenges emerge from the interaction between individual circumstances, community-social relationships, and broader institutional and economic systems (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Morris et al., 2023; Sotomayor et al., 2022). Understanding international housing experiences requires examining how these different levels interacted.

Theoretical Framework: The Social Ecological Model

Given that international students housing needs are the interplay of personal, communal and structural factors, this study is informed by Bronfenbrenner (1994)'s Social Ecological Model (SEM), which emphasizes the interconnected relationship between micro (individual), mezzo (community/social), and macro (societal/structural) factors in shaping international students' housing experiences in Peterborough.

At the micro-level, the SEM focuses on how individual international students' characteristics such as income, race, religion, gender, employment status, and marital status influence their housing experience. These factors shape international students' ability to access affordable rental housing. During the pandemic, international students faced unique vulnerabilities connected to their immigration status, finances, health, and emotional wellbeing (Firang, 2020).

At the meso-level, the model examines how social relationships and community contexts, including social networks, neighbourhood dynamics, and institutional support systems, influence housing affordability for international students. Studies have shown that international students often depend on peer community social networks, such as cultural associations, religious organizations, or university communities for information, emotional support, and temporary housing assistance (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023). However, access to these supports varied significantly depending on the strength of students' social connections. Students who are socially isolated are more vulnerable because they lacked informal networks to help them navigate housing systems or pandemic crises.

At the macro-level, the SEM considers broader structural and policy-related influences such as immigration regulations, housing market conditions, and economic factors beyond students' direct control. Government immigration policies, university decisions, labor market conditions shape housing market dynamics that influence students' access to housing. Also, structural inequalities related to race, immigration status, and labor market precarity also shaped which international students were most vulnerable to the housing market crisis.

Thus, using the SEM enables this study to demonstrate how international students' housing experiences are shaped by overlapping and interconnected forms of vulnerability.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore international students' housing experiences in Peterborough. Data were collected through two focus group discussions involving twelve international students attending Trent University and residing in rental housing within Peterborough. Qualitative focus group methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed participants to share detailed personal experiences regarding housing accessibility and affordability. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, race, marital status, and housing experiences.

The focus groups were conducted online using Zoom and lasted approximately ninety minutes each. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were carefully observed throughout the research process.

Braun & Clark (2006)'s thematic analysis was adopted to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' experiences. Findings were organized according to the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of the Social Ecological Model.

FINDINGS

Micro-Level Factors

The findings reveal that individual socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (n=12) were diverse across gender, marital status, employment and income, race and religion, and significantly influenced international students' housing experiences. Majority of the participants were males (60%). A third of the study participants were married and staying with their spouses. With exception of one participant, all international students who participated in this study the rest were employed in part time work. In terms of racial identity, majority identified as Black (50%) followed by South Asians (33%) and Caucasians (17%).

Gender played a role in access to housing. Male participants reported that they found it more difficult to access affordable housing as some landlords preferred female tenants because they perceived women as cleaner and more responsible. A participant shared this by narrating that: For most of the housing that I searched, the landlords preferred females with the reason that, females clean the house, are less troublesome, and more responsible (Participant 3, FGD2). Female participants, however, expressed concerns regarding privacy and safety within shared accommodations. Many preferred private rooms despite higher costs, suggesting that gender influenced housing affordability differently for male and female students.

Marital Status

Married international students faced additional barriers because of larger household sizes. One participant reported that landlords often preferred single tenants or smaller households, making it difficult for married students with spouses or children to secure affordable accommodation. (Participant 4, FGD 2). Married students with children even struggle more in accessing housing in Peterborough. This finding mirrors earlier studies conducted in Canada and Australia, highlighting that marital status was determinant in securing rental housing for international students (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023; Ruming and Dowling; 2017).

Employment and Income

Employment insecurity emerged as a major factor shaping housing accessibility. Due to employment restrictions, most participants worked in part-time or precarious jobs that provided not only insufficient income to cover rising rental costs, but also do not meet rental criteria in Peterborough. Providing more insights on this point, one participant shared that: some landlords were reluctant to rent to students employed part-time because they viewed such employment as unstable (Participants 5; FGD2). As a result, students often relied on financial support from family members abroad to pay rent and living expenses. Rising rental costs combined with high international tuition fees created significant financial strain. Many participants described feeling overwhelmed by the combined burden of tuition and rent

Race and Religion

Racial discrimination was frequently mentioned by participants, particularly among Black students, as limiting their access to rental housing in Peterborough. Some students believed landlords rejected their rental applications based on racial or cultural stereotypes as one participant explained that: After emailing him all required documents, the landlord asked me to come for the keys. As soon as he physically saw me as Black student, he said, sorry, the place has been taken already, and that he made mistake. I strongly believe I was denied due to my skin colour (Participant 6, FGD 1).

Similarly, Muslim participants described experiences where landlords expressed discomfort or suspicion regarding their religious practices. These experiences contributed to prolonged housing searches and increased emotional stress among these international students.

Messo-Level Factors

The findings revealed that meso-level factors of community social networks and institutional structures influence international students' access to housing in Peterborough. Most participants shared that social network of friends, relatives, and classmates helped them in locating available housing and understanding local rental practices. As one participant shared during the focus group discussion - I contacted my friend and classmate who did everything for me..... to find accommodation, through another international student here in Canada (Participant 5, FGD1).

Also, most participants also relied heavily on online platforms such as Facebook, Kijiji, Place4Students, and LinkedIn. However, many students encountered misleading advertisements or inaccurate housing information online. One participant shared how he relied on online platform for housing search this way: The landlords will show you pictures of their housing units before visiting the rental units. But I realized that what I saw was totally different from what was online (Participant 2, FGD1). Although social networks helped students navigate the housing market, they did not necessarily guarantee access to affordable or suitable accommodation.

Institutional Support was widely perceived as inadequate among the participants, who felt that university housing services offered limited and repetitive assistance. One participant stated: "They were just showing me a bunch of lists that I had already seen on Kijiji... I was looking for something reliable or something more authentic" (Participant 1, FGD1). This lack of meaningful support exacerbated international students' frustration and vulnerability. This finding, however, depart from previous studies that reported that international students received housing information about rental housing from their institution even before they arrive at their study destination (Berg & Farbenblum, 2019; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023).

Macro-Level Factors

Immigration policies and housing market issues were identified as critical macro (societal/structural) factors impacting international students access to housing in Peterborough. Restrictive immigration policies significantly affected housing affordability. Work-hour limits prevented students from earning sufficient income, as one participant expressed: "I felt financially trapped because they were expecting me to balance high educational expenses with restricted employment opportunities" (Participant 3, FGD1). Another participant added: "We are allowed to work 20 hours a week... Now there is an imbalance somewhere" (Participant 4, FGD2). These restrictions created a structural mismatch between financial obligations and income opportunities for international students in Peterborough.

Peterborough's housing market conditions also significantly affected international students' housing experiences. Participants consistently described Peterborough's rental market as highly competitive, with rising rents and limited vacancy rate. One participant summarized: "After the pandemic, there's a high demand for housing... when there's high demand and shortages in supply... it's going to cause inflated rental housing prices... you may have to sacrifice your comfortability" (Participant 3, FGD1). Many students also reported compromising on quality, privacy, and safety to secure accommodation.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that housing precarity among international students is shaped by the interaction of multiple levels of influence. At the micro level, individual students' characteristics such as race, gender, and employment status affect access to housing. At the meso level, social networks and institutional support systems in the students' community of study mediate these experiences. At the macro level, structural factors such as immigration policies and housing market conditions create overarching constraints.

Prior to the pandemic, Peterborough already faced housing affordability challenges linked to low vacancy rates and limited rental supply (CMHC, 2023b). However, the post-pandemic period intensified these pressures considerably. Rising inflation, increased migration into smaller urban centres, and broader regional housing shortages contributed to rapidly increasing rental prices across many Canadian cities, including Peterborough.

For international students in Peterborough, these developments create significant barriers to securing safe and affordable housing (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Mensah, 2025). Structural barriers such as credit requirements and income verification further disadvantage international students who already faced systemic barriers linked to their temporary status and unfamiliarity with Canadian housing systems (Aboagye-Gyasi, 2024; Mensah, 2025). The post-pandemic housing crisis also intersected with broader economic insecurity. During COVID-19, many international students, nationwide, lost employment in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and food services due to lockdown restrictions (Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024). Employment disruptions reduced students' ability to maintain stable housing. Arguably, the study challenges narratives that blame international students for housing shortages. Instead, it highlights systemic issues such as inadequate housing supply and policy misalignment.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study point to significant policy implications, highlighting a clear contradiction: international students are actively recruited for their economic contributions, yet remain inadequately supported in accessing safe and affordable housing. This reflects a broader misalignment between immigration, education, and housing policies. Local housing systems are already ill-equipped to support growing student populations (Morris et al., 2023; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023), while restrictive immigration policies further exacerbate pressures. Addressing these challenges requires integrated policy approaches that connect student recruitment with housing planning and less restrictive immigration policies that support employment opportunities for international students.

Coordinated action across institutional, municipal, provincial, and federal levels is essential. Post-secondary institutions should prioritize affordable housing as central to student success, while municipalities must include international students in housing strategies and strengthen tenant protections. At the same time, federal and provincial governments should avoid blaming students for housing shortages and instead address structural issues such as limited supply and policy gaps, aligning immigration and education strategies with long-term housing infrastructure investment.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the post-pandemic housing realities faced by international students in Peterborough, Ontario, within the broader context of Canada's housing affordability crisis and international education expansion. The findings demonstrate that international students experience significant housing precarity shaped by rising rental costs, low vacancy rates, employment insecurity, and structural inequalities linked to temporary immigration status.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these vulnerabilities by disrupting employment, limiting social support systems, and increasing financial insecurity (Firang, 2020). In medium-sized cities such as Peterborough, constrained housing supply and growing rental competition further restricted students' access to safe and affordable accommodation. The experiences of international students reveal broader contradictions within Canada's political economy of international education. While students are actively recruited as economic contributors and future immigrants (Harden-Wolfson & Zhang, 2026), they often remain excluded from adequate housing protections and social support systems.

Addressing international student housing insecurity requires coordinated action from governments, post-secondary institutions, and local communities. Investments in affordable housing, equitable immigration policies, and student support services are essential for promoting international students' well-being and long-term inclusion. Ultimately, ensuring safe and affordable housing for international students is not only a matter of educational success but also a question of social justice, urban inclusion, and Canada's global reputation as a welcoming destination for international education.

REFERENCES

- Aboagye- Gyasi, L. (2024). *Exploring international students' access to affordable housing in Peterborough, Ontario*. MA Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Sustainability Studies, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario
- Berg, L., & Farbenblum, B. (2019). *Living precariously: Understanding international students' housing experiences in Australia* (SSRN Scholarly Paper 3550890). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3550890>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). *Ecological models of human development*. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3(2), 37–43.
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) (2025). *International students in Canada*. Annual Report, CBIE, Ottawa
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (2023a, March). *Housing market outlook—Spring 2023*. 1–82. <https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sites/cmhc/professional/housing-markets-data-and-research/market-reports/housing-market-outlook/2023/housing-market-outlook-spring-2023-en.pdf?rev=5c29bc91-2310-435f-b2c9-b801866d0ede>
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (2023b, January). *Rental market report - January 2023* (pp. 1–164). <https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sites/cmhc/professional/housing-markets-data-and-research/market-reports/rental-market-report/rental-market-report-2022-en.pdf?rev=ff8ebfd2-961f-4589-8ae2-fac01d1aedac>
- Del Paggio, J. (2025). *Towards a market-based vision: Canadian universities in the era of neoliberalism*. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 16(1).
- Firang, D. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international students in Canada*. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 820–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820940030>
- Global Affairs Canada. (2019). *Building on success: International education strategy 2019–2024* (pp. 1–18). <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies-sei/Building-on-Success-International-Education-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf>
- Harden-Wolfson, E., & Zhang, Y. (2026). *Geopolitics and the governance of international students: The evolving role of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in Canadian policy*. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 56(2). <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v56i2.191079>
- Judge, N. A., & Walton-Roberts, M. (2024). *Transnational lives interrupted: The Canadian state and Indian international student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Population, Space and Place*, 30, e2832. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2832>
- Kang, P. (2020). *Towards sustainable internationalization in post-COVID higher education: Voices from international students in Canada*. *Migration and Language Education*, 1(2), 60–73
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29140/mle.v1n2.383>
- Mensah, A. A. (2025). *The role of social networks and support in housing search duration among international graduate students in Peterborough*. MA Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Sustainability Studies, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario
- Morris, A., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G., & Hastings, C. (2023). *International students struggling in the private rental sector in Australia prior to and during the pandemic*. *Housing Studies*, 38(8), 1589–1610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2021.1961695>
- Pottie-Sherman, Y., Christensen, J., Foroutan, M., & Zhou, S. (2023). *Navigating the housing crisis: A comparison of international students and other newcomers in a mid-sized Canadian city*. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes*, n/a(n/a). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12869>
- Statistics Canada (2024, May). *Housing international students: Housing suitability across municipalities*, Statistics Canada's Economic Report, Ottawa. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024005/article/00001-eng.htm>
- Wang, Y., & Liu, J. (2024). *The impact of COVID-19 on international students: A Qualitative synthesis*. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72(6), 805–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2374077>

Strengthening Pathways to Integration: Cross-Sectoral Collaborations for Immigrant and Newcomer Women and Families in Canada

Punam Dalal, Gurpreet Kaur

Submitted by Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA)

Punam Dalal is an experienced nonprofit leader and educator with over 20 years of leadership in education and community development, both internationally and in Canada. She is currently the Department Manager at Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA), where she advances newcomer inclusion through employment programs, cross-sector partnerships, and community engagement. Punam Dalal holds two Master of Science degrees- in Mathematics and Software- and a Bachelor of Education.

Gurpreet Kaur brings over 19 years of experience in the language sector, including 11 years dedicated to supporting newcomers in Canada. With a Master of Arts in English Language and Literature, Gurpreet is passionate about language as a tool for empowerment. Her work has focused on helping immigrant women overcome language barriers and achieve their personal and professional goals. As Manager of Language Training and Childcare at CIWA, she leads with

Immigrants face systemic challenges such as limited access to employment, affordable housing, language barriers, social isolation, and lack of culturally responsive mental health services, which often impede the process of integration for newcomer women and their families. Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) has developed a holistic, integrated, cross-sectoral model to address some of these challenges, leveraging partnerships across employment and training, language and education, mental health and healthy relationships, and other social services to create sustainable pathways for integration. This article will demonstrate CIWA's collaborative approach and actionable recommendations for stakeholders through case studies and evidence-based insights from its five core departments: Employment and Training, Language, Family Services, Wellbeing and Resiliency, and Settlement and Integration.

Supporting immigrant and newcomer women and families on their settlement journey requires more than the efforts of a single agency; it calls for an integrated ecosystem of partnerships, shared strategies, and collective accountability. At the 27th Metropolis Canada Conference, CIWA Senior Managers Punam Dalal of Employment Training and Bridging, and Gurpreet Kaur, Manager of Language Training and Childcare at the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA), highlighted how cross-sector collaborations are creating inclusive and responsive systems that centre the needs of immigrant women and their families in Calgary. Their reflections underscored CIWA's role as a trusted leader in collaborative integration work.

As one of the fastest-growing and most diverse cities in Canada, Calgary is home to newcomers who make up one-third of its residents. A significant proportion of this demographic is composed of women and children, whose integration experiences are compounded by intersecting barriers such as language, isolation, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, trauma, family responsibilities, and socio-cultural expectations.

Founded in 1982, CIWA is a nationally recognized non-profit and registered charity with a gender-specific mandate. Our organization exists to serve immigrant and refugee women and their families with culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and outcomes-driven support. Today, we deliver over 50 holistic programs across language learning, employment, health, parenting, and social inclusion, grounded in partnerships and a commitment to system change. Clients receive wraparound supports, including first-language assistance and on-site childcare, ensuring accessibility and inclusion at every stage. In the last year, CIWA offered 163 distinct services and over 50 programs while working with 350 partners spanning from social service agencies to employment and industry partners. We work internally and externally to break down barriers, foster belonging, and build pathways to economic security, social inclusion, and family wellbeing.

Immigrant women often face a wide range of challenges when settling in Canada, balancing work and family responsibilities while navigating childcare shortages, inflexible job options, cultural isolation, language barriers, and difficulties with credential recognition. These challenges are further compounded by limited access to professional networks, financial barriers to education, and systemic service gaps.

CIWA's cross-sector model is designed to respond to this complexity. We understand that integration is about more than employment. It requires addressing the full spectrum of social determinants that shape a woman's ability to thrive.

Through coordinated programming in five core areas:

- **Income and Social Status:** Through financial coaching, tax filing support, and matched savings initiatives, CIWA equips women to achieve financial stability. Our RESP savings and budgeting workshops empower participants to build long-term financial resilience.
- **Education and Opportunity:** CIWA delivers Language training, parenting workshops, and employment preparation. In the past year alone, \$53,500 in scholarships were awarded to 26 recipients pursuing post-secondary education and professional certification.
- **Employment:** Our approach goes beyond job placement. We work directly with employers to cultivate inclusive workplaces and organize hiring fairs, upskilling, and employment interventions tailored to immigrant women.
- **Social Support:** and Inclusion: CIWA's volunteering, civic engagement, youth, and senior programs build connections, empower women, and build leadership skills to integrate, contribute, and thrive.
- **Healthcare Access:** In partnership with Alberta Health Services and others, CIWA connects women to prenatal/postnatal care, mental health resources, and interpreter-assisted healthcare navigation. CIWA also supports clients experiencing food insecurity and housing instability by partnering with food banks, providing grocery gift cards, diapers, and supports to access affordable housing through programs like 'Find Me a Home' and the Canada Housing Benefit.

Child development and culturally sensitive parenting are emphasized through programs like Home Instructions for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and home visitation, which integrate first-language services and culturally sensitive approaches. Specialized supports for survivors of gender-based violence are central to our work, ensuring that women regain safety, dignity, and self-determination, all within our internal ecosystem of care and our external partner safety net.

The journey of "Gloria," a composite client profile of many CIWA clients, illustrates this holistic and multi-partner integration approach.

Upon arrival, Gloria faced housing instability, language barriers, financial insecurity, and social isolation. CIWA conducted a needs assessment and connected her to ESL classes, social groups, and programs for her elderly mother.

Financial coaching and a matched savings program enabled Gloria to open an RESP and gain confidence in managing household finances. She then enrolled in employment readiness programs, entrepreneurship training, and mentorship.

Through her transformation, she gained confidence, found employment, and became active in community initiatives. Gloria's path is emblematic of the outcomes possible when agencies work together to remove systemic barriers. CIWA's model thrives on cross-sector collaboration.

Our referral-based and co-delivered programs include:

- **Literacy and Learning Support** through programs like Pebbles in the Sand, and our outreach learning specialists extend services across community agencies. Our Mentorship and Employment Resources, where we work with Making Changes and Dress for Success, to ensure women have access to professional attire and build confidence through mentorship. Or providing Digital Access and Inclusion through our partnership with the Electronic Recycling Association (ERA), where we provide laptops to participants facing technology barriers, allowing them to participate fully in language and employment training.
- **CIWA also partners with the Tsuut'ina Nation and The Confluence Historic Site** to promote awareness of Indigenous histories and foster respectful engagement between immigrant and Indigenous communities. And we are also a founding member of Calgary Newcomer Collaborative (CNC)—a coalition with Centre for Newcomers, Immigrant Services Calgary, and The Immigrant Education Society. CNC has hosted employment workshops and fairs, including events tailored for Ukrainian newcomers, connecting over 700 clients with more than 25 employers annually. This reinforces our role and commitment to initiatives that have a collective Impact

CIWA plays a critical role as a Family Resource Network (FRN) hub, ensuring consistent, high-quality, evidence-based services to children and families across Alberta. FRNs offer prevention and early intervention services aligned with provincial standards.

To deliver results-driven training and workforce development, CIWA employs a four-part strategy:

- **Partnerships with Industry experts:** through collaborations with Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) and Bow Valley College, providing technical training and certifications in fields like hospitality, Early Childhood Educator (ECE), and interpretation.
- **Community-based learning** through visits to places like the Calgary Public Library and Calgary Courts Centre helps participants explore career paths and understand legal rights.
- **Evaluation and Feedback:** Through post-training surveys and follow-ups, CIWA tracks participant progress and adjusts programming to ensure relevance and impact for clients
- **Certification for employability,** such as training in WHMIS, ProServe, and security training to open doors to jobs in in-demand roles.

We also integrate civic education through collaborations with the City of Calgary, presentations by the Calgary Police Service, Fire Department, and City Waste & Recycling, as well as workshops from Momentum and the Workers' Resource Centre, to inform participants about safety, rights, and services in their new community.

At CIWA, integration is both a process and a partnership. Our model is data-driven, informed by ongoing client assessment and shaped by continuous learning. This transparency builds trust and ensures continued relevance. The result is a responsive, replicable approach that builds individual confidence while shifting systems toward equity.

The impact of this collaborative model is evident: immigrant women gain the skills, networks, and confidence to build successful lives in Canada. As we often say, “When we collaborate across sectors, we give newcomers more than services—we give them opportunities to thrive.”

CIWA's experience reinforces a vital truth: no single agency can address the complex realities of immigrant settlement alone. Shared responsibility, mutual learning, and co-designed solutions are essential. Cross-sector partnerships have extended CIWA's reach, strengthened service quality, and remain responsive to Calgary's evolving demographic landscape.

As Canada redefines its immigration strategy for a new era, CIWA's model stands as a proven blueprint, scalable, inclusive, and rooted in collaboration. By placing immigrant women and families at the centre of the integration journey, and by working hand-in-hand with communities, institutions, by staff and systems, CIWA continues to show that real progress is made by building bridges, not silos. This work is sustained by the shared commitment of our dedicated staff, who bring compassion, expertise, and cultural insight to every program and partnership, uplifting CIWA's mandate with purpose and integrity every day.

Talent, Cashcows, Scapegoats, or All of the Above? Reflections on researching international student flows to Canada

Yazhu (Evelyn) Lin

As an international student myself coming from China, the issue of international student flows to Canada is personally relevant. I am a powerful believer in the role of international student exchanges as a vector for cultural diplomacy, intellectual/academic networking and collaboration, and as a precursor to enhanced and enriched cooperation downstream in both the public and private sectors.

This reflection explores the often-contradictory roles assigned to international students in Canada, where they are simultaneously represented by different actors and institutions as talent, cashcows, and scapegoats in Canada's fragmented policy and institutional landscape. My preliminary research highlights the structural tensions between federal immigration priorities, provincial education funding policies, and individual institutional interests. Using Conestoga College as a case study, it critiques the evident growth of academic capitalism and highlights Ontario colleges' systemic reliance on international student revenue. Upon reflection, this paper recognizes the utility of a more detailed and data-driven comparative approach between institutions and provinces.

REFLECTION

The theme of the conference, “Canada’s Education-Migration Policy Nexus: Tapping into Talent, Cashcows, or Scapegoats?” highlights an underlying confusion and tension underpinning the controversies surrounding Canada’s international student levels over the past decade. My preliminary research suggests that Canada’s education-migration policy nexus at a base level incorporates elements of all three priorities of attracting talent, opportunistic use of international students as cashcows, and then later as political scapegoats. My research points to a view of each of these characterizations as pointing to the different ways that international students are commodified as sources of value. Either as human capital, financial capital, or political capital respectively.

Federal immigration policy sought to recruit international students for their contributions to Canada’s human capital, an explicit priority given in the federal government’s 2019 International Education Strategy. Successes from this policy are evidenced by the 50% of international graduate students who become landed immigrants within 10 years (Crossman et al., 2022). Federal messaging was clear that Canada’s policy regime did not just want international students to study here, but to stay and live here afterwards as a means of backstopping the nation’s demographic decline. Hence the ‘ideal immigrant’ framing of international students implicit in immigration policy discourses. But when combined with the decade(s) of provincial-level austerity for the higher education sector (domestic tuition and operating grant freezes), institutional policymaking tapped into international students as logical cashcows to cross-subsidize domestic student services and to finance growth. At the same time, across Ontario’s college sector, revenue growth over the past decade and a half (since 2008) has been due exclusively to growth in international student enrolment (Usher & Balfour, 2024). And finally, in the context of growing backlash over the rising costs of shelter and a nation-wide housing affordability crisis, the government of the day attempted to earn political capital by ‘cracking down’ on an issue that had boiled over in public consciousness.

My research into this area indicates that it can be productive to study the relationships between the institutional and organizational motivations for each of these framings where international students are conceptualized in terms of talent, cashcows, and scapegoats at different times and by different actors. By highlighting the differential incentives and priorities that constitute this fragmented web of interests and actors and the potential tensions between them, the relational and systemic factors that facilitated the growth of what has become a domestic crisis can be more accurately identified and understood.

Reflections on studying the immigration-education nexus

My preliminary research emphasizes the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the study of international student flows. The question of “where did the promise go” for international students in Canada is a fundamentally political one that involves both provincial and federal levels of policy analysis at the intersection of immigration policy, education policy, demographic, economic conditions and related policies, and individual institutional values and budgetary priorities. It is an area of research that requires a relational perspective in analyzing the ways in which demographic considerations shape immigration policy, which in turn influences federal efforts to nudge the operations of the post-secondary system. The ways in which the combination of provincial tuition regulation and federal immigration policy create disparate incentive structures for post-secondary institutions in different provinces, for example Newfoundland and Manitoba which maintained modest levels of international recruitment versus Ontario and British Columbia where recruitment targets for many institutions bordered on recklessness.

Given the significant inter- and intra-provincial disparities in international student recruitment and consequences of the federal study permit cap, a more detailed analysis of the data would be beneficial for future work in an attempt to make sense of the local economic and institutional circumstances that shaped local international student flows. For instance, my research highlighted the case study of Conestoga College as a particularly notable example of the exploitation of international students as cashcows in the interest of capital accumulation (an exercise in academic capitalism where Marx's M-C-M' model accurately models financial flows). However, the use of this case study would have been made more effective in a comparative context with other Ontario colleges at the opposite end of the recruitment spectrum (such as Boréal College) and average Ontario college international student enrollment figures and budgetary data. More detailed analysis on an institution-by-institution basis can reveal distributional trends that may give better clarity on when, where, and why international recruitment practices became excessive, how local and regional decision-making spurred a national-level crisis of confidence in the sector. Despite the issue becoming highly controversial at the federal level, impacting institutional in all provinces, the distribution of institutional recruitment practices was far from uniform and it appears that particular institutions (and provinces) contributed very disproportionately to the overall 'problem'.

This points to a particular challenge in researching international student flows in Canada. The data on international student enrolment and recruitment is not easily obtained in a timely manner and is not centrally collected and aggregated. My research relied extensively on media reports, surveys, interviews, and other such sources for current enrolment data. At the same time as there appears to be a need for greater policy coordination between federal and provincial governments, greater coordination in aggregating data on international student flows may facilitate faster and more robust monitoring and analyses of trends that can help to identify emerging trends of concern or interest.

Canada's social construction of international students

There is also a notable disconnect between the complex realities of inter-institutional and inter-provincial comparisons and public discourse. Public discourse in Canada surrounding the issue seems to suffer from a lack of nuance in acknowledging the interrelationships between the view of students as talent, cashcows, and/or scapegoats. One of the most insightful experiences for me personally at the conference was the opportunity to listen to so many diverse perspectives on the role and politics of international students in Canada. While there are clearly a wide range of well-reasoned arguments that can and should be placed in serious conversation with one another, public discourse broadly seems superficial and emblematic of an intranational cultural conflict where discourse does not really function to resolve differences of opinion as much as it does to entrench attitudes and intensify the moral valence of the debate. The tendency for discourse in the public sphere to reductively characterize Canada's education-immigration policy nexus as a contest of social values obfuscates the need to untangle tensions in provincial-federal policy coordination that precipitated what has become a national crisis.

There is no inherent contradiction between critically scrutinizing the recruitment policies and budgetary priorities at Conestoga College (a public college's experiment with academic capitalism run amok) in conversation with the structural provincial-federal policy tensions that precipitated it. Or between recognizing the need for Canada to recruit and retain human capital from around the world as a demographic and economic priority, while acknowledging the need for proactive guardrails to ensure that institutional practices on this front evolve sustainably. Nor between the reality that

international students are themselves among the first and most hard hit by cost of living and cost of housing increases, while also noting their contributions to these increases, especially in small college and university towns such as Sydney, Cape Breton. The reality that international students in Canada can simultaneously be construed as ‘talent’, ‘cashcows’, and ‘scapegoats’ for different actors with competing priorities is to a large extent absent in the public sphere. Public opinion seems entrenched in a cultural conflict between competing perspectives that prioritize narrative coherence over complexity and the privileging of certain social values at the expense of others.

What emerges from all of these findings is the absence of a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to policy making, an inability of institutions, provinces, and the federal government to coordinate effectively, which has led Canada’s higher education sector from one crisis to the next. The landscape on which institutions of higher education operate is disorganized and therefore constantly in flux. While pursuing a single policy trajectory, the same institutions which were initially valorized for their role in backstopping Canada’s demographic decline and demand for high skilled human capital, became villainized as the faces of housing unaffordability, and are now facing existential financial crises due to the study permit cap. Future work in this area that digs deeper into detail regarding inter-institutional comparisons and to chart the distribution of institutional recruitment levels would add much needed factual nuance to these debates. As well, efforts to de-escalate and de-emphasize the moral and value-driven rhetoric and discourses that unfortunately obscure the need for nuanced, systems-level thinking could go a long way towards bringing a degree of pragmatic sobriety to public policy.

REFERENCES

Crossman, E., et al. (2022). *International students as a source of labour supply: A summary of recent trends*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2022003/article/00001-eng.htm>.

Usher, A., Balfour, J. (2024). *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada 2024*. Higher Education Strategy Associates, Toronto.

