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.