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.

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