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 specialities 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	*n*	%
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
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
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.*

Table 1 (cont.)

International student experiences, resilience and institutional support

Experience	*N*	Low *n* (%)	Moderate *n* (%)	High *n* (%)	*M*	*SD*	Missing *n*
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

Source: *Questionnaire survey data (2024 -2025.*

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*

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 owf 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: 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