INTRODUCTION

International Students in Canada's Higher Education Ecosystem

Jack Jedwab

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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 Borras, 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