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

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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

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