



COUNCIL OF
AGENCIES SERVING
SOUTH ASIANS



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO



DOES INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES/COLLEGES PROMOTE INCLUSION OR A STRUCTURE OF EXPLOITATION?

A Study of South Asian Students' Perspectives

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ABOUT THE COUNCIL OF AGENCIES SERVING SOUTH ASIANS (CASSA)

The Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA) is a social justice umbrella organization representing more than 120 member agencies across Ontario. For nearly three decades, CASSA has worked to advance the economic, social, political, and cultural empowerment of South Asian communities through research, advocacy, policy development, capacity building, training, and community mobilization. Guided by principles of social justice, equity, diversity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression, CASSA collaborates with community organizations, governments, and stakeholders to address issues affecting racialized and marginalized communities.

CASSA's current strategic priorities include combating hate-motivated crimes and hate speech, addressing poverty among racialized and religious minority communities, promoting gender and health equity, advancing economic empowerment, and fostering anti-racism and anti-oppression initiatives. Through its leadership and coalition-building efforts, CASSA works to create meaningful social change and strengthen community participation in shaping Canada's future.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Mitacs Accelerate project was conducted in partnership with the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA) and University of Toronto to examine the experiences of international students in Canadian higher education, with a particular focus on South Asian international students. South Asian students represent the largest and fastest-growing international student population in Canada and are frequently among the most affected by gaps in settlement support, housing access, healthcare navigation, and employment protections. The project was designed to generate applied, evidence-based insights that can inform community-level service delivery, institutional practice, and public policy advocacy.

Drawing on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with South Asian international students and an analysis of relevant higher-education and immigration policy frameworks, the study examined students' experiences across key stages of the international education pathway. These stages included admission and visa processing, arrival and settlement, housing access, employment, healthcare and mental health services, and post-graduation transitions. Throughout the project, attention was given to how institutional and policy arrangements shape students' vulnerability, access to support, and sense of security in Canada.

The findings indicate that South Asian international students often experience significant precarity despite being actively recruited as contributors to Canada's education system, labour market, and demographic goals. Students reported high financial strain due to tuition and cost-of-living pressures, limited and unreliable housing options, exploitative or unstable employment conditions, and substantial barriers to accessing healthcare and culturally responsive mental health support. Many participants relied heavily on informal community networks and agencies such as CASSA-affiliated organizations to navigate these challenges, highlighting the critical role played by community-based service providers in filling gaps left by institutions and government systems.

In addition, the findings highlight important differences between the experiences of international students in colleges and universities. While students in both sectors face financial pressure, housing insecurity, and uncertainty related to immigration and employment, college students reported heightened vulnerability due to shorter program durations, closer alignment between education and immediate labour market participation, and more limited access to institutional support and advocacy structures. University

students, particularly those in longer programs, reported greater access to academic resources and peer networks but continued to face challenges related to immigration insecurity, employment precarity, and gaps in mental health and settlement support. These distinctions underscore the need for sector-specific policy and support strategies, recognizing that internationalization operates differently across colleges and universities and produces uneven student experiences that require tailored institutional and community responses.

For CASSA and its member agencies, the project provides concrete evidence of how international students' needs extend beyond traditional "student services" and closely resemble settlement and newcomer challenges, even though international students are usually excluded from formal settlement support. The findings reinforce the need for stronger coordination between postsecondary institutions, immigration authorities, and community organizations, as well as recognition of community agencies as essential partners in supporting international students' wellbeing and integration.

Based on these findings, the project advances a set of actionable policy and practice recommendations aimed at improving alignment between international education, immigration policy, and community support systems. These recommendations include strengthening pre-arrival and arrival services, improving access to safe and affordable housing, reforming international student health insurance and healthcare navigation supports, protecting students from labour exploitation, stabilizing immigration and work regulations, and formally integrating community-based organizations into international student support and policy planning processes.

Overall, this project contributes practical insights that can support CASSA's advocacy efforts, inform service design across its member agencies, and strengthen collaborative approaches to international student support. By centering the lived experiences of South Asian international students, the research demonstrates that improving international student wellbeing is not only an educational issue, but also a matter of settlement policy, labour protection, and social equity, areas where community organizations play a vital and irreplaceable role.



2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA) and Mitacs for funding and supporting this research project on the internationalization of South Asian students in Canada.

I am especially grateful to CASSA for its partnership throughout the project. In addition to financial support, CASSA provided invaluable guidance, facilitated connections with its extensive network of member organizations and community stakeholders, supported participant recruitment and knowledge mobilization efforts, and offered resources and institutional support that contributed significantly to the successful completion of this research. CASSA's commitment to social justice and community-engaged research helped ensure that this study remained grounded in the experiences and priorities of South Asian communities. Consistent with the community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, CASSA was actively involved in knowledge mobilization throughout the research process. Rather than waiting until the completion of the study, CASSA supported the early dissemination of emerging findings through community information sessions, blogs, social media campaigns, and collaborative outreach events. Working with other community organizations and stakeholders, CASSA helped translate research findings into accessible and practical information for international students and their families. This collaborative dissemination process increased community awareness, strengthened public engagement, and ensured that the research contributed to ongoing advocacy and support initiatives aimed at improving the experiences of international students in Canada.

I would also like to thank the University of Toronto for its partnership on this project. Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Elizabeth Buckner, whose supervision, mentorship, and expertise in higher education and internationalization were instrumental throughout the research process. Her thoughtful guidance strengthened every stage of the project, from conceptualization and methodology to analysis and dissemination.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to all research participants who generously shared their experiences, perspectives, and insights. Their contributions form the foundation of this report and have made it possible to advance a deeper understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and implications of internationalization for South Asian students in Canadian higher education.

3. PROJECT BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 Background

International students play an increasingly central role in Canada's higher education system, economy, immigration, and broader labour market strategy. Over the past two decades, international education has evolved from a primarily educational enterprise into a key component of Canada's internationalization agenda, economic development strategy, and talent retention framework. Postsecondary institutions, governments, and employers increasingly view international students as contributors to institutional sustainability, workforce development, and long-term population growth. As a result, international student recruitment and retention have become closely connected to broader objectives related to global engagement, innovation, immigration, and economic competitiveness.

International students have become integral to the financial sustainability and economic function of Canada's postsecondary education system. As of the end of 2024, Canada hosted approximately 998,000 international students across all levels of study, making international students one of the largest groups of temporary residents in the country (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2024). Postsecondary institutions depend on international student enrolment for financial sustainability, while federal and provincial governments promote international education as a pathway to skills development, workforce participation, and long-term settlement. Over the past decade, international student enrolment has grown rapidly, and despite recent policy caps, institutions remain highly dependent on international tuition. Research shows that between 2010 and 2023, international student tuition accounted for nearly 100% of net new operating revenue growth in Canadian postsecondary institutions, reflecting a structural shift in how higher education is financed (Usher, 2024; ICEF Monitor, 2025), underscoring a significant shift in higher education financing. Moreover, tuition fees paid by international students continue to rise and are substantially higher than those paid by domestic students; in 2025–2026, international undergraduate students were expected to pay an average of \$41,746 annually, compared with \$7,734 for Canadian students. As a result, international students have become important contributors not only to the educational sector but also to the financial sustainability of institutions and Canada's broader economic and demographic objectives.

At the federal level, international education is explicitly positioned as part of a study-work-stay migration framework. Surveys indicate that 70% of international students plan to apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) and 57% intend to apply for permanent residence in Canada, highlighting the close integration of education pathways with labour

market and immigration objectives (CBIE International Student Survey, 2023). Administrative data further show that among international graduates who obtained a PGWP, approximately 64% transitioned toward permanent residence, confirming that international education increasingly functions as an entry point into long-term settlement (Statistics Canada, 2025).

While this alignment supports Canada's economic and demographic goals, it also has exposed a significant capacity gap. Government testimony and national data indicate that international students experience higher rates of unsuitable housing than their Canadian-born counterparts. This disparity is particularly evident in high-enrolment municipalities, where between 25% and 63% of international students live in unsuitable housing, compared with 13% to 45% of Canadian-born students (Statistics Canada, 2024). Federal reviews have acknowledged that rapid growth in international student numbers has placed pressure on housing, healthcare, and local services, contributing to the introduction of enrolment caps beginning in 2024 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024). At the same time, labour market data show that international graduates earn on average nearly 20% less than Canadian graduates with equivalent credentials three years after graduation, indicating uneven labour market integration despite strong participation (Statistics Canada, 2025).

International students face heightened vulnerability within this landscape. Growing concerns have emerged regarding international students' access to safe and affordable housing, healthcare and mental health services, stable employment, and adequate settlement support. Rising tuition fees and cost-of-living pressures have intensified financial strain, while policy changes related to immigration and employment have increased uncertainty. These challenges have highlighted gaps and misalignments between international education policies, immigration frameworks, and community support systems. South Asian international students face particular vulnerability within this context. Students from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan collectively represent the largest regional cohort of international students in Canada, with India alone accounting for nearly half of all international study permit holders in recent years (IRCC, 2024). These students are disproportionately concentrated in rental-constrained big cities, and they are also engaged in precarious employment and housing conditions. At the same time, South Asian populations are among the youngest and most highly educated racialized groups in Canada, highlighting their strategic importance to Canada's long-term labour force (Statistics Canada, 2025).

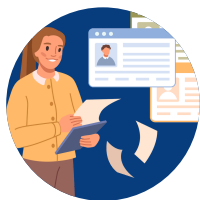
Despite this significance, the lived experiences of South Asian international students remain underrepresented in institutional planning and policy development, particularly in relation to housing, settlement, and early migration risk. This project responds directly to this gap by centering South Asian international students' experiences and examining how international education, migration policy, and community support systems interact to shape inclusion, wellbeing, and long-term integration. By situating international students within Canada's broader migration and labour strategy, the study highlights the need to align recruitment and economic goals with coordinated settlement-stage support and shared responsibility.

2.2 Project Objectives

The objectives of this applied research project were:



To examine the lived experiences of international students, particularly South Asian international students, in Canadian colleges and universities.



To identify structural barriers across key stages of the international education pathway, including:

- admission and recruitment processes;
- visa processing and immigration requirements;
- arrival and settlement supports;
- housing and employment access;
- healthcare and mental health services;



To generate evidence-based, actionable policy recommendations that can inform postsecondary institutions, government agencies, and community organizations in improving international student support, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes.

2.3. Research Questions

The primary research question is:

How does the internationalization of higher education in Ontario govern South Asian international students' academic participation, belonging, and membership of society through processes of conditional inclusion and othering?

The sub questions are:

1. How do internationalization policies and institutional practices in Ontario's colleges and universities conceptualize diversity, inclusion, and international students, and how are these logics differentiated across institutional types?
2. How do South Asian international students experience and interpret internationalization policies and practices in relation to their racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, and migratory positioning?
3. What do variations in South Asian international students' experiences across colleges and universities reveal about the differentiated operation of internationalization as a system of higher education governance?

3. RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND METHODOLOGY

This project employed an applied qualitative research method grounded in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, conducted in collaboration with the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA). CBPR is widely recognized in the literature for its emphasis on collaboration, shared knowledge production, and addressing community-identified needs through research partnerships (Israel et al., 1998). The methodological design was developed to ensure that the research responded directly to the needs, priorities, and lived realities of South Asian international students, while also generating policy-relevant insights for postsecondary institutions and community partners. The study has also received approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of University of Toronto.

The study was conducted in multiple phases. In the first phase, a review of relevant academic literature, government reports, and policy documents related to internationalization, immigration, and international student support in Canada was undertaken. This phase informed the development of an analytical framework of *Education for Other(s)* and helped identify key policies and institutional issues shaping international students' experiences. An advisory group consisting of researchers, academic supervisors, CASSA representatives, and individuals with lived experience as international students was formed to guide the research design, participant recruitment, and interpretation of findings. Ethics approval was received during this phase.

In the second phase, data were collected through a combination of a short demographic survey and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The survey (conducted through U of T authorized Redcap survey) captures background information and identifies participants willing to engage in interviews. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 22 South Asian international students enrolled in both colleges and universities across Ontario, ensuring diversity in level of study, gender, country of origin, and field of study. Interviews explored experiences related to admission, visa processing, arrival and settlement, housing, employment, healthcare and mental health access, and future planning. The interviews also asked for policy recommendations from students based on their experiences. Where appropriate, follow-up interviews and small group discussions were used to deepen and clarify emerging themes. Interviews were also conducted with three key institutional and community informants to contextualize student perspectives. Please find Appendix A for demographic information on 22 student participants.

The third phase conducts data analysis. All interviews were transcribed through a paid secured TurboSubscribed account and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. This

process allows patterns across individual experiences to be identified while preserving the complexity of participants' stories, as thematic analysis focuses on identifying and analyzing recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings from interviews and document analysis were integrated to support triangulation and strengthen the reliability of results. The analysis was further guided by a postcolonial framework of *Education for the Other*, which helps examine how international students are positioned within unequal global and educational power relations. Throughout the project, ongoing consultation with CASSA ensured that the research remained grounded in community realities and oriented toward actionable outcomes.

The anonymity and privacy of both the interviewer and participants have been ensured throughout the research. All collected data have been securely stored on a password-protected and encrypted laptop maintained at CASSA. Only the researcher has access to the data, and no other individual is permitted to access it.

This study also has some limitations. First, although participants from Pakistan and Afghanistan were initially approached and some provided consent to participate, none ultimately chose to participate in the interviews. As a result, the perspectives of students from these countries are not represented in the findings. Second, the study sample was not evenly balanced in terms of gender or their level of study, with unequal representation of men and women as well as college- and university-based students. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all South Asian international students. Rather, the study provides in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of a specific group of participants situated within particular institutional, social, and geographic contexts. The overrepresentation of certain groups may have influenced the prominence of particular themes, while the experiences of underrepresented groups may not have been captured to the same extent. In addition, participants differed in terms of country of origin, program type, family status, and stage of study, further highlighting the diversity of experiences within the South Asian international student population. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending these findings to broader populations. The purpose of qualitative research is not statistical generalization but analytical and contextual understanding; accordingly, the findings should be understood as illustrative of key patterns and processes rather than universally applicable to all South Asian international students in Canada. Future research with larger and more demographically balanced samples could further examine whether the themes identified in this study vary across gender, educational sector, level of study, family status, and national origin.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of higher education is most commonly defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). Although cross-border academic exchange has a long history, internationalization emerged as a coherent strategic agenda only in the early 1980s, gaining prominence in institutional policy and planning (de Wit, 2013; Knight, 2015). Early conceptualizations framed internationalization as a humanistic project of international cooperation with a set of discrete activities, such as student and faculty mobility or international partnerships, largely in response to globalization (Arum & van de Water, 1992; Van der Wende, 1997). Over time, it has become a core strategic function shaped by political, economic, and institutional pressures, including global competitiveness, declining public funding, and revenue generation through international student recruitment (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Rizvi, 2011). However, these dominant definitions offer limited insight into how internationalization operates as a governance regime that structures power, risk, and belonging.

While the above understanding has been widely manifested in institutional and policy discourse, subsequent scholarship emphasizes that internationalization is not a singular or neutral strategy, but a complex and evolving process shaped by multiple, and sometimes competing, objectives (de Wit et al., 2015). Scholars note that internationalization operates at the intersection of educational quality, cultural exchange, economic priorities, and political governance (Knight, 2015). Although ethical and academic goals such as global citizenship and intercultural learning remain central to internationalization policy rhetoric, critical scholars argue that these goals often coexist with market-driven and migration-oriented priorities. These priorities focus on revenue generation, labour supply, and national competitiveness (Guo & Guo, 2017; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). This insight has given rise to what is often described as a critical turn in internationalization studies. This critical turn redirects attention from treating internationalization as an inherently positive goal or an end in itself toward the power relations and governance structures produced through internationalization. This critical approach examines *who benefits, who bears risk, and whose knowledge, labour, and mobility are valued* within internationalized higher education systems (Marginson, 2011; Rizvi, 2011; Stein, 2017). While this scholarship has exposed commercialization and colonial asymmetries (de Wit, 2014; Stein & Andreotti, 2016), it has been less attentive to how internationalization systematically governs international students through immigration status, labour expectations, and conditional forms of inclusion.

4.1 Framework of Education for Other(s)

Building on this critical approach to internationalization, this study adopts Allan Luke's *Education for the Other* framework (2003, 2004, 2011) to situate internationalization within post-colonial, immigration, and political-economic governance structures. Luke challenges liberal and humanistic assumptions that education functions as a neutral or inherently inclusive system. Instead, he argues that education is always organized for someone, for a particular purpose, and toward specific ends, reflecting dominant cultural norms while marginalizing Indigenous, immigrant, and multilingual learners. Across his work, Luke emphasizes the importance of valuing students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. He encourages critical engagement with power and inequality while questioning standardized and globalized education systems that often overlook local contexts, diverse knowledge systems, and the realities of the marginalized learners. He advocates for an inclusive and critical form of education that enables learners to participate meaningfully in society by challenging dominant ideologies and social structures (Luke, 2003, 2004, 2011).

Allan Luke's concept of *Education for the Other*, extended through *Education for Other(s)*, offers a critical lens for understanding internationalization as a historically and politically situated system rather than a benevolent project of global engagement. From this perspective, internationalization functions as a governing process that manages difference through education. It enables selective forms of participation while limiting access to stability, recognition, and a genuine sense of belonging for certain groups of students. International students are thus positioned not simply as learners, but as subjects whose inclusion is conditional and unevenly structured. Importantly, this framework integrates political economy, immigration governance, and settler-colonial and postcolonial theory to move beyond viewing internationalization as a set of discrete institutional practices. Instead, it reveals how internationalization operates through the coordinated management of mobility, economic value, risk, and belonging, aligning the interests of universities, provincial governments, and the federal immigration regime. Power circulates through these alignments to produce differentiation, othering, and exclusion rather than equitable inclusion.

The framework conceptualizes internationalization in higher education, shifting its focus from how the policy is framed to how it is experienced in practice. It describes internationalization as a structurally organized process that intersects immigration governance, globalization, economic rationales, and colonial histories (Stein & Andreotti, 2016; Guo & Guo, 2017). This framework explains how internationalization operates in alignment with immigration regimes, labour markets, and institutional practices to generate uneven outcomes for international students (Trilokekar, 2010; McCartney, 2021). These intersecting forces produce international students as conditionally included Others within

postsecondary institutions. Differentiation occurs through overlapping markers such as nationality, race, religion, language, class, and legal status, which shape how students are valued, governed, and positioned within institutional hierarchies. Therefore, this framework will clarify patterns of conditional inclusion, student precarity, and differential access to housing, employment, healthcare, and support services, particularly for racialized students from the Global South (Bauder, 2015; Ellis, 2023).

Applied to the Canadian context, *Education for Other(s)* helps explain how these structural conditions shape the lived experiences of South Asian international students in colleges and universities. The experiences of these students are central to assessing whether internationalization promotes meaningful inclusion or reproduces new forms of marginalization, racialized inequality, and conditional belonging. This perspective highlights how international students are often valued for their economic and labour contributions while facing unequal access to support, recognition, and participation within systems that closely link education to immigration governance and labour market needs (Marom, 2022; Stein, 2019).

Although Canada promotes itself as multicultural and welcoming to international students, this narrative often obscures the realities many students face. Internationalization is commonly presented in policy and institutional discourse as a strategy for integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into teaching, research, and institutional practice. This approach projects the image that internationalization enhances educational quality and prepares students for participation in a globalized world (de Wit et al., 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; van der Wende, 1997). It also frames internationalization as a positive and mutually beneficial process based on mobility, merit, and intercultural exchange, suggesting that access to Canadian higher education is open to all capable and motivated students (Stein, 2019). However, critical scholars argue that this narrative often functions as a branding strategy that portrays Canada as welcoming and inclusive while masking the extent to which internationalization is driven by economic, labour market, and immigration objectives (Guo & Guo, 2017). The experiences of South Asian international students presented in this study suggest a different reality. Many participants encountered financial precarity, housing insecurity, limited institutional support, and uncertainty regarding immigration pathways, experiences that contrast sharply with the promises embedded in internationalization discourse.

To examine this disconnect, the present study draws on Luke's concept of Education for Other(s). This framework helps explain how internationalization is experienced by South Asian international students and how their lived realities often diverge from the inclusive ideals promoted by institutions and policymakers. It contributes to critical internationalization scholarship by analyzing how internationalization policies intersect with economic objectives, immigration priorities, and broader structures of inequality, shaping students' experiences of inclusion, marginalization, and conditional belonging within Canadian higher education (Luke, 2009; Marom, 2022; Stein, 2019).

4.1.1. International Students as Revenue Generator

Internationalization in higher education is increasingly driven by revenue generation and economic objectives, positioning international students as central to institutional financial sustainability. Research on the internationalization of higher education shows that international students have become critical to the financial viability and global positioning of postsecondary institutions in countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2013; Knight, 2015). Although policy discourse often emphasizes goals such as global citizenship, intercultural competence, and educational quality, critical scholars argue that these aspirations frequently coexist with market-driven priorities related to revenue generation, competitiveness, and institutional branding (Khoo, 2011, as cited in Guo & Guo, 2017; Bamberger, Morris, & Yemini, 2019). As a result, institutions increasingly depend on international student tuition, differentiated fee structures, global rankings, and transnational education partnerships to maintain financial sustainability (Knight & de Wit, 2018; Bamberger & Morris, 2024). In this context, international students are often valued not only as learners but also as important economic assets whose presence supports institutional growth and national economic objectives.

Several contested practices have become increasingly common in internationalized higher education. These include aggressive international branding (Stein, 2018), competitive approaches to internationalization (Knight, 2015), and predatory international student recruitment practices (Huang, Raimo, & Humfrey, 2016). Scholars have also criticized the treatment of international students as “cash cows” (Lomer, 2014), the expansion of branch campuses and offshore education (Altbach, 2015), and the transformation of universities into market-oriented international businesses (Wu & Naidoo, 2016). Together, these developments suggest that economic goals have become increasingly central to internationalization in Canadian higher education.

International students are increasingly positioned as customers in a global education marketplace, while educational credentials are treated as commodities within a global knowledge economy. In this context, students are often valued for their economic contributions rather than as full members of academic communities. They pay significantly higher tuition fees than domestic students and contribute billions of dollars annually to Canada’s economy (Cudmore, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2020). This economic framing reinforces the view of international students as revenue generators and economic assets, rather than learners with educational and social needs. As a result, their experiences of vulnerability, exclusion, and precarity are often intensified (Robertson, 2013; Stein, 2019).

4.1.2. International Students as Ideal Migrants

While serving broader economic objectives, internationalization of higher education has become increasingly connected to labour market needs and immigration goals, blurring the boundaries between education, labour migration, and population management (Trilokekar, 2010; Robertson, 2011). In major destination countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, international education is promoted as a national economic strategy aligned with workforce development and immigration priorities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Robertson, 2013). These countries present higher education through narratives of opportunity, skills development, and post-study employment (Stein, 2019). As a result, international study is often framed as a pathway to social mobility and long-term settlement (Robertson, Hoare, & Harwood, 2011). In Canada, this connection is particularly explicit, as internationalization policies reward Canadian educational credentials in permanent residence selection systems (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2020). The availability of spousal work permits, family accompaniment, and post-graduation work opportunities further reinforces the widely promoted “study-work-stay” pathway (El Masri, 2023; Guo & Guo, 2017). Consequently, higher education is increasingly positioned not only as an educational opportunity, but also as a pathway to skilled employment, permanent residency, and long-term integration into Canadian society (Cerna & Chou, 2023).

A central feature of Canada’s internationalization agenda is its close connection to immigration, labour market, and population-growth objectives. Canada increasingly relies on immigration to address low fertility rates, an aging population, and long-term labour shortages (Edmonston, 2016). As a result, policymakers have prioritized attracting young, highly educated migrants who can contribute to economic productivity, integrate into the labour market, and support population growth. Within this migration regime, internationalization functions as a mechanism for producing what policy discourse often describes as “ideal migrants.” These individuals are typically young, highly educated, self-funded, English proficient, financially self-sufficient, and adaptable to changing labour market conditions (Stein, 2019; Trilokekar, 2010). Unlike traditional immigrants, international students are expected to finance their own education and absorb many of the risks associated with migration, including credential recognition challenges and labour market integration. They are also responsible for continuously maintaining their legal status while navigating increasingly complex immigration pathways. Within this framework, international students are positioned not only as learners but also as future workers and potential immigrants whose value is closely tied to their economic contribution.

Although Canada’s immigration policies increasingly position international students as desirable future migrants, the state retains the authority to determine who is ultimately accepted as a permanent resident and future citizen. Since the 1970s, Canadian

international student policy has been shaped by a governance framework that classifies international students as temporary migrants. Despite their growing economic importance, they continue to be governed through policies that produce insecurity and conditional inclusion. This framework largely excludes international students from public support systems and justifies their presence primarily in economic and geopolitical terms (McCartney, 2021). As a result, access to stable and secure legal status remains tightly regulated (Cerna & Chou, 2023).

international students are actively recruited to address labour shortages and demographic challenges, they are managed through temporary visas, restricted work rights, and uncertain post-graduation immigration pathways. Unlike permanent residents, they are expected to finance their own education, navigate labour market integration, and continuously maintain their legal status. These conditions create institutionalized forms of precarity and conditional belonging, where students are welcomed for their economic contributions but remain excluded from full membership and security (Bauder, 2006; Edmonston, 2016; Ellis, 2023; McCartney, 2021). Consequently, pathways to permanent residency remain uneven and uncertain. In practice, international students' legal status is temporary and unstable, shaped by limited work authorizations and frequently changing immigration policies.



4.1.3. International Students as a Racialized and Colonized Other

Building on the economic, immigration, and governance logics discussed above, internationalization must be understood as embedded within longer histories of racialized, and colonial migration control. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship shows that contemporary internationalization is not a neutral or benevolent educational project, but a continuation of colonial power reworked through higher education institutions and market logic. Coloniality explains why internationalization produces racialized patterns of conditional inclusion rather than equal participation. Decolonial and racial-capitalist analyses further show that internationalization commodifies difference while maintaining epistemic and material hierarchies, producing students as economically valuable yet politically and socially disposable subjects (Robinson, 1983; Stein, 2019; McCartney, 2021; Marom, 2022; CBIE, 2020). They are simultaneously framed as students, temporary migrants, future workers, and ideal immigrants within a fragmented education-immigration policy environment (Trilokekar, 2010; Scott et al., 2015). Within this context, internationalization functions as a mechanism of managed migration that uses higher education to sort, regulate, and filter mobile populations. In Canada, this process unfolds within ongoing settler colonial structures that organize belonging through land, race, and permanence, with universities operating as key institutions of colonial governance (Wolfe, 2006; Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015; Coulthard, 2014). International students, particularly those from the Global South, are incorporated through education systems that regulate mobility and legitimacy, potentially positioning them as “settlers of colour in-the-making” while sustaining their marginalization (Chen, 2021). Universities and colleges become key sites where students are assessed for future inclusion or exclusion from the nation. At the same time, this system sustains students’ disposability by positioning them as temporary and replaceable within broader population and labour strategies (Edmonston et al., 2018; McCartney, 2021).

Settler colonialism also structures epistemic authority within internationalized higher education. Decolonial scholars show that internationalization frequently reproduces colonial knowledge hierarchies by positioning Western epistemologies, pedagogies, and credentials as universal standards of excellence (Santos, 2014; Stein, 2019). Academic curricula, research practices, and evaluation systems continue to privilege Euro-American theories and methods, while Indigenous, Global South, and non-Western epistemologies are treated as supplemental or contextual. Within *Education for Other(s)*, this epistemic ordering is not incidental; it is a mechanism through which international students are expected to assimilate into dominant norms rather than participate as equal knowledge-producing subjects. These practices undermine the stated goals of internationalization, which celebrate diversity and global knowledge exchange, by continuing to privilege Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing perspectives from the Global South.

Within this framework, international students’ inclusion that is conditional, uneven, and highly stratified, produce marginalized experiences. A growing body of research shows that students’ experiences are shaped by high tuition fees, limited access to affordable housing, precarious employment, and restricted eligibility for public services such as healthcare and

settlement support (Bauder, 2015; McCartney, 2021; Ellis, 2023). Absence of appropriate supports also worsen such experience. In addition, internationalization practices often assume eventual assimilation to Euro-Canadian academic and cultural norms, providing support primarily during the initial transition period and offering limited long-term or culturally sensitive support (Cudmore, 2005; Crosby, 2010). These dynamics can lead to significant culture shock, mental health distress, academic difficulties, and, in extreme cases, severe harm, including suicide, as documented in recent media and scholarly discussions (Bascaramurty et al., 2021/2022; Aulakh, 2022).

These conditions have particularly significant consequences for racialized and Global South international students, especially those from South Asia. Research shows that South Asian students now constitute the largest international student cohort in Canada and have become highly desirable recruits for Canadian institutions, especially colleges (Sondhi, 2013; Marom, 2022). This desirability is shaped by colonial legacies of English language dominance, the expansion of middle-class aspirations in South Asia, and education-migration pathways that position these students as economically valuable. Despite their growing presence, South Asian students' diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic experiences remain underexamined in Canadian scholarship. Available studies indicate that many encounter racism, microaggressions, academic marginalization, housing insecurity, exploitative labour conditions, financial stress, and limited access to culturally responsive mental health and wellbeing supports (Guo & Guo, 2017; Calder et al., 2016; Buckner et al., 2020).

The framework of *Education for Other(s)* further situates these processes within racial capitalism, a system historically rooted in slavery and colonial labor regimes that generates value through racial differentiation and disposability (Robinson, 1983; Bhattacharyya, 2018). In internationalized higher education, racial capitalism appears through the commodification of difference. International students' racialized identities enhance diversity metrics, institutional branding, and global prestige, while their material conditions remain insecure. Universities benefit economically and symbolically from international students' tuition, labour, and presence, while transferring financial, legal, and emotional risk onto students themselves through high fees, precarious legal status, and limited access to protections (McCartney, 2021; Walia, 2013).

In summary, the literature demonstrates that internationalization is not simply an educational project but also a social, economic, and political process shaped by power relations, migration governance, and institutional priorities. While internationalization is often promoted as a pathway to global learning, intercultural exchange, and inclusion, critical scholars highlight how it can also reproduce inequality, precarity, and conditional belonging for international students. Guided by Luke's concept of *Education for Other(s)*, this study examines how South Asian international students experience these dynamics within Canadian higher education. The framework provides a critical lens for understanding how internationalization is lived, negotiated, and contested in everyday life, and how students navigate the tensions between the promises of inclusion and the realities of marginalization. The following findings section explores these experiences and the structural conditions that shape them.

5. FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings from in-depth interviews with South Asian international students enrolled in Canadian colleges and universities. While individual experiences varied by gender, family status, institution type, and stage of study, strong cross-cutting patterns emerged across the data. The overall findings indicate that international education in Canada operates less as a purely academic endeavour and more as a socio-political project that advances Canada's economic, labour market, immigration, and nation-building objectives. While international students are recruited through narratives of opportunity, inclusion, and global learning, their experiences reveal a system in which access to support, stability, and belonging remains conditional. Rather than being positioned primarily as learners, students are often valued as future workers, potential immigrants, and sources of institutional revenue. Consequently, the benefits of internationalization are distributed unevenly, while the risks associated with housing, employment, finances, and immigration uncertainty are largely transferred onto students themselves. The overall findings have been discussed in multiple sub sections below:



5.1 International Education as a Work–Study–Stay Pathway

This research finds that international education in Canada operates less as a standalone educational project and more as a work–study–stay pathway that links education, labour market participation, immigration, and long-term settlement. Participants rarely understood higher education as an end in itself. Instead, they viewed education as one element within a broader strategy for securing employment, permanent residency, economic stability, social mobility, and long-term belonging. Their educational decisions were therefore embedded within larger life and migration projects rather than being driven solely by academic aspirations.

Viewed through the lens of *Education for Other(s)*, these findings suggest that international students are positioned in Canada not simply as learners but as prospective workers, future immigrants, and economic contributors whose value extends beyond the classroom. The work–study–stay pathway reflects a policy architecture in which education becomes a mechanism for attracting, selecting, and incorporating particular forms of mobile labour and human capital. Students enter the system as “others” who are invited into Canada through education but whose presence is also tied to broader demographic, economic, and labour market objectives. International education therefore functions not only as a knowledge project but also as a migration and workforce development strategy.

The findings demonstrate that participants themselves rarely understood their journeys as solely educational. Most described education as one component of a broader strategy that involves work, permanent residency, family security, social mobility, and long-term settlement. Their motivations closely mirrored the work–study–stay pathway promoted through Canadian policy, where educational attainment, labour market participation, and immigration outcomes are intentionally linked. Most participants perceived Canada as an attractive destination for their education since it combines higher education with post-graduation work opportunities and relatively accessible pathways to permanent residency. The Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) and related immigration programs played a central role in participants’ decisions. Rather than viewing education, employment, and immigration as separate stages, participants described them as mutually reinforcing components of a single migration trajectory. Participants’ own accounts show how difficult it is to separate these objectives. Most cited multiple motivations simultaneously rather than prioritizing education alone. Among the 22 participants, 81% explicitly identified career and economic opportunities, 76% identified immigration and permanent residency pathways, and 48% identified academic goals as a primary reason for choosing Canada. These motivations overlapped rather than competed, which demonstrates that educational decisions were embedded within broader migration and settlement strategies.

These findings align with critical scholarship that conceptualizes international education in Canada as “edugration” or two-step migration, where education functions simultaneously as an immigration mechanism and a labour market strategy rather than solely an academic endeavour (Brunner, 2025; Robertson, 2018). What appears to be an educational decision is often also a migration decision, a labour market decision, and a settlement decision. From an *Education for Other(s)* perspective, this is significant because it reveals how international students are incorporated into the Canadian context through a framework that values them not only for their educational participation but also for their future economic utility. Their mobility is encouraged not simply to facilitate learning but also to address labour shortages, population growth objectives, and economic development goals. Education becomes intertwined with migration governance that positions students as both learners and future nation-building subjects.

Participants’ narratives illustrate this clearly. For many, migration opportunities were as important as, and sometimes more important than, academic considerations. Compared with destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, Canada was frequently viewed as offering a more realistic pathway to permanent residency. Participants repeatedly linked their educational choices to this pathway. As Participant 20 stated, he came to Canada for “*higher education and PR*,” while Participant 19 explained that “*Canada seemed like a better opportunity since it offers applying for PR*.” One participant from Nepal noted that Canada was chosen over the United States because “*Permanent Residency felt realistic here*,” even though stronger academic options were available elsewhere. Similarly, a participant from Bangladesh described education as “*the safest way to migrate legally*.” These accounts suggest that education and migration were not separate aspirations but interconnected and mutually constitutive goals.

The findings also challenge conventional assumptions that international student mobility is primarily driven by the pursuit of knowledge or academic excellence. Instead, participants frequently evaluated educational destinations through the lens of future work opportunities, immigration policies, quality of life, and settlement prospects. Canada’s appeal was therefore rooted not only in its universities and colleges but also in its ability to offer a relatively coherent pathway from study to work to permanent residence. In this sense, education functioned as a gateway to broader forms of social, economic, and legal mobility.

Participants’ motivations varied according to their life stage and personal circumstances, but they remained connected to the same work–study–stay framework. In many cases, these motivations also reflected broader economic and social conditions in the Global South that shaped students’ decisions to pursue education abroad. Younger and single students often viewed education and work experience as pathways to independence, career advancement, and upward social mobility. For example, Participant 2 described that

he left Nepal because of “*economic stagnation*” and limited professional opportunities. He explained that Canada offered “*better employment prospects,*” “*higher wages,*” and, most importantly, “*a feasible route to PR,*” which he associated with financial security and upward mobility. In contrast, he described conditions in Nepal where “*salaries are low, public jobs are corrupt, and upward mobility is limited.*” His account illustrates that Canadian education was understood not simply as an opportunity to gain academic credentials but as a strategy for improving one’s social and economic position through migration. It highlights how students from South Asia are drawn into Canadian higher education not only as learners but also as future workers and prospective immigrants. Canada’s work–study–stay model gains much of its appeal by responding to the economic constraints, labour market limitations, and social inequalities that participants described in their home countries. In this process, education becomes a vehicle through which students seek mobility, security, and opportunity, while also supplying Canada with skilled labour and future immigrants.

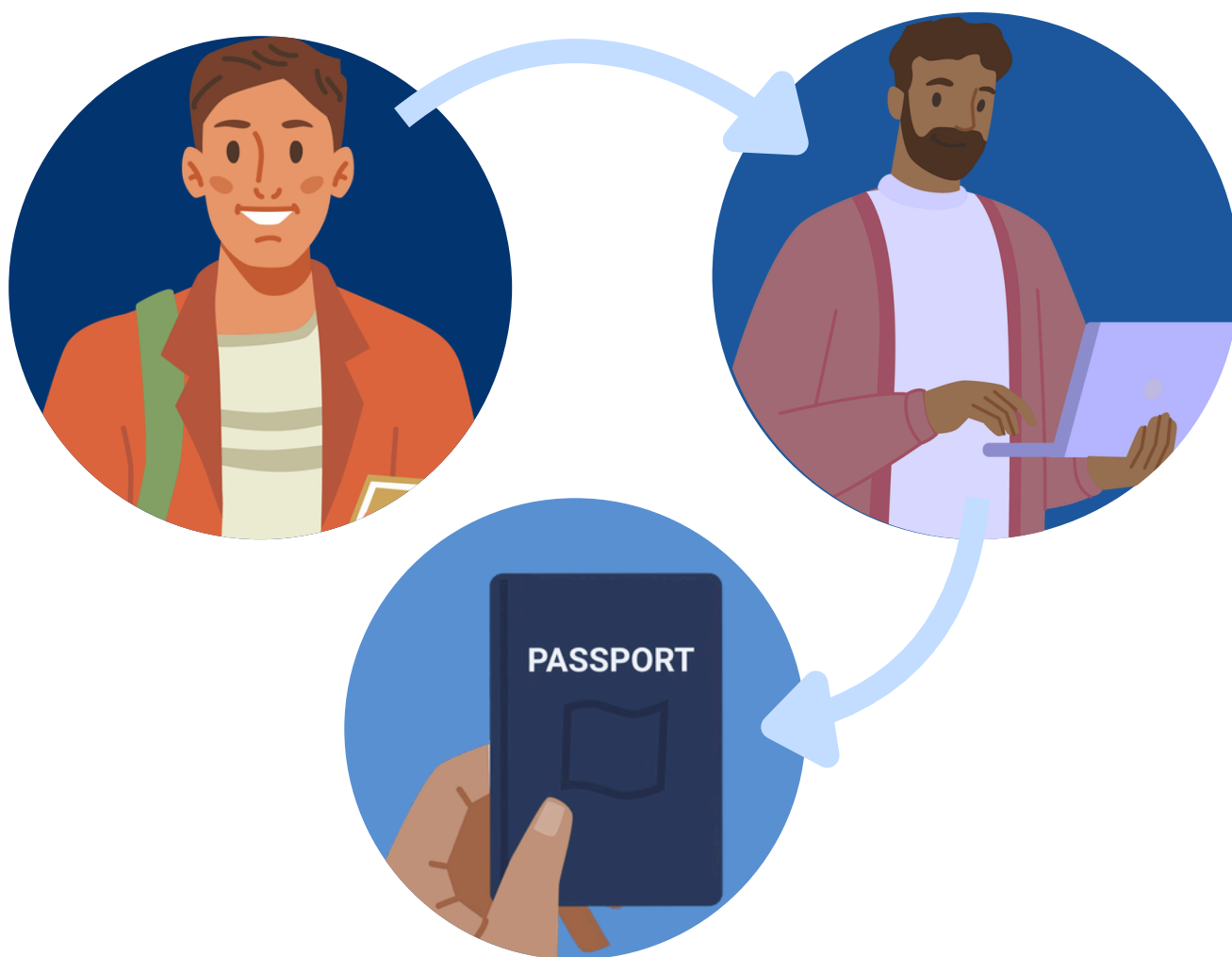
Many single female participants similarly described Canada as an opportunity to restart their lives, gain independence, and move beyond restrictive social expectations. For these students, international education was not only an educational or economic decision but also a pathway toward personal autonomy, safety, and self-determination. Several participants described Canada as a place where they could rebuild their lives, make independent choices, and establish a more secure future. Their narratives reveal that the appeal of international education often extended far beyond academic objectives and into broader aspirations for freedom, dignity, and belonging.

Participants with families were more likely to prioritize long-term stability, safety, and opportunities for their children. In some cases, they were willing to compromise on academic preferences if doing so improved their settlement prospects. Research-oriented students placed greater emphasis on intellectual and scholarly goals. However, even among these participants, Canada’s attractiveness remained closely connected to migration-related opportunities, including funding availability, flexible admissions pathways, post-graduation work options, and family-friendly immigration policies. Thus, academic motivations existed alongside, rather than independently from, employment and settlement considerations.

From an *Education for Other(s)* perspective, these patterns demonstrate how international education operates through forms of conditional inclusion. Students are welcomed because they contribute tuition revenue, labour, skills, and future demographic growth, yet their educational participation is simultaneously tied to expectations of economic productivity and successful integration into the labour market. The findings suggest that international students are not positioned solely as knowledge seekers but also as future

workers and prospective immigrants whose educational mobility serves multiple institutional and national objectives. Consequently, the boundary between education policy and immigration policy becomes increasingly blurred.

Overall, the findings indicate that Canada's international education system is best understood as part of a broader migration infrastructure that integrates education, labour market access, and settlement pathways. International students enter this system with expectations shaped by the promise of a connected work-study-stay trajectory. They are positioned simultaneously as students, workers, future immigrants, and contributors to national economic and demographic objectives. Yet, as the findings demonstrate, while policy narratives actively promote this pathway, institutional support for settlement, housing, employment, and wellbeing often remains limited. This creates a significant gap between the promises embedded within the work-study-stay model and participants' lived experiences after arrival. Rather than functioning solely as an educational project, international education emerges as a migration and settlement strategy through which students pursue not only credentials, but also economic security, social mobility, autonomy, belonging, and long-term futures in Canada.



5.2 Admission and Visa Processes: Information Gaps and Institutional Distance

One recurring finding across the interviews was the information gap and limited institutional support during the early stages of migration. This study finds that, although international education in Canada is actively promoted as a pathway to employment and long-term settlement, students often receive little support during admission, visa processing, and pre-arrival preparation. As a result, many risks are transferred onto students at one of the most vulnerable stages of their migration journey.

Participants consistently described a disconnect between Canada's strong recruitment efforts and the quality of information, communication, and practical support available to them. Many students reported difficulty finding clear information about admission requirements, visa procedures, housing, and settlement. Communication from institutions was often slow, unclear, or focused mainly on tuition payments rather than student support. Students were often left to manage complex academic, administrative, and immigration processes on their own. This lack of guidance created uncertainty, increased stress, and exposed students to additional financial and settlement risks even before they arrived in Canada.

Students reported that admission information was often fragmented, unclear, and difficult to navigate. Universities provided general information online, but it was rarely tailored to students with different educational backgrounds, family circumstances, or country-specific visa challenges. Many students found admission and visa requirements confusing and had to figure out the process on their own. As a result, they relied on informal networks, education agents, or personal guesswork to make important decisions.

The findings also show that support during admission and visa processing was limited. Many participants felt that universities were highly responsive during recruitment but became distant after issuing admission offers. Students reported slow, generic, or delayed responses when they had questions about funding, visas, or supervisor arrangements. As one student explained, *"After I got the offer, it was very quiet. When I had questions about funding and visa timelines, the replies were very general or delayed."* Several students experienced delays in funding confirmation, supervisor approval, or visa processing. These delays affected their ability to submit visa applications on time and prepare for their move to Canada. One participant waited several months for funding confirmation and arrived after the semester had already started. The student explained, *"By the time everything was finalized, classes had started. I missed orientation and had to figure out housing on my own."* Students who arrived late due to visa delays often missed orientation programs, settlement support, and opportunities to build early connections. These delays created additional

financial pressure, housing difficulties, and adjustment challenges. Overall, the findings suggest that students were left to manage uncertainty, financial risks, and settlement planning largely on their own during one of the most vulnerable stages of their migration journey. This indicates a gap between active international student recruitment and the practical support needed to help students successfully transition to life in Canada.

Due to this information gap and weak institutional guidance, education agents emerged as key intermediaries during the admission and visa process. Nearly all participants reported relying on agents because universities often provided limited, delayed, or unclear information after admission offers were issued. For many students, agents became the primary source of guidance when navigating complex academic and immigration requirements. However, while agents were initially viewed as helping students manage a complicated process, interviews suggest that their involvement often increased rather than reduced risk. Several participants reported that they received misinformation, false reassurance, poorly prepared application materials, or advice that did not align with their academic backgrounds and career goals. In some cases, these errors contributed directly to visa refusals, funding difficulties, academic mismatch, and later settlement challenges. Participants also expressed concern that agents operated in a largely unregulated environment and charged high fees with little accountability. Many felt they were treated as transactions rather than individuals making important educational and migration decisions. Importantly, students' reliance on agents should not be interpreted as a lack of initiative or information-seeking skills. Instead, it reflects a structural gap created by institutional disengagement during critical stages of the migration process. When universities remained distant or unavailable during admission, funding, and visa processing, students turned to private intermediaries to manage uncertainty.

The interviews do not provide enough evidence to determine whether this gap is the result of a deliberate institutional strategy or a broader lack of capacity, awareness, or commitment to supporting international students. However, the continued presence of unclear information and fragmented support suggests that this is a systemic issue rather than an isolated problem. It reveals how responsibility is redistributed within the international education system. While students are actively recruited through promises of education, employment opportunities, and future settlement, the burden of navigating complex academic, bureaucratic, and immigration systems is often transferred to the students themselves. Rather than being supported as learners entering unfamiliar educational and social environments, international students are expected to behave as self-managing and self-sufficient subjects capable of independently navigating institutional processes, immigration requirements, housing markets, and labour systems. This dynamic reflects broader neoliberal forms of governance in which risk and responsibility are individualized. Students become responsible for managing uncertainties that are produced

by institutions and policy structures. As a result, they are often required to make important educational, financial, and immigration decisions based on incomplete, inconsistent, or difficult-to-access information, frequently at considerable personal, financial, and emotional cost.

From a critical internationalization perspective, this pattern also illustrates how international students are positioned as the “Other” within the Canadian higher education system. They are welcomed as tuition payers, prospective workers, and future immigrants, yet are often expected to navigate systems that were not designed around their particular needs, backgrounds, or experiences. It reflects a broader structure in which international students are simultaneously valued and marginalized, included within the system for their economic and demographic contributions while bearing disproportionate responsibility for overcoming the barriers they encounter. In this sense, fragmented support functions as more than an operational challenge. It reveals how internationalization can reproduce unequal relationships of power and responsibility, where institutions benefit from international student recruitment while much of the work of settlement, adaptation, and navigation is shifted onto students themselves. Consistent with the framework of *Education for Other(s)*, international students are positioned not only as learners, but also as subjects who must continuously demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and self-reliance in order to access the opportunities that the system promises. This expectation normalizes precarity and obscures the structural conditions that produce many of the challenges students face.

Overall, the findings suggest that Canada’s international education system benefits from international student mobility while placing many of the early migration risks on students themselves, especially those from less advantaged countries. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond recruitment-focused practices and providing coordinated, student-centred support during admission, visa processing, and pre-arrival stages. International education should be understood as the beginning of a complex migration journey rather than simply an educational transaction.



5.3 Arrival and Early Settlement: Institutional Silence and Community Dependence

Extending the previous finding, participants' arrival and early settlement experiences reveal how international students, already positioned as "others" within the work-study-stay system, were expected to independently navigate many of the practical challenges that emerged after arrival. While policy and institutional narratives presented Canada as a destination that integrates education, employment, and settlement, participants often found that responsibility for managing this transition rested largely on their own shoulders. In this sense, the expectation that students would solve their own problems upon arrival mirrors the broader pattern identified in the previous section, where international students are welcomed as future workers, immigrants, and economic contributors, yet are simultaneously expected to be self-reliant and self-managing.

Across the interviews, participants consistently described arrival and early settlement as one of the most difficult and disorienting stages of their migration journey. Travelling alone and arriving in a new country was often an overwhelming experience. This experience was made more challenging by unfamiliar surroundings and systems. After a long flight, many had to navigate lengthy immigration screening processes, limited phone and internet connectivity, and an unfamiliar transportation system. For students arriving alone in a new country, these challenges created feelings of anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty at a time when they were already physically and emotionally tired. For many participants, arriving during the winter months further intensified these challenges. Extreme cold weather added to their physical and mental exhaustion while they were trying to find housing, understand local systems, and adjust to a completely new environment. Many participants arrived late due to visa delays and were forced to make rushed travel arrangements, missing orientation sessions and early settlement support. Together, these factors made the early settlement period a particularly vulnerable and stressful stage of the international student experience.

During this period, institutional support was often limited or absent, and responsibility for settlement was largely shifted onto students and informal community networks. Most reported that their institutions did not offer airport pickup, arrival guidance, or practical assistance with transportation, short-term accommodation, or daily settlement needs. Participants emphasized that no institutional guidance or outreach during this highly vulnerable stage was frightening and emotionally distressing. Although orientation sessions have the potential to address some of these challenges, participants reported that such sessions—when offered—were often brief, generic, and poorly aligned with immediate settlement needs. Some sessions lasted less than thirty minutes and provided limited practical information on housing, transportation, finances, or daily living systems. Participants also noticed a sharp decline in institutional communication after admission

offers were accepted. Despite facing visa delays, travel uncertainty, or family-specific concerns, many received no personalized pre-arrival guidance. Several participants also expressed that, as first-time international migrants, they were unsure what questions to ask or what support might be available.

In the absence of meaningful institutional support, students relied heavily on YouTube videos, Facebook groups, and informal community networks to learn how to travel, navigate airports, and arrange transportation. As a result, many experienced confusion, uncertainty, and, in some cases, scams during the earliest stages of their arrival. Arranging airport pickup emerged as one of the first major challenges. Since most students did not know anyone in Canada, they often arrived without reliable transportation or local support. Students who arrived alone described this period as stressful, frightening, and isolating. Several participants reported waiting for hours at the airport after individuals who had promised to meet them failed to arrive. In some cases, students only discovered after arrival that they had been victims of scams. For example, Participant 22 recalled being stranded at the airport late at night during winter after a landlord failed to respond or appear. Similarly, another participant spent several hours trying to navigate public transportation alone because the person who had agreed to pick him up never arrived. Other students were forced to pay expensive last-minute transportation costs because they had no alternative options. These experiences highlight how the absence of structured arrival support increased students' vulnerability during one of the most difficult stages of migration.

Immediate housing emerged as another urgent and severe settlement challenge. While many students struggled to arrange airport pickup, they also did not know where to go after leaving the airport. Participants reported limited access to university residences, little guidance for finding off-campus housing, and no short-term or emergency accommodation for students arriving late. As a result, many arrived in Canada without stable housing and had to rely on hotels, Airbnbs, or informal arrangements at significant personal cost. Another participant, who was unable to secure housing before arrival, spent \$850 on a six-day Airbnb stay while searching for accommodation. As she explained, she paid the high cost simply because *"I just needed a roof."* In the absence of institutional support, students were forced to navigate the housing market on their own at a time when they were unfamiliar with the country, housing system, and local communities. This made them highly vulnerable to exploitation and scams. One participant narrowly avoided a housing scam arranged through Facebook Marketplace after arriving late due to visa delays. These challenges were particularly severe for students who arrived after the start of the academic year because of visa delays or late admission decisions. Several participants emphasized that universities did not provide temporary accommodation or practical support for late-arriving students. Nor did they receive clear information about housing risks, affordable options, or alternative arrangements before arrival. As a result, students were left to manage one of the most critical aspects of settlement entirely on their own.

In addition to housing challenges, most participants reported difficulties with everyday settlement and navigation during their initial period in Canada. These challenges included understanding public transportation, obtaining a Social Insurance Number (SIN), opening a bank account, purchasing a local SIM card, finding affordable food, and buying suitable winter clothing. Several participants stated that they were unaware what the SIN was and/or if a SIN was required and did not know how or where to apply for one (e.g., Participant 7; Participant 14).

The emotional impact of this experience was significant. Many participants described their first weeks in Canada as confusing, stressful, and isolating as they received little guidance on basic settlement tasks. Finding food, arranging housing, learning how to use public transportation, and completing everyday tasks became their top priorities. Meeting these immediate needs was often more urgent than preparing for classes or adjusting to campus life. The first days in Canada were frequently described as “scary” and overwhelming. For example, Participant 11 explained that they avoided transferring between buses because they were afraid of getting lost and instead stayed on a single route, even when it was less convenient. Some students reported feeling anxious about leaving their residences because they did not understand local systems and procedures. These challenges were even greater for students arriving during the winter months. Unfamiliarity with Canada’s harsh winter conditions created additional stress. Many students had to quickly learn what clothing to wear, how to layer properly, and how to stay safe outdoors in cold weather. Participants described this as another challenge they had to manage while already coping with settlement pressures. Several participants reported that they would often cry because of the overwhelming stress, helplessness, and uncertainty they experienced during their first days in Canada. These experiences were particularly difficult for women, racialized students, and students arriving with families, who faced additional concerns related to safety, stability, and caregiving responsibilities.

One important finding from the interviews was the role of community networks in supporting students during their early settlement. In the absence of adequate institutional support, many participants relied on acquaintances, extended family members, ethnic community contacts, and online community groups for help. These networks assisted students with finding housing, arranging transportation, accessing food, and completing basic administrative tasks such as obtaining a Social Insurance Number (SIN) and opening a bank account. Students who had relatives or close contacts in Canada often depended entirely on these personal networks and rarely sought support from other sources. In contrast, students without existing connections had to look for help elsewhere. Many reported using Facebook community groups and other online platforms to connect with people in their city. Interestingly, despite reaching out to strangers, many students received positive support from community members who provided guidance, transportation,

temporary accommodation, or practical information. As one participant explained, “*people I had never met before helped me when I arrived.*” However, access to this support was not guaranteed. Community assistance depended largely on personal connections, luck, and the willingness of others to help. As a result, students without established networks faced greater challenges during settlement. They were more vulnerable to housing scams, overpriced services, unsafe living arrangements, and misinformation. Several participants emphasized that finding reliable help was often difficult and depended on who they happened to know or encounter online.

From the perspective of *Education for Other(s)*, the prominence of community support reveals a tension between recruitment and responsibility. International students are actively recruited through promises of education, opportunity, and future settlement, yet much of the work of arrival, orientation, housing, and social integration is left to students and their communities. Rather than being fully supported through institutional structures, students often depend on informal networks to access resources and navigate challenges during one of the most vulnerable stages of migration.

This pattern reflects broader forms of neoliberal responsibilization, in which risks and responsibilities are shifted from institutions and governments onto individuals and communities. Community organizations and informal networks effectively fill gaps left by universities and public systems, providing support that is essential but largely unrecognized within official internationalization frameworks. Consequently, community support should not be viewed simply as a strength of the system. Instead, it highlights the extent to which the responsibilities of settlement and care have been externalized.

The findings therefore support the argument that international students are positioned as conditionally included “others” within Canadian internationalization. They are welcomed as students, future workers, and prospective immigrants, but the burden of adaptation is frequently transferred to them and their communities. In this sense, community networks function as an invisible infrastructure of internationalization, compensating for institutional shortcomings and sustaining students in ways that formal support systems often do not. Their importance reflects not only community resilience but also the limits of an international education model that prioritizes recruitment while investing less consistently in settlement, care, and belonging.



5.4 Housing Insecurity as the Central Site of Precarity

This research finds that housing insecurity is not limited to the early settlement period but remains a persistent feature of international student migration in Canada. Housing challenges affected students' financial stability, well-being, and academic adjustment from the moment they arrived. Participants consistently described housing as an ongoing concern rather than a temporary difficulty. As one student explained, *"housing was the first problem and it never really got stable after that,"* while another noted, *"even after settling, you're always worried if something will go wrong."*

Most participants were unable to secure housing before arrival because landlords required Canadian credit history, references, or local guarantors. As a result, many arrived without confirmed accommodation and relied on short-term, high-cost options such as Airbnb or hotels, often under significant financial pressure. One participant described this situation clearly: *"I came without any place... so I had to book whatever I found, even if it was expensive."* Another shared, *"I didn't have any option, I just needed somewhere to stay immediately."* These short-term costs created immediate financial strain, especially since students already had limited income.

The absence of regulated and accessible housing channels pushed many students into informal and often exploitative rental markets, particularly on online platforms such as Facebook Marketplace and Kijiji. Several participants reported experiencing housing scams or near-scam situations during their search. Participant 22 described arranging an airport pickup with a landlord who never arrived, leaving him stranded at the airport late at night in December. He explained that only at that moment did he realize *"it was a scam"* and that he had *"no place to go."* Such experiences highlight the vulnerability students face during early settlement.

Even when students secured housing, many continued to face unstable and exploitative living conditions. Participants reported high rents, poor housing quality, overcrowded accommodations, and controlling landlord behaviour. Even when students avoided outright scams, they described landlords charging illegal deposits, raising rent without notice, or imposing unreasonable restrictions on the use of shared spaces and daily activities. One student shared, *"we were paying more than normal rent, but the place was crowded and not clean."* Several participants also reported living without formal rental agreements, which increased their vulnerability and limited their ability to challenge unfair treatment. In some cases, students lost security deposits or faced illegal rental practices. Participant 18 explained that their landlord refused to sign a lease and did not return the last month's rent deposit when they moved out. Similarly, Participant 22 reported losing his deposit because he had not signed a formal rental agreement. He was unaware of tenant rights and did not know that a lease agreement was required. In addition, many students

described their landlord as ill-behaved and interfering. As participant 15 explained, *“the landlord kept interfering in everything we do.”* Some participants described feeling uncomfortable in their own homes and avoiding spending time there. As one student noted, *“I didn’t feel comfortable going home, so I stayed longer on campus.”* These experiences affected students’ sense of safety, stability, and well-being.

Students with families faced even greater challenges. University housing was largely designed for single students, leaving families to rely on the private rental market. This significantly increased costs and insecurity. Participant 8 explained, *“it was very hard to find a place for a family... everything was expensive and limited.”* Participants reported that many landlords were reluctant to rent to students with children or sign leases with families. As a result, family-based international students often had fewer housing options and were pushed into more expensive rental markets. Finding suitable accommodation was particularly difficult because families needed larger units, longer-term stability, and housing in safe neighbourhoods.

Certain students—especially those from Nepal—faced additional housing precarity linked to visa delays and late arrivals caused by the absence of Canadian embassies in their home countries. Arriving weeks after the term began, it meant campus housing was fully allocated, rental markets were saturated, and community support networks were harder to locate quickly. Visa-driven delays created cascading burdens: higher short-term accommodation costs, limited choice, and greater susceptibility to exploitation. These structural barriers amplified vulnerability at precisely the stage when students were least equipped to navigate the Canadian housing market.

In the absence of institutional support, students relied heavily on informal community networks. Many reported that help from co-national or ethnic communities was essential for securing housing. As one participant stated, *“if I didn’t get help from people in my community, I wouldn’t have found any place.”* However, this reliance also highlights a structural gap. Basic housing support was not provided by institutions, but instead shifted onto students and their personal networks.

Importantly, housing insecurity often marked the beginning of a broader pattern of precarity and marginalization that extended into other areas of students’ lives. Difficulties securing safe and affordable housing frequently shaped access to employment, transportation, social networks, healthcare, and academic success. As participant 8 summarized, *“housing is the biggest stress... everything else depends on it.”* Participants described above their struggles with housing that includes accepting overcrowded accommodations, exploitative rental arrangements, long commutes, and unsafe living conditions because they lacked alternatives. These experiences limited their ability to focus on their studies and increased financial and emotional stress.

Viewed through the framework of *Education for Other(s)*, housing insecurity represents more than a settlement challenge; it illustrates how international students are incorporated into Canada through forms of conditional inclusion. Students are welcomed as future workers, migrants, and contributors to the economy, yet they are expected to secure one of their most basic needs through increasingly competitive and unaffordable private housing markets. As a result, the process of marginalization begins almost immediately upon arrival, often before students even enter the classroom.

Housing precarity also reveals the early stages of a broader process of exploitation. International students arrive after paying substantial tuition fees and demonstrating financial capacity, yet many enter housing markets where they have limited knowledge of tenant rights, few social networks, and little bargaining power. These conditions make them particularly vulnerable to inflated rents, overcrowded housing, discriminatory rental practices, withheld deposits, and exploitative landlords. The findings suggest that vulnerability is not an accidental outcome but is produced structurally through the disconnect between international student recruitment, housing availability, and settlement support.

From a critical perspective, housing becomes one of the first sites where the contradictions of the work–study–stay model become visible. Students are recruited through promises of opportunity and future belonging, but they encounter conditions that require them to absorb significant risks individually. Housing insecurity therefore functions as an entry point into broader experiences of precarity, where the responsibility for managing settlement challenges is transferred from institutions and governments onto students themselves. In this way, housing is not merely a logistical issue but a manifestation of how international students are positioned as the “Other” within internationalization: welcomed for their economic value yet expected to navigate structural barriers with limited institutional protection.



5.5 Financial Pressure

Consistent with the previous findings, participants' financial struggles cannot be understood separately from their broader position as international students navigating Canada as temporary migrants and institutional outsiders. As "others" within the work-study-stay system, they entered Canada already facing unequal access to information, settlement support, affordable housing, and stable employment. Financial hardship therefore emerged not simply as an economic issue, but as another manifestation of the conditional and precarious inclusion that characterized many participants' experiences. Rather than arriving with secure foundations from which to pursue their studies, many entered a system in which financial risk was largely individualized and managed through personal sacrifice, family resources, and low-wage employment.

Financial stress emerged as a central and ongoing challenge across all interviews. This stress was shaped by high living costs, expensive tuition fees, unstable employment, and policy uncertainty. Participants consistently described financial pressure as affecting their daily lives, academic choices, and overall, well-being. As one student explained, *"no matter how much you try to manage, expenses are always more than what you expect,"* while another noted, *"every month feels like survival, not stability."*

First, rent and basic living expenses were the most immediate source of pressure. Most students reported that housing and daily costs consumed a large portion of their budgets, leaving little for other needs. Many also described the rental market as unregulated and difficult to navigate, especially without institutional support. This often pushed them into vulnerable housing arrangements. Participant 5 shared, *"we ended up paying more than the actual rent because we didn't know the market price,"* while both participants 4 and 6 noted, *"the place was overcrowded and not clean, but we had no other option."* Students also described controlling landlord behavior and financial exploitation. As one participant stated, *"they asked for a very high deposit and extra money, and we couldn't argue because we needed the place."* Currency conversion further increased financial strain. Several participants explained that *"everything feels expensive when you convert it from back home,"* making everyday expenses such as rent, food, and transportation feel like a constant burden. Given that, the process of exploitation began shortly after arrival. Several participants described entering unfamiliar housing and labour markets with limited knowledge, restricted social networks, and little bargaining power. Their temporary status and urgent need for accommodation or employment often left them vulnerable to these exploitations in the rental markets. These experiences suggest that financial vulnerability was not merely an unintended outcome but was closely tied to broader structural conditions that placed students in dependent and unequal positions within housing, employment, and educational systems.

Second, high tuition fees significantly intensified financial stress. Students described tuition as their largest expense, often limiting their ability to cover basic living costs. While most were aware that tuition would be high, many underestimated its impact after arrival. One participant reflected, *"I thought I could manage with part-time work, but it's not possible,"* while another described it as *"a myth that you can pay tuition by working here."* Several students also shared feelings of guilt when relying on their families. As one participant explained, *"my parents are paying so much, and that adds pressure on me every day."* Others relied on loans, which created long-term financial anxiety. As participants 16 and 17 noted, *"I took a high-interest loan, so I am always thinking about repayment."* Participants also expressed frustration with hidden costs. One student explained, *"There are so many extra expenses—books, lab fees, deposits—that no one tells you before coming."* Another added, *"they just tell you the tuition, but not the full cost of living."* Participant 16 said she fought for two months to receive a full refund after being forced to drop a course due to an institutional error—*"it wasn't even my mistake"*—highlighting how administrative failures can translate directly into cash losses for international students. In addition, several participants reported that universities increased tuition fees each year, creating additional financial pressure that many had not anticipated when planning their studies. These unexpected fee increases made it more difficult for students to manage their finances and added to the overall cost of their education in Canada.

Third, part-time employment provided only limited financial relief. Most students were unable to find a part-time job during their first six months in Canada. As a result, many exhausted the savings and financial support they had brought from home. Even when students eventually found work, the jobs were often low-paying, unstable, and unrelated to their education or qualifications. Participants reported that earnings were usually enough to cover only basic expenses. One student explained, *"I work a lot, but still I cannot save anything,"* while another shared, *"the money I earn just goes to rent."* Some students also experienced unfair labour practices, including unpaid training and exploitative working conditions. As participant 17 stated, *"they made me work without pay first and then didn't give me the job."* These experiences suggest that employment helped students meet basic survival needs but did not provide financial stability or meaningful economic security.

Fourth, financial stress was more severe for students with families and those relying on loans or funding. Family students faced higher and ongoing living costs, including larger housing and childcare. Participant 8 explained, *"everything is on my plate now... I have to manage rent, family, everything together."* Research students also reported that funding packages were often insufficient. As one noted, *"after tuition is deducted, very little is left for living."* In some cases, sudden policy changes or loan disruptions created immediate financial crises. Participant 17 described this as *"everything is collapsing at once,"* which highlights how quickly financial stability could be lost.

As a result, many students experienced food insecurity and adopted strict survival strategies. Several participants described reducing meal sizes, skipping meals, and cutting social activities. One student shared, *"sometimes I skip meals to save money,"* while another explained, *"I stopped going out or buying anything extra."* These conditions also affected mental health. Several participants reported feeling *"constantly stressed," "mentally exhausted,"* or *"overwhelmed all the time."*

Financial precarity reveals how international students experience their position as "others" within Canada's international education system. Despite making substantial financial investments through tuition payments, loans, savings, and family contributions before arrival, many entered Canada already facing unequal access to housing, employment, and support systems. High rents, hidden fees, rising tuition, delayed employment, and unstable income quickly intensified their vulnerability, making financial insecurity a persistent feature of everyday life rather than a temporary adjustment challenge. This precarity extended beyond economics and intersected with housing insecurity, food insecurity, social isolation, and mental health challenges. Limited financial resources restricted access to safe housing, social participation, emergency support, and opportunities to travel home, reproducing multiple forms of exclusion. As a result, financial stress was not simply a consequence of individual budgeting difficulties or high living costs. Rather, it reflected a broader system in which responsibility for managing the costs and uncertainties of migration, education, and settlement was transferred onto students themselves, shaping their everyday experiences of belonging, security, and opportunity in Canada.



5.6 Policy Volatility and Sudden, Unpredictable Changes

Policy volatility has emerged as another mechanism through which international students experience marginalization, uncertainty, and conditional inclusion within Canada's international education system. As "others" in the work-study-stay pathway, participants describe that they have no control over policy decisions that directly shape their educational, financial, and migration futures. Across the interviews, students report that sudden changes to federal immigration and education policies disrupted carefully planned financial and academic strategies. These changes included shifts in work-hour limits, modifications to Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) eligibility, the introduction of international student enrolment caps, and unexpected changes to study permit and program requirements (IRCC, 2024). While institutions and governments promoted Canada as a predictable pathway from education to employment and settlement, participants experienced this pathway as increasingly unstable and difficult to navigate.

Several students explained that they had made major financial commitments based on existing policies, but found those conditions changing after arrival. For example, some expected to work additional hours because temporary work restrictions had been removed. When those rules changed, many experienced an immediate loss of income. Participant 14 explained that *"I planned everything thinking I could work more hours... when they changed it, I couldn't manage my rent anymore."* Another described the changes as *"sudden and confusing,"* adding that *"no one really explained what would happen next or how to adjust."* These shifts made it more difficult to pay rent, tuition, and everyday living expenses. Some participants also believed that employers became less willing to hire international students because work regulations were constantly changing. As one participant stated, *"employers don't want complications, so they just avoid international students now."*

Policy changes also affected students' academic plans. Some students reported that their institutions faced financial difficulties following sudden policy changes and declines in international student enrolment. As a result, some programs were restructured, shortened, or scheduled more intensively so that students could complete them earlier than originally planned. Some participants reported that their programs were shortened or reorganized to align with new PGWP requirements. One student explained, *"they (the university) condensed our two years program into one and half a year to address the sudden policy change, so we lost the summer break... that's when we usually work full time to save money. Our programs also got condensed and more stressful."* Another described feeling overwhelmed, stating that *"now everything is rushed, and I don't know how to manage studies and expenses together."* These changes created additional uncertainty and stress for students who had planned their studies based on the original program structure.

In some cases, policy shifts created serious financial crises. Participants 17, 18, and 20 reported that their education loan was cancelled after lenders reassessed risks following changes to immigration policies. Participant 17 explained, *“my loan was approved for two years, and suddenly it was gone... I didn’t know what to do.”* As a result, the student faced immediate tuition shortfalls and was placed on an enrollment hold. The student described feeling *“frozen and ashamed,”* reflecting the emotional impact of this disruption. Another participant facing financial uncertainty shared, *“everything depends on these policies, but we have no control over them.”*

These experiences show how risk is unevenly distributed within Canada’s international education system. While students are recruited through promises of opportunity, mobility, and future settlement, they are expected to bear the financial, academic, and emotional consequences of changing policies. Participants described having little control over decisions that directly affected their studies, work, and future plans, yet they remained responsible for managing the resulting disruptions. Policy volatility therefore became another form of precarity, reinforcing students’ conditional belonging within the system. Much like housing insecurity, financial strain, and settlement challenges, shifting policies placed international students in a position where they were valued as future workers, immigrants, and economic contributors but left to individually absorb the risks created by institutional and governmental decisions. As a result, policy uncertainty functioned not only as an administrative issue but also as a mechanism that reproduced insecurity, exclusion, and unequal power relations within international education.



5.7. Employment Constraints, Underemployment, and Exploitation

Across the interviews, employment emerged as both a necessity for survival and a site where international students experienced marginalization, othering, and exploitation. Participants consistently described entering the labour market from a disadvantaged position, often facing barriers that were closely linked to their status as international students. Most struggled for extended periods, often more than six months, to secure even minimum-wage, part-time work. Several students described the process as slow and uncertain, with few formal opportunities available. One participant explained, *"I kept applying everywhere for months, but I wasn't even getting interview calls,"* while another noted, *"even getting one interview took a very long time."* Securing on-campus employment was described as especially difficult due to limited positions, with one student stating that *"on-campus jobs are almost impossible to get unless you have connections."* As a result, many relied on informal networks. As one participant shared, *"I finally got my job through a friend... otherwise no one was responding."*

Students' experiences reveal how international students are positioned as desirable workers within the work-study-stay pathway while simultaneously being excluded from equal access to employment opportunities. Although students are recruited as future contributors to the economy, they often encounter labour market barriers that mark them as outsiders. Employer demands for *"Canadian experience"* functioned as a recurring mechanism of exclusion. As one participant stated, *"They (employers) always ask for Canadian experience, but how do we get that if no one gives us a chance?"* Such expectations place international students in a paradoxical position where they are expected to integrate into the labour market but are denied opportunities because they lack prior access to it.

Even after securing employment, underemployment was common. Students were concentrated in low-wage sectors such as retail, food services, warehouses, delivery services, caregiving, and security, regardless of their qualifications or prior professional experience. Participant 22 reflected, *"Back home I had a professional job, but here I work night shifts in retail just to manage expenses."* Another explained, *"I'm always tired... working and studying, but still not saving anything."* These accounts illustrate how many students experienced deskilling and downward occupational mobility, where educational credentials and professional experience acquired abroad carried limited value in the Canadian labour market.

At the same time, participants frequently reported exploitative working conditions. These were especially common in sectors such as food service, retail, caregiving, and security.

Students described unpaid “training” periods, wages below the legal minimum, and lack of breaks. One participant stated, *“They made me work for a week without pay and then said I wasn’t selected,”* while another shared, *“We worked long hours, but sometimes they didn’t pay us fully.”* In some cases, promised hours were not honoured. As one student explained, *“My contract said 20 hours, but they would only give me 5 or 6 hours some weeks.”* These experiences made it difficult for students to cover their expenses and increased their financial stress.

Importantly, many participants felt unable to report unfair treatment because their financial survival depended on maintaining employment. Students reported working long or overnight shifts while studying full-time. These work schedules left them physically and emotionally exhausted. One participant described the experience as *“working overnight and going to class in the morning... It was exhausting, and it did not pay the minimum wage. I did not get any breaks.”* Despite these conditions, many students felt unable to speak up or report workplace problems. Their temporary immigration status and fear of losing their jobs made them feel vulnerable. As one participant explained, *“I didn’t complain because I was scared of losing the job. I need this money.”* Another added, *“As international students, we don’t have much protection... we just accept it.”* In one particularly concerning case, a participant accepted a security job on the condition that he would work additional unpaid hours to cover his supervisor’s spouse’s shifts in the same building. The participant felt unable to refuse because he needed the job and feared losing his income. These comments illustrate how financial pressures, temporary immigration status, and future migration aspirations created conditions in which students frequently tolerated exploitation rather than risk unemployment. In this sense, the labour market became another arena where responsibility was individualized. Students were expected to navigate exclusion, workplace abuse, and employment insecurity on their own, even when these challenges stemmed from broader structural conditions.

Overall, these findings show that international students face structural barriers in the labour market. Limited job opportunities, employer preference for *“Canadian experience,”* and widespread underemployment push students into unstable and low-paying work. At the same time, weak protections and immigration-related fears increase vulnerability to exploitation. Their willingness to accept precarious and exploitative work is often interpreted as personal resilience rather than a response to structural pressures. As a result, employment becomes not only a source of income but also a mechanism through which othering, marginalization, and economic exploitation are reproduced. Rather than providing stability and mobility, work often reinforced a cycle of financial insecurity, exhaustion, and vulnerability, while shifting responsibility for managing these conditions onto the students themselves.

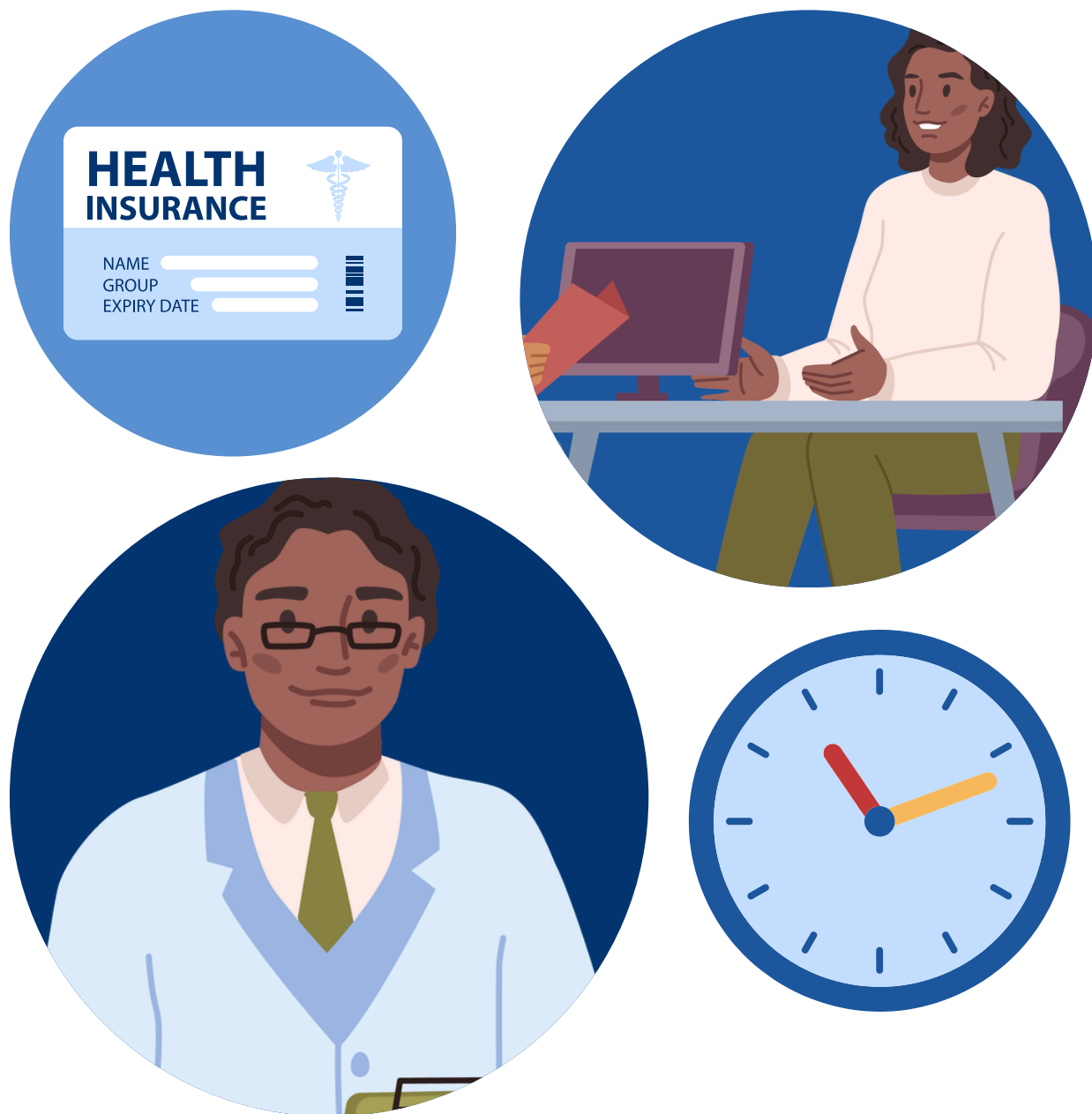
5.8 Medical Care and Health-System Barriers

Access to health care emerged as another area where international students experienced othering, marginalization, and the expectation of individual responsibility. Although students contributed significantly through tuition fees and were positioned as valued participants in Canada's international education system, many described feeling overlooked when trying to access essential healthcare services. Long wait times, difficulties finding family doctors, complex insurance systems, and high upfront costs created barriers that students were largely expected to navigate on their own. Many participants reported delays in accessing care, especially when trying to find a family doctor after arrival. As a result, they often relied on walk-in clinics or emergency services for their healthcare needs. Participants described long wait times as a common experience. One student explained that they had to *"wait for hours every time"* they visited a clinic, while another said that visiting the emergency department often required *"almost a whole day just sitting and waiting."* These delays made it difficult to receive timely care and increased stress, particularly during busy periods such as the winter months when illnesses were more common.

Students also found the health care system complex and difficult to navigate. Many were unsure where to go, how to make appointments, or what their insurance covered. For many students, navigating an unfamiliar healthcare system without guidance added another layer of uncertainty and frustration to their settlement experience. This uncertainty created confusion and fear. As one participant shared, *"I didn't know where to go or what to do,"* while another noted, *"everything felt unclear, especially about what is covered and what is not."* In some cases, this lack of information discouraged students from seeking care even when it was needed.

Financial barriers further limited access to healthcare. Many students reported that they had to pay medical costs upfront and then apply for reimbursement later. This created additional stress, especially for students who were already managing financial challenges. Participant 17 described feeling *"shocked and panicked"* when asked to pay a large amount before receiving treatment. She said after being charged more than \$1,000 for emergency care, they were *"not even sure how much would be covered"* by insurance. She never received full reimbursement. A portion of the claim was denied because of missing documentation that the student struggled to obtain from the hospital. This experience created frustration and uncertainty about the healthcare system and insurance process. In addition, insurance coverage was often incomplete. Essential services such as dental care, vision care, medications, and mental health support were either limited or excluded. As a result, many students delayed treatment. One participant stated that they postponed dental care because *"it is too expensive here,"* while another shared that they avoided seeing a doctor because they were *"afraid of the cost."*

These experiences reveal a form of conditional inclusion in which international students are welcomed as fee-paying learners, future workers, and prospective immigrants but are expected to independently navigate systems that are not designed around their needs. The burden of understanding healthcare procedures, insurance policies, reimbursement processes, and service eligibility was largely transferred to students themselves. When problems arose, responsibility for resolving them also remained individualized. Consequently, healthcare became another site where financial precarity, marginalization, and vulnerability intersected. Rather than demonstrating a system organized around care, these experiences reveal how institutional indifference and limited support can reproduce forms of exclusion, vulnerability, and unequal access during a critical period of settlement.



5.9. Mental Health Struggles and Coping

TRIGGER WARNING

This section discusses mental health challenges, depression, emotional distress, self-harm, and suicide among international students. Readers who may find these topics distressing are encouraged to engage with this section with care and take breaks as needed.

If you are experiencing emotional distress or having thoughts of self-harm, support is available. In Canada, you can call or text 988, the Suicide Crisis Helpline, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Immediate support is also available through local emergency services by calling 911. Students may also wish to contact their campus counselling services, community mental health organizations, [CMHA Resources](#), trusted health professionals, or supportive family and friends.

The mental health challenges that this study identifies cannot be understood as individual struggles alone. Rather, they reflect the cumulative effects of a system that recruits international students aggressively while providing insufficient support for their settlement, well-being, and long-term integration. Participants' experiences show how loneliness, financial strain, housing insecurity, employment exploitation, academic pressure, and immigration uncertainty intersect to produce ongoing psychological distress. Students were expected to navigate these challenges largely on their own while simultaneously meeting demanding academic, financial, and immigration requirements.

Across the interviews, loneliness and social isolation emerged as some of the most immediate and distressing mental health challenges for international students. The transition to Canada often required leaving behind family, friends, and familiar routines, which led to a sudden loss of daily social support. Many students described this loss as emotionally overwhelming during their first months after arrival. Participant 22 described his early experience as “*very lonely*,” explaining that he had no one to talk to during this period. He noted that time zone differences with Bangladesh made it difficult to contact his family when he needed emotional reassurance. He also described feeling depressed and unable to share his feelings with others. Other participants reported feeling socially excluded in classroom settings where peer groups were already established. In some cases, classmates who belong to the same country communicate in shared languages such as Hindi or Tamil, leaving others feeling marginalized. These experiences reinforced feelings of alienation and made it harder to form new social connections. Together, prolonged loneliness and social isolation contributed to emotional distress, withdrawal, and extended adjustment periods for many students.

Homesickness was also strong, especially during the early months. It was often made worse by the cold weather and unfamiliar environment. One participant recalled, *“when I stepped out of the airport, I thought, why did I come here?”* Another shared, *“I felt so overwhelmed that I cried at the airport.”* These experiences show how emotional stress begins at arrival and continues during adjustment.

Anxiety and constant mental strain were common across interviews. Students worried about rent, food, tuition, and work. One participant explained, *“rent and food are always in my mind,”* while another said, *“I am always thinking about money and how to manage.”* Some students reported skipping meals due to financial pressure. As one shared, *“sometimes I skip meals just to save money.”* Academic pressure also added to anxiety. One participant noted, *“I was scared of failing because I didn’t understand the system.”*

Family expectations created another layer of stress. Many students felt pressure to succeed because of the financial sacrifices made by their families. However, they often could not share their struggles openly. One participant explained, *“my parents have high expectations, but I don’t tell them what I am going through.”* Another said, *“I don’t want to worry them, so I keep everything inside.”* This silence increased emotional burden and made students feel more isolated.

Students frequently described deep emotional exhaustion caused by managing multiple demands at the same time. Many reported having to balance coursework with settlement tasks, job searches, and ongoing worries about immigration status. This constant pressure left students with little time or energy to rest or recover. Participant 22 described his first three to four months in Canada as *“mentally very bad,”* explaining that he felt his future was over during this period. Other participants similarly described arrival as emotionally overwhelming rather than hopeful.

Despite the availability of campus mental health services, many students reported low use because they felt these services did not adequately meet their needs. Participants described the services as culturally mismatched, stigmatized, difficult to navigate, and overly focused on emotional validation rather than practical problem solving. Several students viewed counselling as generic and reactive, which discouraged them from seeking continued support. Some felt that counsellors did not understand their cultural background or migration experience. One participant noted, *“they listen, but they don’t really understand my situation,”* while another said, *“I needed solutions, not just someone to listen.”* As a result, many relied on self-coping strategies such as talking to friends, exercising, praying, or staying alone. One student explained, *“I just try to manage it myself,”* while another said, *“I don’t go to counseling, I deal with it on my own.”*

Cultural stigma around mental health also limited help-seeking. Many students came from backgrounds where mental health is not openly discussed. As one participant shared, *“we don’t talk about these things... people think it is a weakness.”* Another explained, *“going to counseling feels like something is wrong with you.”* Because of this stigma, students often avoided formal support services.

These conditions often accumulated and created serious mental health challenges that many students struggled to manage. Loneliness, financial stress, family expectations, uncertainty, and feelings of being overwhelmed placed a heavy emotional burden on students. When academic pressure and experiences of social exclusion were added to these challenges, many participants felt they were reaching their mental and emotional limits. Together, these pressures increased students’ vulnerability to anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and other serious consequences.

Recent evidence suggests that mental health risks among international students, especially those from South Asian backgrounds, can have serious consequences (Sastitharan, CBC News, May 24 2023; Johal, Feb 2, 2023). In recent years, there have been growing reports of suicide cases among international students in Canada, particularly within South Asian communities. However, there is no official disaggregated national data or unified system tracking deaths among international students. Federal Statistics do not collect specific data on international student deaths, and educational institutions also do not maintain systematic records on such cases. This lack of data is problematic, as it makes it difficult to understand the scale of the issue and develop appropriate interventions.

Despite the absence of formal data, reports from community groups, funeral homes, consulate offices, and crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe indicate a disturbing rise in mental health struggles and sudden deaths among international students. For example, community leaders in Ontario have described attending multiple funerals of international students who died by suicide, calling the situation *“very concerning”* and emphasizing the need for urgent support systems (Arora, 2022). Organizations such as Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) and funeral homes, including Lotus Funeral and Cremation Centre in Etobicoke, Ontario, have reported handling the repatriation of several deceased international students each month, sometimes between four and seven cases, which is significantly higher than in previous years (Sasitharan, CBC News, May 24, 2023).

Although many funeral homes do not publicly disclose detailed data, informal sources suggest increasing numbers. Crowdfunding records indicate that at least 30 deaths of international students were reported between 2021 and 2023 (Johal, 2023, PressProgress). Media coverage has also highlighted these incidents, drawing attention to the extreme

pressures faced by this population (CBC News, 2023). Informal evidence also suggests that some deaths among international students have been linked to heart attacks and other sudden health events. For example, an analysis of crowdfunding pages documenting international student deaths in Canada identified cases involving heart attacks among young students, although no systematic national data currently exists to verify the prevalence or causes of these deaths (Johal, 2023 Feb 2).

While national-level data remains limited, regional and community-based evidence points to a worrying pattern. In some cases, deaths have been linked to financial hardship, long working hours, and social isolation. For example, reports of international students working late-night shifts and struggling to balance work and study illustrate the intense pressure associated with survival in Canada (CBC News, 2024). Even when deaths are not officially categorized as suicide, they reflect broader risks associated with precarious living and working conditions.

Although participants in this study did not always speak directly about suicide, their narratives revealed conditions strongly associated with mental health crisis. Students described feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and emotionally exhausted. One participant shared, *“I felt mentally very bad... like everything was too much,”* while another said, *“I was completely alone, and I didn’t know who to talk to.”* These accounts reflect a broader pattern in which financial stress, academic pressure, and lack of support interact to create severe emotional strain.

Although no national data system currently tracks deaths among international students, the above evidence points to a troubling pattern of suffering that remains largely invisible within policy and institutional discussions. The absence of systematic data collection itself reflects the marginal position of international students within higher education and migration systems. Students are actively counted when they contribute tuition revenue, labour, and economic growth, yet their hardships, vulnerabilities, and deaths often remain unrecorded and poorly understood.

Taken together, these findings suggest that mental health challenges among international students are deeply connected to broader structures of precarity, exploitation, and conditional belonging. Rather than representing isolated personal struggles, they reveal the human consequences of an internationalization system that prioritizes recruitment, revenue generation, labour market needs, and immigration objectives while providing inadequate support, protection, and care for the students on whom the system depends.

5.10 Academic Experiences, Belonging, and Conditional Inclusion

Students' academic experiences were shaped by more than classroom factors. Limited guidance, program mismatch, hidden academic expectations, and administrative barriers made adjustment difficult. At the same time, support from instructors, supervisors, peers, and institutional staff helped some students build confidence and improve over time. However, access to such support was uneven and often depended on individual relationships rather than systematic institutional commitment.

Students described their academic experience as challenging, especially during the first term. They noted that courses moved at a faster pace and required greater self-directed learning than they had previously experienced. Students also reported a largely hidden curriculum related to academic writing, classroom participation, and the use of learning management systems. Early in their programs, they struggled to understand assessment formats, including project-based evaluations, multiple-choice examinations, and expectations to clearly show problem-solving steps in STEM courses. These challenges were intensified by limited academic support specifically designed for newcomers.

Students also reported that instructors often assumed that international students already understood how education works in Canada, which was not the case. Most students struggled to understand how the academic system functioned in their institutions. They pointed to many assumptions made by instructors and institutions. One student explained, *"they expect you to already know how everything works."* Another said, *"no one really explains how to study here; you have to figure it out yourself."* Students also found it difficult to understand assignments and participation expectations. As one student noted, *"I didn't understand what they wanted in assignments at first,"* while another said, *"even using the online system was confusing."*

Graduate students faced additional challenges. Many had difficulty finding supervisors, which delayed their academic progress. One student shared, *"I emailed many professors, but no one replied."* Another said, *"without a supervisor, you just feel stuck."* Some students were placed in undergraduate courses without receiving proper support. One participant described this as *"frustrating and unfair."* In contrast, students who secured supportive supervisors reported better experiences. One student explained, *"once I had a supportive supervisor, everything became easier."*

Many students also reported that their programs did not match their expectations. Course content often differed from what was promised during recruitment. Several participants noted that recruitment messages and course descriptions did not reflect the actual curriculum or professional outcomes. This mismatch was especially common in applied or college programs, where courses emphasized soft skills and general employability rather than field-specific technical knowledge. Students with strong disciplinary backgrounds

found this particularly challenging, as they felt the content did not support career advancement. One student said, *“The program promised technical skills, but it was mostly general content.”* Another explained, *“I realized after coming here that this degree doesn’t lead to the job I expected.”* Students in regulated fields faced additional confusion. As one participant noted, *“I didn’t know I needed another degree for certification.”* This mismatch reduced motivation and created uncertainty about future careers.

Students also identified gaps in the curriculum, particularly the lack of diverse and international perspectives. Many reported that courses were largely based on North American or Western perspectives, with limited inclusion of Global South contexts. Even when non-Western perspectives were included, they often focused on regions such as South America rather than South Asia or other parts of Asia. As a result, students struggled to connect their prior knowledge with the content taught in class. In addition, teaching approaches and materials were not adapted to reflect the large number of international students in the classroom. The limited representation of Global South perspectives within curricula further reinforced these dynamics. Many students struggled to see their histories, knowledge systems, and lived experiences reflected in what they learned. Consequently, internationalization frequently exposed students to global diversity rhetorically while continuing to privilege Western epistemologies and educational practices in everyday academic life. In this way, inclusion often occurred without meaningful recognition, representation, or belonging.

Teaching quality varied across programs. Some instructors were supportive and clear, while others were difficult to communicate with. Students valued clear instructions and detailed feedback. One student said, *“when the professor explained things clearly, I felt more confident,”* while another noted, *“feedback really helped me improve.”* Group work and presentations also supported learning. As one participant explained, *“presentations and group work helped me understand better.”* However, some instructors were described as *“hard to reach”* or *“not supportive,”* which made learning more difficult.

Administrative issues also affected academic progress. Students reported incorrect advising, slow responses, and unclear rules. One student said, *“it wasn’t even my mistake, but I had to deal with all the stress”* after being forced to drop a course. Others faced challenges due to late arrival. One participant explained, *“I missed orientation and the first classes, so everything was harder.”* These issues created both academic and financial stress.

Taken together, the findings reveal that international students—particularly South Asian students—are actively recruited into Canadian higher education but supported inconsistently across admission, settlement, housing, employment, healthcare, and academic systems. Internationalization operates as a managed migration framework in which education is closely linked to labour and immigration goals, while responsibility for risk, navigation, and survival is largely individualized. These findings directly inform the policy recommendations that follow.

5.11. Differences Between College and University Student Experiences

The findings also show important differences in how international students experience colleges and universities in Canada. These differences are linked to program structure, institutional capacity, labour outcomes, and levels of support.

5.11.1. Program Structure and Learning Experience

Students in colleges described their programs as more employment-focused but limited in academic depth. Many reported that programs, especially in business and management, emphasized general and soft skills rather than technical or specialized knowledge. This created a gap between expectations and outcomes. One student explained, *“the course was not what I expected... it was too general and not useful for my field.”* At the same time, students noted that college instructors were often more aware of international students’ backgrounds and adjusted teaching accordingly.

In universities, students describe more theoretical and research-based learning. However, the quality of teaching and support varied widely across institutions. Some students reported that instruction was mainly designed for domestic students and did not consider their pace or background. As a result, many struggled unless they actively asked for help. While some instructors were supportive, others did not provide additional guidance unless students initiated contact.

5.11.2. Campus Environment and Student Experience

Students also reported major differences in campus life and overall experience. In colleges, many students said they did not experience the diverse or integrated academic environment they had expected. Institutional recruitment patterns meant that many college programs enrolled international students from a small number of countries, often in South Asia, with few domestic students in the same classes. As a result, participants had limited opportunities to interact with domestic peers. One student noted that they had *“never met a Canadian student”* in their program. Students in universities generally reported greater exposure to diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. Unlike many college programs, which were often dominated by international students from a few countries, university classrooms tended to include a more diverse mix of domestic and international students. As a result, university students had more opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and gain broader international exposure through classroom discussions, campus activities, and extracurricular programs. However, several students noted that simply studying in a diverse environment did not always lead to meaningful interaction or inclusion.

Students also described limited physical space and resources in colleges. They reported shortages of classrooms, libraries, and spaces for extracurricular activities. Some classes were delivered online because institutions could not accommodate large student numbers. While online classes provided flexibility for work, students felt this reduced their campus

experience and opportunities for social connection. In contrast, university students generally reported better access to campus facilities and extracurricular activities. However, some university students in smaller or satellite campuses noted similar issues of limited resources and isolated learning environments.

5.11.3. Financial Pressure and Work Patterns

The findings also show differences in financial stress and work patterns. College students were more likely to rely on low-wage, part-time jobs, especially in service sectors such as retail and food services. Their programs were often shorter and closely linked to the study-work pathway, which increased pressure to work while studying. Flexible schedules and online classes allowed more work hours but reduced academic engagement. University students, especially at the graduate level, faced different challenges. These included limited funding, high living costs, and pressure to meet academic expectations. While both groups experienced financial stress, college students were more directly tied to immediate labour market survival, whereas university students faced pressure related to academic performance and long-term career goals.

5.11.4. Program–Career Alignment

Another important difference was the alignment between education and career outcomes. College students more frequently reported misalignment between their programs and career goals. Many felt they were guided into programs that did not match their background or labour market opportunities. Some students also noted that certain diploma programs were designed mainly for international students and lacked real demand in the job market. In contrast, university students also experienced misalignment, but for different reasons. This was often related to a lack of information about certification requirements or professional pathways, especially in regulated fields.

5.11.5. Institutional Support

Both college and university students reported limited institutional support, but the issue was more visible in colleges. College students described institutions as highly focused on enrollment with limited support after arrival. Services related to housing, employment, and settlement were often unclear or insufficient. The lack of physical infrastructure and reliance on online delivery also reduced access to academic and social support. University students reported somewhat better access to resources, but many still felt that support was not appropriate, culturally responsive, or accessible. In both sectors, students felt that they were largely responsible for managing their own challenges.

5.11.6. Long Term Goal

College students were often more focused on finding a job and settling in Canada. Many paid less attention to their academic programs or the quality of education. In several cases, students did not choose their programs based on academic interest but followed guidance from agents. In contrast, university students were generally more focused on their studies. While they also aimed to settle in Canada, they placed greater importance on performing well academically and securing relevant employment after graduation. They were more likely to research their programs and institutions carefully before making decisions.

5.11.7. Tuition Fees

Tuition fees were another important difference between colleges and universities. College programs generally charged lower tuition fees than university programs, making them more accessible to many international students. As a result, colleges attracted large numbers of international students, particularly those seeking affordable pathways to work and permanent residency. Several participants explained that they chose colleges because university tuition was too expensive or because they did not meet university admission requirements. However, many students felt that the lower tuition was often accompanied by fewer resources, limited campus facilities, and less academic support. In contrast, university students paid higher tuition fees but generally had access to larger campuses, more academic resources, and greater opportunities for research and extracurricular activities. Despite these differences, students in both sectors questioned whether the high fees they paid were matched by adequate support and services.

Overall, these differences suggest that college students' pathways are often shaped more by migration goals and external guidance, while university students tend to combine academic goals with long-term settlement planning.

5.11.8. Overall Pattern: Unequal and Conditional Experiences

Taken together, these findings show that international students experience unequal conditions across colleges and universities, but similar structural challenges. Colleges often function as entry points into the labour market, while universities are positioned as academic and research institutions, although both operate within resource constraints.

In both settings, students experience conditional belonging. Their inclusion is shaped by their role as tuition-paying students and potential labour market participants, rather than as fully supported members of the academic community.

Finally, the research findings indicate important yet underexplored differences between international students' experiences in colleges and universities. Colleges, which enrol a higher proportion of South Asian students, are more closely aligned with direct labour market preparation and shorter program timelines, potentially intensifying students' exposure to employment precarity and immigration risk. However, few comparative studies examine how institutional differences shape international students' experiences across these sectors. This gap underscores the need for research that explores how internationalization policies and practices operate differently in colleges and universities and how these differences affect international students' inclusion, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes.

6. CROSS-CUTTING STRUCTURAL FINDINGS

Beyond the major themes, this research identifies several indirect but important findings that reveal how the international education system operates in practice. These insights highlight the roles of different actors, including education agents, community organizations, universities, and the government.

6.1. Role of Educational Agents

Education agents emerged as key but largely unregulated actors in the international student migration process. In the absence of adequate institutional guidance before and after admission, many students relied heavily on educational agents for information about admissions, visa applications, and migration procedures. Participants noted that institutions often depend on these agents to recruit students from South Asia, yet there are limited regulatory mechanisms to ensure ethical practices, accurate information, and accountability. As a result, students frequently lacked protection from misinformation, manipulation, or exploitation.

Most participants relied on educational agents because institutional information about admissions, programs, and visa processes was limited, difficult to access, or challenging to understand. As one participant explained, *“I didn’t understand the process, so I had to depend on the agent,”* while another stated, *“There was no clear information from universities, so the agent became the only option.”* Although a few participants reported receiving helpful guidance, the overall quality of support was highly uneven. Most described experiences of misinformation, poor guidance, and limited accountability. Participants reported that agents often failed to clearly explain actual costs, program requirements, career outcomes, and immigration pathways. Several students felt that agents prioritized securing admissions rather than acting in students’ best interests. As one participant noted, *“I trusted the agent, but later I realized they gave wrong information,”* while another remarked, *“They just wanted to get me admitted somewhere, not what was best for me.”* This indicates a lack of transparency and accountability on agents’ side.

Many participants reported that poor agent support had serious consequences for their admission and visa applications. Despite paying high service fees, students often received limited or low-quality assistance. Several participants discovered errors or missing information in their applications only after submission. In some cases, these mistakes led to application delays, visa refusals, or additional financial costs. Nearly half of the participants reported experiencing at least one visa refusal, and many believed that errors made by agents contributed to these outcomes.

The lack of accountability was a major source of frustration. Students often had to identify and correct mistakes themselves despite paying for professional services. As one participant explained, *“I paid a lot, but I had to correct their mistakes myself.”* Another participant described the emotional distress of learning that incorrect information had been included in her application because she had fully trusted the agent and had not independently reviewed the documents. Several participants felt that agents treated applicants as *“numbers rather than individuals,”* despite the significant financial investments students and their families had made. The weak oversight and poor accountability within the education agent sector can expose students to substantial financial, emotional, and immigration-related risks.

The findings also show that some students were guided into programs that did not match their academic backgrounds, career goals, or future plans. Several participants reported that important information about certification requirements, employment prospects, and program outcomes was not clearly explained during the admission process. As one student stated, *“I didn’t know the degree wouldn’t lead to certification... no one told me.”* As a result, some students only realized after arriving in Canada that their programs would not provide the opportunities they had expected.

Participants also raised concerns that some agents promoted specific programs or institutions because of financial incentives rather than students’ best interests. One participant reflected, *“Later I understood they had connections with the program... that’s why they pushed me there.”* Participant 22 similarly reported that the agent who advised him had a financial connection to the program he was encouraged to enroll in. He also recalled being promised strong employment opportunities that later proved unrealistic. These accounts suggest that agent recommendations were sometimes influenced by commission structures rather than students’ educational and career goals. As a result, major educational and migration decisions were often made without full transparency or accountability.

Overall, the findings highlight the powerful yet largely unregulated role that educational agents play in international student migration. In the absence of clear institutional guidance, many students relied heavily on agents to navigate admission and visa processes. However, participants frequently reported misinformation, poor-quality support, application errors, and a lack of accountability. As a result, students often began their migration journey with incomplete or misleading information, exposing them to visa refusals, financial losses, academic mismatch, and emotional distress. These findings suggest that weak oversight of education agents creates significant risks for international students and can negatively shape important educational and migration decisions even before students arrive in Canada.

6.2. Role of Post Secondary Institutions

The findings suggest that post-secondary institutions are not always acting in a transparent, accountable, or student-centred manner. Participants' experiences indicate that institutions are heavily focused on recruiting international students to increase enrollment, enhance institutional rankings, promote campus diversity, address funding shortfalls, and generate revenue. However, this emphasis on recruitment is not matched by a similar commitment to student well-being, successful settlement, or long-term support.

Many participants felt that institutions prioritized attracting international students without adequately addressing the unique challenges they face as newcomers. Although various support services existed, students often described them as limited, generalized, difficult to access, or disconnected from their actual needs. Several participants viewed these supports as superficial or tokenistic rather than meaningful and responsive. Institutions also have limited understanding of the realities international students experience both before and after arrival. Students frequently reported that support systems were designed around institutional assumptions rather than students' lived experiences. Consequently, there was a significant gap between the image of support promoted during recruitment and the support students actually received.

The findings show that universities often play an inappropriate, insufficient, and distant role in supporting international students. Participants described institutions as very active during the admission process but largely absent after arrival. One student explained, *"They care when you apply, but after that you are on your own,"* while another noted, *"We pay a lot, but support is very limited."* This shows that institutions focus more on attracting students than supporting them later. Many students reported that colleges/universities did not provide enough information or guidance in important areas such as housing, employment, and daily settlement. Pre-arrival and post-arrival supports were often unclear, limited, or difficult to access. As a result, students had to manage complex systems on their own in a new country. One participant shared, *"I had to figure everything by myself when I arrived."* This lack of support increased stress and made the transition more difficult. Although institutions benefit from international student enrollment, many participants felt that their well-being, settlement, and long-term success were not given the same level of attention as recruitment. As a result, many students continued to struggle with housing, employment, settlement, immigration, and mental health challenges despite the availability of institutional services.

International students are increasingly positioned as an important source of revenue for post-secondary institutions. Participants questioned the motives behind the growing recruitment of international students and often perceived it as being driven more by financial considerations than by educational or intercultural goals. Many believed that colleges and universities rely on high international tuition fees to address budget shortfalls, compensate for limited government funding, and support institutional growth.

Participants also questioned whether the rapid growth in international student recruitment was matched by adequate investment in student support and well-being. Many felt that colleges and universities focused heavily on increasing international enrollment and collecting higher tuition fees, while providing limited support for housing, settlement, academic adjustment, and mental health. Several participants also questioned why international students pay significantly higher tuition fees but do not receive stronger or more specialized support. They felt that rising international tuition fees were not accompanied by meaningful improvements in services or institutional accountability for student well-being. Many students reported receiving little additional assistance despite facing language, cultural, financial, and settlement challenges that differed from those of domestic students. As a result, participants raised concerns that financial considerations were being prioritized over students' educational experiences, well-being, and successful integration into Canadian higher education.

These experiences suggest a shift in the role of colleges and universities. Instead of acting mainly as the main support system, they are experienced as organizations focused on recruitment and tuition collection. Their role appears distant because they do not fully engage with students after arrival. It appears insufficient because the available support does not meet students' needs. It also appears inappropriate because it does not consider the specific challenges international students face in a new country.

Overall, the findings suggest that universities and colleges play a strong role in recruiting international students but a much weaker role in supporting them after arrival. Many participants viewed themselves not only as learners but also as important sources of institutional revenue. They felt that institutions prioritized increasing international enrollment and collecting high tuition fees without making comparable investments in student support, well-being, and successful settlement. As a result, students often experienced a significant gap between the promises made during recruitment and the realities they faced after arrival. Many felt left to manage housing, employment, immigration, and academic challenges largely on their own, leading to the perception that their tuition contributions were valued more than their educational experience, inclusion, and overall well-being.



6.3. Role of the Government

The findings suggest that the government's role in international education is primarily driven by economic, labour market, and population goals rather than the well-being of international students. Participants viewed international students as being recruited not only as learners but also as future workers, potential immigrants, and contributors to the Canadian economy. This partially benefits many international students but many felt that policy decisions were designed to address labour shortages, demographic challenges, and economic growth, while giving limited attention to the realities and needs of students already studying in Canada.

Participants pointed to frequent policy changes, reduced benefits, and limited settlement support as evidence that international students' well-being was not a central policy priority. They felt that government decisions often focused on protecting economic interests and managing immigration numbers without fully considering how these changes affected students' academic plans, finances, and future prospects. Several participants noted that policy changes were introduced suddenly and applied to students already in the system, creating uncertainty and additional hardship.

The findings suggest that international students are primarily valued for their economic contributions to Canada's education system, labour market, and broader economy. Participants viewed themselves as both revenue generators and labour resources within a system that increasingly links international education to economic growth. High international tuition fees provide significant income for educational institutions, while students also fill labour shortages in low-wage and unstable sectors such as retail, food services, warehousing, and delivery. Several participants also linked the rapid growth in international student recruitment after COVID-19 to efforts to address economic losses and labour shortages. However, they felt that this expansion was not supported by adequate planning or investment in housing, employment opportunities, and settlement services. Participants felt that neither the broader social system nor the post-secondary education sector was adequately designed to support their socio-economic transition and settlement. As one participant reflected, *"It feels like we are important for the economy, not really for education."* Another explained, *"They brought more students, but there is not enough housing or jobs,"* while a third noted, *"Everything became more competitive, but support did not increase."* These experiences suggest that student intake grew faster than the country's capacity to provide housing, employment, and settlement support. The widely promoted study-work-stay pathway was therefore often understood as a mechanism for attracting migrants who could meet Canada's workforce and population needs, rather than as a system primarily designed to support students' educational success and well-being.

The findings also show that government settlement support for international students is limited. Unlike other migrant groups, students reported receiving little structured assistance in areas such as housing, employment, or mental health. One participant shared, *“There is support for others, but for students we are mostly on our own.”* At the same time, governments do not strongly require institutions to provide expanded support, nor do they consistently work with community organizations to improve services. As a result, many essential supports are left to informal networks rather than coordinated systems.

A key concern raised in the findings is the nature of sudden policy changes. Students described policies related to work permits, study rules, and immigration pathways as changing quickly and without warning. These changes often applied immediately and affected students already studying in Canada. As one participant explained, *“They change rules suddenly, and we have to adjust right away,”* while another noted, *“One policy change can affect everything—work, income, and study.”* One participant described feeling trapped and hopeless after a policy change affected her ability to continue her studies. She explained that she had already spent all of her own savings and her parents’ savings on previous semesters. However, due to the policy change, she no longer saw a way to continue her education and felt that returning home was not a realistic option. As she described, she felt stuck between an uncertain future in Canada and the financial sacrifices already made by her family. These experiences point to a lack of accountability and responsibility toward students who make significant contributions to Canada’s education system, labour market, and economy. These sudden shifts created instability not only for students but also for institutions that had to implement changes without sufficient preparation. Such policy practices suggest a system that prioritizes control and economic management over student well-being, stability, and protection.

Overall, the findings suggest that the government’s approach is economically driven and migration-focused, with strong emphasis on attracting students but limited attention to long-term support and integration. Policies prioritize labour market needs and population growth, while responsibility for navigating risks, such as housing, employment, and sudden policy change, is largely placed on students. This creates a system where international students are included as potential future workers and economic contributors but remain exposed to high levels of uncertainty and limited structural support.



6.4. Role of Community Partners/Organizations

The findings show that community organizations function as an often invisible but essential support system for international students. While universities and government agencies play a visible role in recruiting and regulating international students, many of the supports needed for daily survival and settlement were either absent or difficult to access through formal institutions. As a result, students often received their first and most meaningful support from community members, informal networks, and community organizations, including people they had never met before. These community actors regularly stepped in to help with housing, transportation, food access, healthcare navigation, employment information, and emotional support when institutional services were unavailable, fragmented, or inaccessible. For many participants, community networks became a critical source of practical guidance and care during their transition to life in Canada. These findings suggest that community organizations operate as an informal settlement infrastructure, filling important gaps left by universities and government systems and becoming a largely unrecognized but essential component of internationalization.

Community organizations/members played a key role in housing support, which was one of the most urgent needs. Students relied on community members to find accommodation, understand rental systems, and avoid scams. In some cases, community members even offered temporary shelter when students arrived without housing. These supports filled a major gap, as institutions provided little direct help beyond basic orientation. As one participant shared, *“Without help from people in my community, I wouldn’t have found a place,”* which shows how critical this support is during arrival.

Community organizations also provided material and food support, especially for students facing financial difficulties. Participants described receiving help through food distribution, community meals, and referrals to food banks. One student explained, *“They helped me with food when I was struggling,”* highlighting how basic needs were often met through informal care rather than formal systems.

In addition, community organizations supported students in navigating healthcare and daily systems. Students often found the healthcare system confusing and difficult to access. Community actors helped explain insurance, locate services, and sometimes accompanied students to appointments. This kind of support was especially important for students who faced language barriers or uncertainty about costs.

Community spaces also provided emotional and crisis support. Students felt more comfortable sharing experiences of stress, loneliness, or exploitation in these settings. One participant noted, *“I could talk freely there,”* while another said, *“They understood what I was going through.”* These spaces were seen as safer because they did not involve academic evaluation or immigration control.

Trust was a key factor influencing students' reliance on community support. Many participants turned to community organizations, informal networks, and fellow community members because they perceived them as more trustworthy, responsive, and understanding of their needs than institutional sources of support. Unlike universities/colleges or government offices, community organizations did not hold authority over students' grades, visas, or employment. This reduced fear and allowed students to seek help openly. Many participants said they trusted community members because of shared cultural background and lived experience, which made communication easier and more meaningful.

However, the community support functions within a limitation. First, community support is under-resourced and informal. It often depends on volunteers, personal networks, and limited funding. This makes it uneven and not sustainable over time. Second, support is not equally available to all students. Those without strong community connections may struggle to access help. Third, community organizations often take on responsibilities that should be handled by universities or government systems. This creates pressure on community actors and shifts institutional responsibility onto them.

Finally, while community-based care is effective and trusted, it cannot fully replace formal systems. It works as a response to gaps rather than a complete solution. These limitations show that relying on community support alone is not enough. There is a need for stronger coordination and shared responsibility between governments, institutions, and community organizations to better support international students.

The findings show that community organizations act as an informal settlement infrastructure for international students. They provide support across housing, food, health, and emotional well-being. However, this also highlights a structural gap. These supports exist because formal institutions do not fully meet students' needs. While community-based care is critical and effective, it is often informal, under-resourced, and not recognized within official systems. This shows that international student support depends heavily on community efforts, rather than coordinated institutional responsibility.



7. DISCUSSION

This study shows that the experiences of international students in Canada are shaped by broader structural conditions rather than individual challenges alone. While Canada presents itself as a destination of opportunity, the findings reveal a gap between this promise and students' lived realities. Students experience limited support, high financial risk, and uncertainty after arrival. These conditions suggest that international students are not fully included within the system but experience conditional belonging, where their inclusion depends on their economic and labour value rather than their well-being.

7.1. Market-Driven Internationalization and Conditional Belonging

The findings suggest that Canadian universities operate within a market-driven model of internationalization, where recruitment and tuition generation are prioritized over student support. Universities are highly present during the admission stage but become distant after arrival. This pattern reflects how international students are positioned as fee-paying consumers rather than fully supported members of the academic community (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In this system, belonging is conditional. Students are welcomed as long as they contribute economically, but their needs as learners and migrants are not fully addressed. This creates a form of institutional othering, where international students are treated differently from domestic students despite their higher financial contribution.

7.2. Structural Precarity and Marginalization

A key finding of this study is that precarity is not accidental but structurally produced. Students face instability in housing, employment, and finances, which directly affects their academic and personal lives. These conditions reflect a broader shift toward individual responsibility, where students must manage risks on their own.

This system marginalizes international students by placing them in vulnerable positions without adequate protection. Their difficulties are often framed as personal problems rather than structural issues. As a result, students must continuously prove their worth by managing work, study, and survival at the same time. This reinforces their position as peripheral and replaceable participants within the system. The struggles and difficulties these students experience during their journey in Canada even after paying a huge amount of tuition fees are ignored and not addressed for creating more support. Policy changes

further deepen this marginalization. Sudden shifts in work permits, immigration rules, and program eligibility affect students immediately, even when they are already enrolled. These changes show that students' stability is not guaranteed. Instead, their position in the system remains uncertain and conditional, reinforcing their limited and temporary belonging.

7.3. Unequal Responsibilities and Informal Support Systems

The findings also show that responsibility for supporting international students is unevenly distributed. Education agents, community organizations, and informal networks play major roles in guiding students, while institutions and government provide limited support. Education agents shape expectations but often provide incomplete or misleading information. Community organizations, in contrast, provide essential support through housing, food, and emotional care. These organizations act as an informal settlement infrastructure, filling gaps left by universities and government systems.

However, this reliance on community support highlights a deeper structural problem. Essential care and support are increasingly shifted away from formal institutions and onto informal community networks. This reflects a system in which international students must rely on trust-based and relational forms of assistance rather than accessible, adequately resourced institutional services. Yet such support is neither guaranteed nor equally available to all students. Access often depends on personal connections and social networks rather than universal entitlements. As a result, these arrangements can reinforce marginalization and inequality, leaving students' well-being contingent on their ability to mobilize informal support rather than on rights-based institutional protections.

7.4. Migration Governance, Othering, and Conditional Inclusion

Government policies play a central role in producing international students' conditional belonging by including them as economic contributors while limiting their access to stable rights and support. Policies position international students as future workers who can support labour markets and economic growth. At the same time, their rights and stability remain uncertain and dependent on policy changes. Students are included in the system as economic contributors, but excluded from full social and institutional support. This creates a form of othering, where international students are present within institutions but not fully integrated into them. Their participation is conditional on their ability to meet academic, financial, and immigration requirements. Critical scholarship suggests that internationalization is shaped by global inequalities and economic priorities, which influence how international students are treated within host countries (Stein, Andreotti, & Suša, 2019). The findings of this study support this view by showing that students' belonging remains partial and unstable.

7.5. Financialization and Unequal Value

The findings also highlight the financialization of international education. Students invest large amounts of money through tuition fees, loans, and family resources. However, these investments do not guarantee stability or success. This creates a system where students' value is measured mainly through their economic contribution. At the same time, they bear the risks associated with unstable housing, limited employment, and changing policies. This imbalance reinforces their marginal position within the system, where they are economically important but socially and institutionally unsupported.

Taken together, these findings reveal that Canada's international education system operates through conditional belonging, marginalization, and othering. International students are included as long as they contribute economically and adapt to institutional expectations. However, they are excluded from full support, stability, and institutional accountability. This creates a structural contradiction. International students are invited as part of a global education system, but the conditions required for their success are not fully provided. Instead, they must rely on personal effort and informal networks to navigate challenges.

These findings contribute to critical internationalization scholarship by showing how everyday student experiences reflect broader systems of inequality. They highlight the need to move beyond recruitment-focused models toward approaches that recognize international students as full members of the academic and social community, with meaningful access to support, protection, and belonging.



8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that internationalization in Canadian higher education currently prioritizes recruitment and revenue generation without adequate coordination of settlement, academic, labour, and health supports. International students, particularly South Asian students, are expected to self-manage complex systems related to housing, employment, healthcare, and immigration under conditions of policy instability and limited institutional accountability. The following recommendations call for a shift from recruitment-focused internationalization toward support-based, rights-conscious, and coordinated internationalization at institutional, provincial, and federal levels.

8.1 Shift from Recruitment-Focused to Support-Based Internationalization

Policy actors: Universities and colleges; provincial ministries of education; federal government.

Postsecondary institutions should be required to align international student recruitment targets with demonstrated capacity to provide housing assistance, health-care navigation, academic support, and settlement services. Current recruitment practices often expand enrolment without proportional investment in support infrastructure, transferring financial and emotional risk onto students.

Provincial accountability and funding frameworks should connect approval of international student growth to clear and enforceable standards for student support and well-being. International students should be recognized as members of the learning community rather than primarily as sources of revenue. The provincial government should establish minimum standards for supporting international students before arrival, during settlement, and throughout their studies. These standards should apply consistently across all colleges and universities to ensure equity, accountability, and quality of support.

International student intake targets and policy changes should be based on evidence, planning, and institutional capacity rather than sudden or reactive decisions. Decisions to increase or reduce international student enrolment should be guided by research, data analysis, labour market needs, housing availability, settlement service capacity, and the ability of institutions to support students effectively. Student recruitment should not exceed available resources, infrastructure, and support services.

The provincial government should invest in dedicated settlement support for international students and require colleges and universities to align recruitment targets with available support services and infrastructure. A clear provincial framework should establish minimum standards for supporting international students before arrival, during settlement, and throughout their studies. Rather than allowing institutions to determine support practices independently, consistent standards should be applied across the post-secondary sector to ensure equity and accountability.

In addition, regular monitoring and oversight mechanisms should be introduced. Annual reviews or audits should assess how institutions support international students, including their access to housing, employment assistance, settlement services, academic support, and mental health resources. Institutions should be required to publicly report outcomes and demonstrate how they are meeting established standards. Such measures would help ensure that international student recruitment is matched by meaningful investments in student support, creating a more accountable, equitable, and sustainable international education system.



8.2 Mandate Structured, Proactive Pre-Arrival and Arrival Support

Policy actors: Universities and colleges; provincial ministries of education; (IRCC); federal government;

Institutions should provide clear, comprehensive, and student-centred support before arrival and during the early stages of settlement. Pre-arrival information should include step-by-step guidance on visa processes, health insurance, housing, transportation, banking, and everyday life in Canada. The findings show that much of this information currently exists but is fragmented, generalized, and often accessed only after students encounter problems. Institutions should engage directly with international students to better understand their needs and develop supports based on students' lived experiences rather than relying on standardized checklists or generic orientation programs. More proactive assistance should also be provided during visa processing, travel planning, arrival, and early settlement so that students can navigate challenges more effectively.

Pre-arrival preparation should be mandatory and flexible. Non-credit pre-arrival modules could help students prepare for life in Canada while accommodating visa delays, late arrivals, and family migration. Support should continue beyond orientation and include practical, hands-on assistance during students' first weeks in Canada.

Post-secondary institutions should also provide airport pickup services either free of charge or at a subsidized cost for newly arriving international students. Many students arrive in Canada without knowing anyone and often face significant challenges navigating airports, transportation systems, and unfamiliar surroundings after long international flights. The findings show that difficulties with airport pickup were among the first challenges students faced upon arrival, exposing them to confusion, stress, financial costs, and, in some cases, scams.

Arrival support should also address the additional safety concerns reported by women and other students during their first weeks in Canada. Airport reception should be available for late-night and off-schedule arrivals, when students are most exposed to unsafe situations. Pre-arrival and orientation information should include practical guidance on personal safety, safe transportation, and where to seek help if students feel unsafe, provided in multiple languages and in a way that does not place responsibility for safety on students alone.

At the same time, governments and institutions need stronger coordination to ensure that visa policies, student recruitment, and institutional capacity are aligned. Visa decisions should be transparent, thorough, quick, and fair. Sudden policy changes, inconsistent approval practices, prolonged visa processing time and rapid enrolment restrictions create uncertainty for both students and institutions. A more coordinated, accountable, and student-focused approach is needed to support successful transitions and reduce risks during the migration process.

8.3 Required Temporary and Family-Inclusive Housing on Arrival

Policy actors: Universities and colleges; provincial governments; municipal partners;

Post-secondary institutions should be required to provide short-term, affordable, institution-supported housing for newly arriving international students, including those who arrive late because of visa delays. Temporary accommodation for the first two to four weeks would give students a safe and stable place to stay while they search for long-term housing. The findings show that the lack of immediate housing support exposes students to housing scams, unsafe living conditions, financial exploitation, and significant stress during one of the most vulnerable stages of settlement.

Providing short-term housing would also create a positive and safe landing experience for international students. Instead of arriving with uncertainty about where they will stay, students would have time to adjust to their new environment, learn about local housing systems, and make informed decisions. This support would reduce anxiety, improve well-being, and help students focus on settling into their academic and social lives.

Institutions should also provide practical housing assistance before and after arrival. This support should include information about rental agreements, tenant rights, common housing scams, local housing markets, and trusted housing options. Many students begin their housing search and lease without understanding the Canadian rental system, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation and financial loss.

Housing supports should also take students' personal safety into account. Institution-supported and institution-referred housing should meet basic safety standards, such as secure and lockable private rooms, and students should be able to request arrangements that address safety concerns, including shared accommodation with students of the same gender. Students should also have a clear, confidential way to report harassment or intimidation by landlords or housemates, with referrals to institutional, legal, and community support.

Municipal housing policies must also better support international students who arrive with spouses and children. Participants reported that families often faced greater difficulties finding suitable housing because of higher rental costs, limited availability of larger units, and reluctance from some landlords to rent to students with children. Despite these additional responsibilities and challenges, students with families are often overlooked in residence planning and housing support programs. Institutions should ensure that housing policies recognize the needs of student families and provide access to family-friendly accommodation and settlement support.

Providing secure short-term housing and family-inclusive housing policies would reduce settlement risks, improve student well-being, and support a smoother transition to life in Canada. These measures would also help align international student recruitment with the practical support necessary for successful settlement and academic success.

8.4 Reform International Student Health Insurance and Improve Healthcare Access

Policy actors: Provincial governments; provincial health ministries; insurance regulators; healthcare providers; and post-secondary institutions;

Health insurance plans for international students should be redesigned to provide comprehensive, transparent, and accessible coverage. Coverage should include mental health services, prescription medications, dental care, vision care, and support for dependents. Current insurance plans often provide only partial coverage and leave students responsible for significant out-of-pocket expenses, creating financial stress and discouraging them from seeking care when needed.

Post-secondary institutions should clearly explain health insurance coverage after students arrive in Canada. Information should be provided in simple and accessible language and should clearly outline what is covered, what is not covered, and what costs students may be expected to pay themselves. Institutions should also provide practical guidance on how to access healthcare services, use insurance plans, find healthcare providers, access mental health services, submit claims, and navigate reimbursement procedures. Many students encounter the healthcare system for the first time without understanding how it operates, creating confusion and unnecessary anxiety.

Institutions should establish dedicated health support services, such as a health navigation hotline or help desk, where students can receive assistance with booking appointments, understanding insurance coverage, accessing emergency care, completing claim forms, and resolving reimbursement issues. Such support would reduce confusion, improve confidence, and help students access healthcare services more effectively during their transition to Canada.

International students should not be required to pay large upfront costs for emergency healthcare when insurance coverage already exists. Many participants reported significant financial hardship when they were required to pay medical expenses before receiving reimbursement. Universities, insurance providers, and provincial governments should work together to reduce or eliminate upfront payments wherever possible. When upfront payments are unavoidable, students should receive immediate support to navigate claims, documentation requirements, and reimbursement processes.

Simplifying insurance and reimbursement procedures is equally important. Complex claim systems, excessive paperwork, long processing times, and unclear documentation requirements often discourage students from seeking care and can result in delayed or denied reimbursements. More transparent, efficient, and user-friendly systems would reduce financial hardship, improve access to healthcare, and prevent students from avoiding necessary treatment because of administrative barriers or financial concerns.

The findings show that many international students struggle to understand both the healthcare system and their insurance plans after arrival. Improving coverage, increasing transparency, reducing administrative complexity, and providing dedicated healthcare navigation support would help address unmet health needs and reduce the physical, emotional, and financial risks that many students experience during their studies in Canada.

8.5 Expand Culturally Responsive and Solution-Oriented Mental Health Services

Policy actors: Universities and colleges (post-secondary institutions); provincial health systems; provincial and federal governments; relevant community organizations;

Campus mental health services should be redesigned to better address the realities of international students' lives. The findings show that many students experience migration-related stress, financial pressure, family responsibilities, housing insecurity, and uncertainty about their future. However, participants often felt that existing counselling services did not fully understand these challenges. Many described current services as culturally mismatched, difficult to access, and focused mainly on emotional support rather than practical solutions to the problems affecting their mental health.

Institutions should expand access to multilingual counselling services and hire practitioners who are trained to work with students from diverse cultural and migration backgrounds. Mental health support should recognize the influence of migration stress, family expectations, financial hardship, discrimination, and settlement challenges on students' well-being. Counselling approaches should be culturally responsive and designed to meet the needs of international students rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.

Post-secondary institutions should also develop stronger partnerships with community-based organizations that already provide trusted, registered and culturally appropriate support to international students. These services should be formally recognized and covered through student health insurance plans so that students can access support beyond campus when needed. Community organizations often have a deeper understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and settlement challenges and can provide practical assistance alongside emotional support.

Mental health services should also move beyond crisis response and provide preventive support. Early intervention programs, peer-support networks, settlement counselling, and workshops on financial stress, housing challenges, and adaptation to life in Canada could help students manage difficulties before they become severe. A more holistic and culturally responsive approach would improve access to care and better support the mental health and well-being of international students throughout their educational journey.



8.6 Regulate Education Agents and Reduce Institutional Dependence on Intermediaries

Policy actors: Federal government; provinces; postsecondary institutions;

Governments should introduce mandatory licensing, regulation, and accountability mechanisms for education agents involved in recruiting students to Canadian post-secondary institutions. The findings show that students rely on agents largely because of gaps in institutional guidance rather than personal preference. When admission, program, and visa information is unclear or difficult to access, students often turn to private agents for assistance. However, this reliance frequently exposes them to misinformation, visa refusals, application errors, financial losses, and enrollment in programs that do not match their academic or career goals.

A national or provincial regulatory framework should establish clear standards for agent conduct, transparency, and accountability. Agents should be required to disclose financial relationships with institutions and programs, provide accurate information, and follow ethical recruitment practices. Formal complaint and monitoring systems should also be established to protect students from misleading advice and poor-quality services.

At the same time, post-secondary institutions must assume greater responsibility for admissions guidance and visa-related communication. Students should not have to depend on unregulated intermediaries to understand admission requirements, program outcomes, immigration pathways, or application procedures. Institutions should provide clear, accessible, and timely information throughout the admission process and offer direct support for students during program selection, application preparation, and visa processing.

Reducing reliance on private agents requires stronger institutional engagement from the beginning of the student journey. By providing accurate information and personalized guidance, institutions can help students make informed decisions and reduce the risks associated with admission and migration. Such measures would improve transparency, strengthen accountability, and create a more ethical and student-centred international education system.



8.7 Stabilize Immigration and Work-Related Policies for Enrolled Students

Policy actors: Federal government (IRCC)

Major changes to work eligibility, Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) rules, study permit conditions, and immigration pathways should not be applied retroactively or immediately to students who are already enrolled in Canadian institutions. Many participants described how sudden policy changes disrupted their financial plans, affected employment opportunities, created uncertainty about immigration pathways, and, in some cases, contributed to loan cancellations and academic difficulties. Students make significant financial, educational, and personal commitments based on existing policies. Changing those rules during their studies creates unnecessary hardship and instability.

Governments should adopt cohort-protected policy frameworks, where students are assessed according to the policies that were in place when they began their studies. This approach would provide greater certainty and allow students to make informed decisions about their education, work, and future plans. Any major policy change should apply only to future applicants or include clear transition measures for those already in the system.

Policy changes should also be introduced gradually and supported by clear communication and consultation with students, institutions, and community stakeholders. Predictable and transparent policies would reduce financial and emotional stress, strengthen trust in Canada's international education system, and prevent the transfer of systemic risks onto students who have already invested substantial time, money, and effort in their education. A stable policy environment is essential for protecting student well-being and ensuring fairness within the study-work-stay pathway.



8.8 Improve Academic Transparency, Cost Disclosure, and Student Preparation

Policy actors: Post-secondary institutions, academic departments, registrars, admissions offices, provincial ministries responsible for post-secondary education, and quality assurance bodies.

Post-secondary institutions should be required to clearly disclose the connection between academic programs and career outcomes before admission, particularly in regulated professions such as teaching, healthcare, engineering, and social work. The findings show that many students only discovered after arriving in Canada that their programs did not lead directly to professional certification, licensing, or the employment opportunities they expected. Institutions should provide clear information on certification requirements, professional pathways, labour market outcomes, and any additional qualifications or training required for employment.

Institutions should also provide greater financial transparency before students accept admission offers. Many participants reported unexpected annual tuition increases and hidden costs that were not fully explained during recruitment. Students should receive a clear estimate of the full cost of attendance, including tuition, ancillary fees, health insurance, books, housing, transportation, food, and other living expenses. Where possible, institutions should implement tuition predictability measures that allow students to understand the likely costs of completing their programs before they enroll. Greater transparency would help students and their families make informed educational and financial decisions and reduce unexpected financial hardship after arrival.

Institutions should also introduce mandatory orientation programs that explain the “*hidden curriculum*” of Canadian higher education. Many students struggled with unfamiliar academic expectations, including classroom participation, academic writing, independent learning, citation practices, assessment methods, and the use of learning management systems. These expectations are often assumed rather than explicitly taught, creating unnecessary barriers for international students.

Pre-arrival and early-semester academic preparation programs should help students understand how higher education operates in Canada. Such programs should cover academic expectations, grading systems, classroom culture, communication with instructors, and available academic support services. Providing this information early would reduce confusion, improve academic confidence, and help students transition more successfully into Canadian post-secondary education.

A more transparent and supportive approach would allow students to make informed decisions before enrolment and reduce avoidable academic, financial, and career-related difficulties after arrival. It would also help address forms of academic othering that occur when institutions assume prior knowledge of Canadian educational systems and place the burden of adaptation entirely on international students. By providing clear information, realistic expectations, and structured preparation, institutions can support a more equitable transition and improve international students' academic success and long-term well-being.

8.9 Strengthen Labour Protections for International Students

Policy actors: Federal and provincial labour ministries; immigration authorities;

Governments should strengthen monitoring, inspections, and enforcement in sectors where international students are commonly employed, including food services, retail, caregiving, warehousing, delivery, and security services. The findings show that many students experience underpayment, unpaid training periods, inadequate working conditions, and other forms of labour exploitation. Employers who engage in wage theft, unpaid work, unsafe practices, or violations of labour standards should face meaningful penalties and increased oversight. Stronger enforcement would help protect international students from exploitation and ensure that labour laws are applied fairly.

Post-secondary institutions should also provide mandatory education on labour rights as part of orientation and settlement programming. Many participants were unaware of their workplace rights, minimum wage requirements, reporting procedures, and available protections. Training should include information on employment standards, workplace safety, discrimination, wage theft, and protection from employer retaliation. This information should be provided in clear and accessible language and made available in multiple languages to increase understanding and accessibility.

Institutions should also establish confidential reporting and referral systems so that students can seek help when they experience workplace problems. Many participants were reluctant to report exploitation because they feared losing their jobs or affecting their immigration status. Students need clear information about where to report concerns and reassurance that they can seek assistance without risking their employment or future opportunities. Improving awareness of labour rights and strengthening protections would help reduce exploitation, improve working conditions, and support the well-being of international students who rely on employment to support their studies and settlement.



8.10. Developing a Collaborative Settlement Model for International Student Support

Policy Actors: Post-Secondary Institutions; Federal and Provincial Government; Community Organizations; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC);

The findings of this study show that community organizations play a critical role in supporting international students, particularly during arrival and early settlement. While governments and post-secondary institutions focus on recruitment and regulation, community organizations often provide the practical, emotional, and culturally responsive support that students need to navigate everyday life in Canada. These findings suggest the need for a collaborative settlement model in which responsibility for international student well-being is shared among governments, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations.

Community organizations should be formally recognized as essential partners in international student support rather than as informal or supplementary actors. Their effectiveness stems from three key strengths. First, they operate through trust, cultural familiarity, and shared experiences. Second, they provide flexible and responsive support that addresses students' immediate needs. Third, they possess local knowledge about housing, employment, healthcare, and settlement challenges that institutions often do not provide.

Under a collaborative model, federal and provincial governments would provide funding, policy support, and coordination mechanisms that integrate international students into broader settlement planning. Post-secondary institutions would move beyond a recruitment-focused approach and work closely with community organizations to support housing access, healthcare navigation, employment preparation, and early settlement. Community organizations would contribute cultural knowledge, trusted relationships, and practical support while receiving stable funding and recognition for this work.

The findings show that community organizations often fill gaps created by fragmented, delayed, or inaccessible institutional support. Students consistently described these organizations as more approachable, responsive, and trustworthy than universities or government agencies. While institutional services frequently assumed prior knowledge of Canadian systems, community organizations provided practical guidance tailored to students' lived realities. However, relying on community goodwill alone is neither sustainable nor equitable. Many community organizations operate with limited resources despite carrying significant responsibilities.

A collaborative settlement model would help address this challenge by creating shared accountability among governments, institutions, and community organizations. Such a model could improve coordination, reduce duplication of services, and provide earlier intervention for students facing challenges related to housing, healthcare, employment, and mental health. It would also move internationalization away from a model based on individual self-reliance and toward one based on collective responsibility and student well-being.

The findings also reveal a broader structural contradiction. International students are actively recruited as contributors to higher education, labour markets, and population growth, yet they are largely excluded from many formal settlement supports available to other newcomers. As a result, community organizations and informal networks are often expected to address challenges that universities and governments have not adequately planned for. While community support helps reduce harm, it also transfers responsibility from public institutions to communities that are often underfunded and overstretched. Provincial governments should ensure that provincially funded settlement and newcomer services are open to international students, and coordinate with federal and institutional partners so that students are included in broader settlement planning.

To address this gap, governments should establish dedicated funding streams for community organizations that support international students and encourage formal partnerships between these organizations and postsecondary institutions. In addition, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should extend eligibility for its Settlement Program to international students. This would directly address a key gap identified in this study by enabling established settlement agencies to provide orientation, housing and employment guidance, and referral services through existing and accountable support structures. If full eligibility is not immediately feasible, IRCC could begin by offering settlement services during students' first months in Canada, when participants in this study reported the greatest need for support.

Post-secondary institutions should establish formal, funded partnerships with community organizations rather than relying on them informally. These partnerships should integrate community organizations into orientation, housing support, mental health services, and employment initiatives, with clear roles, referral pathways, and shared accountability for outcomes. Organizations should integrate them into settlement planning, orientation programs, housing supports, mental health services, and employment initiatives. Recognizing community organizations as key partners would help create a more coordinated, equitable, and sustainable internationalization system that better reflects the realities of students' settlement experiences.

Such a model would move internationalization closer to its stated goals of inclusion, support, and intercultural engagement. It would also acknowledge that successful internationalization requires not only student recruitment but also meaningful investment in the structures of care that support students throughout their educational and settlement journeys.

Together, these recommendations call for a structural shift away from treating international students as self-managing economic units and toward recognizing them as rights-bearing participants in Canada's education, labour, and migration systems. Without institutional accountability, coordinated policy design, and sustained investment in care infrastructures, internationalization will continue to reproduce managed precarity rather than meaningful inclusion.

8.11 Fund Student Support Obligations Without Shifting Costs to Students

Policy Actors: Provincial Ministry of Colleges and Universities; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC); Post-secondary Institutions

Many of the recommendations in this report require new or expanded services, including arrival housing, airport reception, health navigation, multilingual counselling, and monitoring of recruitment practices. Institutions are already under financial pressure following recent changes to study permit caps. Without dedicated funding, these costs are likely to be passed on to international students through higher tuition or ancillary fees, which would worsen the financial precarity documented in this study.

Institutions should commit a defined share of international tuition revenue to international student support services, and publicly report each year how that revenue is spent. New support obligations should not be funded through new or increased mandatory fees charged to international students.

Provincial governments should provide targeted funding to help institutions meet minimum support standards, rather than introducing requirements without resources.

The federal government should extend eligibility for IRCC-funded settlement services to international students. This would allow community organizations, which already provide much of this support without dedicated funding, to serve these students sustainably.



8.12 Advance Anti-Racism, Inclusive Curriculum, and Equitable Teaching Practices

Policy actors: Post-secondary institutions (senior leadership, academic departments, teaching and learning centres, international student offices, equity and anti-racism offices); provincial ministries responsible for post-secondary education; quality assurance and accreditation bodies.

The findings of this study show that international students often experience academic inclusion in conditional and uneven ways. While institutions promote diversity and internationalization, many students reported that curricula, teaching practices, and support systems continued to privilege Western knowledge, assumptions, and educational norms. Students frequently encountered courses centred on North American and Western perspectives, limited representation of South Asian and Global South scholarship, and teaching approaches that assumed familiarity with Canadian academic culture. These experiences contributed to feelings of marginalization, othering, and exclusion, particularly when students' prior knowledge, educational experiences, languages, and cultural backgrounds were not recognized as valuable forms of knowledge.

8.12.1. Curriculum Reform

Institutions should conduct systematic curriculum reviews, beginning with programs that enrol large numbers of international students. These reviews should integrate Global South, South Asian, Indigenous, and other marginalized perspectives across courses and programs. Diverse knowledge systems should be embedded as core content rather than treated as optional additions or special topics. Curriculum reviews should involve faculty members, students, community organizations, and scholars from diverse backgrounds to ensure meaningful representation and inclusion.

8.12.2. Inclusive and Equitable Teaching

Institutions should strengthen faculty development on inclusive, culturally responsive, and anti-racist teaching practices. Faculty should be encouraged to make academic expectations explicit, including assignment requirements, participation norms, assessment criteria, and academic conventions that are often assumed rather than taught. Instructors should recognize that students enter classrooms with diverse educational experiences and should avoid deficit-based assumptions that position international students as lacking knowledge or skills.

Teaching practices should also value multiple ways of knowing, communicating, and participating. Rather than expecting students to assimilate into dominant academic norms, institutions should create learning environments where diverse perspectives and experiences are recognized as assets that enrich teaching and learning.

8.12.3. Anti-Racism and Belonging

Institutional anti-racism strategies should explicitly include international students. Students' experiences are often shaped by the intersection of race, nationality, language, religion, and immigration status. Many participants reported experiences of exclusion, stereotyping, microaggressions, and a sense that they were viewed primarily as temporary outsiders rather than full members of the academic community.

Institutions should establish confidential and accessible mechanisms for reporting racism, discrimination, harassment, and exclusion. Reporting systems should be available in multiple languages, include clear protections against retaliation, and provide pathways to legal, housing, employment, and community support services when incidents occur on or off campus.

All faculty, staff, advisors, counsellors, and student service professionals should receive ongoing training on anti-racism, cultural humility, implicit bias, and the ways racism intersects with immigration precarity and international student status. Institutions should also regularly collect data on international students' experiences of racism, discrimination, and belonging to inform policy improvements and accountability measures.

8.12.4. Moving Beyond Representation to Structural Inclusion

Anti-racism efforts should extend beyond symbolic commitments to diversity. Institutions should critically examine policies, practices, and structures that contribute to unequal experiences for international students. This includes reviewing admissions practices, academic policies, support services, hiring practices, complaint procedures, and decision-making processes to identify and address barriers that disproportionately affect racialized and international students.

Creating genuinely inclusive institutions requires moving beyond recruitment-focused diversity agendas toward a model of shared responsibility, equity, and care. International students should be recognized not only as contributors to institutional revenues and internationalization metrics, but as full members of the academic community whose knowledge, experiences, and well-being are central to the educational mission of post-secondary institutions.

8.13. Promoting an Anti-Racist and Equity-Oriented Culture Within and Beyond Postsecondary Institutions

Policy actors: Provincial and federal governments; municipalities; post-secondary institutions; community organizations;

To advance anti-racist and equity-oriented approaches to internationalization, coordinated action is required across institutional, provincial, and community levels. The findings of this study suggest that experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and conditional belonging are not merely individual incidents but are produced through broader institutional and policy structures. Therefore, anti-racism initiatives must address the systemic factors that shape international students' educational, social, and settlement experiences while promoting meaningful inclusion, representation, and equitable access to support both on and off campus.

8.13.1. Collect and Report Race-Disaggregated Data

Institutions should collect and publicly report race-, nationality-, and immigration-status-disaggregated data on student experiences, retention, housing insecurity, employment outcomes, mental health, and access to support services. Many forms of racial inequity remain invisible because institutions do not systematically track how international students experience belonging, discrimination, or exclusion. Regular reporting would improve accountability and help institutions identify disparities affecting racialized and international students.

8.13.2. Address Racism Beyond Campus

Anti-racism policies should extend beyond classrooms and campuses to include housing, employment, healthcare, and community settings. Participants in this study described discrimination and exclusion in rental housing and workplaces. Institutions should establish partnerships with municipalities, legal clinics, and community organizations to provide support when students face racism in housing, employment, or public services.

8.13.3. Create Dedicated Anti-Racism Support Services for International Students

Most anti-racism initiatives are designed primarily for domestic students and often overlook the unique experiences of international students. Institutions should create dedicated anti-racism advisors or support services that understand how race, culture, language, religion, nationality, and immigration status intersect in shaping students' experiences. These services should provide advocacy, referrals, reporting support, and crisis intervention.

8.13.4. Increase Representation in Decision-Making

International students, particularly students from underrepresented racialized communities, should be included in institutional decision-making processes. Institutions should create advisory councils and governance structures where international students can contribute directly to policies affecting housing, settlement, academic support, mental health, and student services. Policies should be developed with students rather than for students.

8.13.5. Mandatory Anti-Racism Training for Front-Line Service Providers

Training should be mandatory not only for faculty but also for staff working in admissions, housing services, international student offices, counselling centres, financial aid offices, registrars, and career centres. Participants often interacted more frequently with administrative staff than with instructors. These staff members should understand the effects of racialization, migration stress, and immigration precarity on student experiences.

8.13.6. Recognize International Students as Equity-Deserving Groups

International students should be recognized explicitly within equity, diversity, and inclusion frameworks. Many institutional equity initiatives focus on domestic equity-deserving groups while overlooking the specific forms of exclusion experienced by international students. Recognizing international students as an equity-deserving population would help ensure that programming, resources, research, and policy development address their specific needs.

8.13.7. Decolonize Internationalization Policies

Institutions should critically examine how internationalization policies reproduce colonial assumptions about knowledge, mobility, and belonging and re-think how internationalization should be defined. This includes reviewing recruitment practices, curriculum design, student support models, and institutional narratives that position students from the Global South primarily as sources of revenue, labour, or diversity. Internationalization should move beyond market-driven recruitment toward approaches grounded in reciprocity, equity, knowledge pluralism, and social justice.

8.14. 8. Establish Institutional Accountability for Belonging

Institutions should be required to measure and report not only international enrolment numbers but also indicators of student belonging, inclusion, safety, and well-being. Recruitment success should not be evaluated solely by enrollment growth and revenue generation. Institutional accountability frameworks should assess whether international students experience meaningful inclusion, equitable treatment, and access to support throughout their studies.

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the internationalization of higher education in Ontario governs the academic participation, belonging, and social membership of South Asian international students through processes of conditional inclusion and othering. Drawing on Allan Luke's concept of Education for Other(s) and scholarship on critical internationalization, migration governance, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism, the findings demonstrate that internationalization is not simply an educational project. Rather, it functions as a system of governance that shapes who is included, under what conditions, and for whose benefit.

The study shows that internationalization policies and institutional practices frequently conceptualize international students as contributors to institutional sustainability, labour market development, and immigration objectives. Although diversity, inclusion, global engagement, and intercultural learning are prominent themes within policy and institutional discourse, these commitments are not consistently translated into supports that address students' educational, settlement, and well-being needs. International students are actively recruited through promises of education, employment, and permanent residency. However, responsibility for navigating admission, settlement, housing, healthcare, employment, academic adjustment, immigration requirements, and mental health challenges is largely transferred onto students themselves. Rather than being supported through a coordinated system of care, students are expected to independently manage the risks associated with migration, adaptation, and survival. In this sense, internationalization operates as a system that privatizes risk while socializing benefits to institutions, governments, and labour markets.

Drawing on *Education for Other(s)*, the findings further reveal how international students experience forms of conditional belonging. They are welcomed as tuition-paying students, future workers, and potential migrants, yet their inclusion remains contingent upon their ability to remain economically productive, academically successful, and legally compliant. Their value is often tied to what they contribute rather than to their rights, well-being, or full participation in university and community life. Consequently, international students occupy an ambiguous position: they are simultaneously needed and marginalized, included and excluded, visible as economic contributors but often invisible in policy and institutional care structures.

The findings also demonstrate how contemporary internationalization reproduces broader colonial and racialized relations of power. Consistent with critical internationalization, postcolonial, and decolonial scholarship, participants encountered academic systems that privileged Western knowledge, institutional practices that assumed familiarity with Canadian norms, and support structures that were often disconnected from their lived

realities. Their experiences point to the continued operation of colonial knowledge hierarchies in which Global South knowledge, histories, and perspectives remain undervalued. At the same time, students were incorporated into Canada's education and immigration systems as desirable economic subjects while remaining vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation, and policy uncertainty. These dynamics reflect how internationalization functions within broader structures of settler colonialism, migration governance, and racial capitalism, where mobility is managed according to national economic interests and labour market needs rather than principles of equity and social justice.

The experiences of South Asian international students reveal how internationalization is interpreted and lived through their racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, and migratory positioning. Participants frequently navigated educational institutions, labour markets, housing systems, and immigration processes as racialized migrants whose belonging was continually negotiated rather than assumed. Their experiences demonstrate that internationalization is not encountered uniformly but is shaped by intersecting forms of identity, power, and inequality that influence access to support, recognition, and participation.

The findings also reveal important differences in how internationalization operates across institutional contexts. College students were generally more likely to describe their educational experience through the lens of employment and immigration pathways and often faced greater exposure to housing insecurity, low-wage work, and program-career mismatch. University students reported stronger academic engagement, greater diversity within learning environments, and more opportunities for research and intellectual development. However, students across both sectors reported similar concerns regarding settlement challenges, financial pressures, policy instability, and inadequate support. These differences suggest that internationalization does not operate uniformly across Ontario's post-secondary system but is shaped by institutional mandates, student populations, funding models, and relationships with labour markets and immigration pathways.

These findings illustrate how internationalization reproduces broader relations of power embedded in coloniality, migration governance, and racial capitalism. International students are not simply learners moving across borders; they are governed subjects whose mobility, labour, and potential future citizenship are managed through a complex network of educational, economic, and immigration policies. Their experiences demonstrate how higher education functions as a mechanism for sorting, regulating, and differentiating populations according to their economic value and perceived contribution to national priorities. At the same time, dominant Western academic norms, curricula, and institutional practices continue to shape whose knowledge is recognized and whose experiences remain peripheral, reinforcing forms of epistemic othering within internationalized higher education.

The study further demonstrates that community organizations have emerged as an essential but largely unrecognized component of internationalization. When institutions and governments failed to provide adequate support, community organizations, informal networks, faith communities, and fellow migrants often became the primary sources of housing assistance, settlement guidance, healthcare navigation, emotional support, and crisis intervention. The central role of these organizations highlights a significant structural gap between recruitment-focused internationalization and the supports required for successful settlement and inclusion. Their work exposes the limits of current internationalization models and demonstrates that responsibility for student well-being has increasingly been transferred from public institutions to communities operating with limited resources and recognition.

By centering the experiences of South Asian international students, this study contributes to critical internationalization scholarship by moving beyond analyses of policy discourse and institutional rhetoric to examine how internationalization is experienced in everyday life. The findings demonstrate how housing, employment, healthcare, settlement, mental health, and academic systems collectively shape students' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. In doing so, the study highlights how internationalization operates not only through institutional policies but also through broader social, economic, and immigration structures.

Taken together, these findings suggest that contemporary internationalization in Ontario is characterized by a fundamental contradiction. International students are actively recruited as contributors to higher education, labour markets, immigration systems, and economic growth, yet many remain excluded from the supports necessary for stability, security, and meaningful belonging. They are simultaneously welcomed and marginalized, valued and neglected, included and othered. Their experiences reveal the human consequences of an internationalization model that prioritizes market growth, migration management, and institutional sustainability while transferring many of the associated risks onto students themselves.

The study therefore calls for a fundamental rethinking of internationalization. Moving beyond recruitment-driven and market-oriented approaches requires a shift toward shared responsibility, accountability, and care. Governments, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations must work collaboratively to create structures that prioritize student well-being alongside economic and educational objectives. Such a shift requires recognizing international students not merely as consumers, temporary migrants, or future workers, but as full members of academic and social communities. Only by confronting the settler colonial, racialized, and economic inequalities embedded within current models of internationalization can Canadian higher education move closer to its stated commitments to equity, inclusion, and global engagement.

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APPENDIX A

Participant	Country of Origin	Gender	Institution	Program/Level
1	Bangladesh	Female	University	Graduate student
2	Nepal	Male	College	Graduate Certificate in Project Management
3	Nepal	Female	University	Research-based graduate student
4	Sri Lanka	Female	University	Graduate student
5	Bangladesh	Female	University	Graduate student
6	India	Female	College	Undergraduate student
7	India	Male	University	Undergraduate student
8	Bangladesh	Female	University & College	Graduate student
9	Nepal	Male	College	Postgraduate program (Undergraduate)
10	India	Female	University	Post-Degree Certificate
11	Bangladesh	Male	College	Postgraduate student
12	India	Female	University	Graduate student
13	India	Female	University	Undergraduate student
14	India	Male	College	Postgraduate student
15	India	Male	University	Undergraduate student
16	India	Female	University	Undergraduate transfer student
17	Bangladesh	Female	University	Postgraduate program (Undergraduate)
18	Bangladesh	Female	University	Graduate student
19	India	Male	University	Graduate student
20	Bangladesh	Female	University	Graduate student
21	Bangladesh	Female	University	Graduate student
22	Bangladesh	Male	College	Postgraduate program (Undergraduate)