



POLICY BRIEF

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Ensuring the Success of International Students: A collaborative model between governments, post-secondary institutions and the settlement sector

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of international students in Canada has tripled in the last decade. This significant increase has been influenced by Canadian policy measures that emphasize the importance of attracting global talent to strengthen the Canadian knowledge-based economy. While the policies are focused on the admissions and retention of international students, supporting their integration as they pursue their education and transition from study to work is largely overlooked. As a result, international students' adjustment difficulties impact their integration into the academic institution and labour market. Their lower earnings after graduation compared to their Canadian born counterparts, their lower-than-expected transition rate to permanent residence, and their experience of social isolation and discrimination prevent the policy objective from being fully achieved. This brief addresses this policy problem and recommends a collaborative model between governments, post-secondary institutions, and the settlement sector to improve the outcomes for international students which will better meet the government's policy objectives.

INTRODUCTION

With almost three-quarters of a million international students in 2019, Canada became the third most popular destination for international students in the world, next to the US and Australia ([Walbank 2020](#)). Over the past 20 years, the international student population has grown six-fold, tripling in the last decade alone. They are currently the largest temporary migrant group in Canada.

Canadian policies have been designed to encourage growth in the number of international students given that their Canadian education, work experience and proficiency in English/French, make them potentially a vital source of highly skilled workers and future permanent residents ([Arthur 2017](#)).

However, research shows that this promise is not being met; rather, there is a gap between the expectations that international students will be ideal skilled workers and their actual lived experience. ([Scott et al., 2015](#)). International students and graduates are increasingly becoming a class of low-wage precarious workers who have a low rate of retention in Canada ([Vosko 2020](#)). This gap between policy objectives and reality of outcomes for

international students can in large part be attributed to their lack of access to settlement services, particularly during their time at post-secondary educational institutions (PSIs).

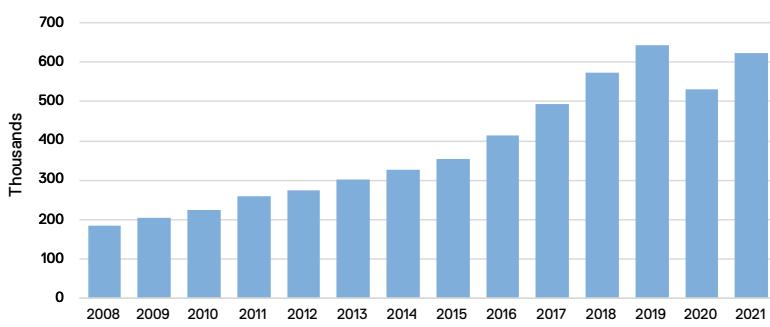
Canada has a well-organized federal government-funded settlement service sector that offers free language and employment training, networking opportunities, referrals and information sessions for permanent residents ([Flynn & Bauder 2015](#)). However, as temporary migrants, international students are not eligible for these services. They turn to their PSIs for academic, employment, health, and some immigration services, but find only limited supports and services available ([Arthur 2017](#)). The PSIs that admit international students are not obligated by the federal or provincial governments to provide targeted services to them.

After graduation, international students become even more vulnerable as they cannot access services from either the PSIs or federally-funded settlement agencies in their community. For example, they are unable to access newcomer employment supports at a time when they need them the most to obtain a skilled job.

Despite the inadequate support international students receive, they provide Canada and local communities with significant social and economic benefits. In terms of economic value, international students contributed about \$21.6 billion to Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 ([Government of Canada 2020a](#)).

Canadian PSIs have become highly dependent on the revenue stream from international students. In 2020/2021, international undergraduate students paid five times more annual tuition fees than domestic students (\$32,041 vs. \$6,610). It is estimated that international students paid almost 40% of all tuition fees earned by Canadian universities and accounted for almost \$4 billion in annual revenue in 2017/2018 ([Statistics Canada 2020](#)). International students also play an important role in diversity, inclusion and knowledge dissemination initiatives in Canadian colleges and universities. Despite these contributions made by international students there is a limited reciprocal contribution made by PSIs or governments to ensure their successful social and economic integration.

Figure 1: Number of international students in Canada, 2008-2021



Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

International Students at a Glance

- About half of international students resided in Ontario (48%) in 2019, followed by British Columbia (26.24%) and Quebec (11.71%) ([Government of Canada 2020](#)).
- Between 2015 and 2020, the number of international college students more than doubled, rising from 60,318 to 153,360. The number of international university students increased from 168,606 to 235,422 over the same period ([Statistics Canada 2021](#))
- From 2008 to 2018, the annual number of new Post Graduate Work Permit holders grew more than six times in size, from 10,300 to 64,700 ([Statistics Canada 2022](#)).
- Diversity among international students has declined in recent years with half of them (48% of all students) coming from India and 23% coming from China ([El-Assal 2022](#)).

International students' precarious migration status and their lack of access to services make them one of the most vulnerable migrant groups in Canada. The pandemic hit them particularly hard, intensifying existing challenges and creating new ones related to job loss, reduced income, social isolation and lack of adequate health care and social support ([Government of Canada 2021](#); [Varughese & Schwartz 2022](#)). In recognition of international students' important contributions to the PSIs and the economy, the federal government introduced a number of time-limited policy initiatives during the pandemic. These included a temporary extension for Post Graduate Work Permits, a special Temporary to Permanent Residency program to provide permanent resident status to students, some limited financial support, and the expansion of the invitations for Canadian Experience Class applicants that allowed many international graduates who gained work experience to apply for permanent residency ([IRCC 2021](#); [IRCC 2020a](#); [IRCC 2020b](#); [Thevenot 2020](#); [Levy 2022](#)). However, the federal government has not taken any initiative to provide settlement services to international students and graduates who are not eligible for such services because of their temporary status.

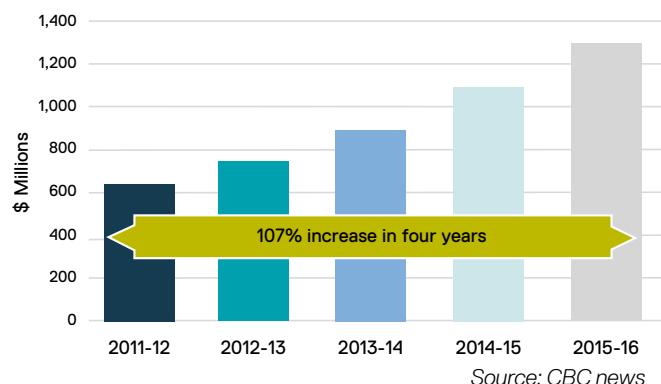
RELEVANT RESEARCH: CHALLENGES AND SERVICE NEEDS FACING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The existing literature has identified four interrelated areas of challenges facing international students in Canada, revealing the gap in services: academic and social integration, labour market integration, transition to permanent residency, and addressing discrimination and mental health issues.

Academic and social integration

When international students arrive on Canadian campuses, they face multiple linguistic, cultural, financial, and mental health challenges. High tuition fees, difficulties balancing school and work, difficulties finding accommodation, and missing their families further exacerbate their challenges with integration

Figure 2: Tuition revenue from international students



As the government is committed to the 'build back better' agenda for the post-pandemic recovery period, it is an appropriate time to introduce a policy framework to provide services to international students and graduates so that they can access the help and support they need to participate as full members of the Canadian economy and society.

into a new university/college and an unfamiliar society. Many international students find it difficult to fit in among their peers. Many international students have less than desirable social interactions with Canadian-born students ([Scott et al. 2015](#)). Language barriers, diverse cultural norms, and lack of opportunities to engage in social activities create barriers for social interactions between domestic and international students. University and college services often do not offer programs that bring international and domestic students together to enhance their social participation. ([Arthur 2017](#)). International students also need opportunities to share their concerns and learning needs, and to access help with lectures, assignments, and exams to enhance their academic performance.

Labour market integration

Despite having Canadian education and training, proficiency in English/French and familiarity with Canadian society, many international students are underperforming in the labour market during their

study period as well as after graduation. Recent research by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) found that 43% of international students were having difficulties finding paid employment ([International Consultants for Education and Fairs \(ICEF\) Monitor 2018](#)). Many of the international graduates who participated in the Post-Graduation Work Permit programme worked only part time and/or for a low income ([International Centre for Migration Policy Development \(ICMPD\)](#)). A study by [Statistics Canada \(2021\)](#) reports that former international students earned 20% less than their domestic counterparts in the first year after graduation and 9% less five years after graduation. International students who generally possess characteristics (such as university education and Canadian credentials) associated with higher earnings, earn less than similar domestic students six years post graduation ([Frenette, Lu and Chan 2019](#)). These studies confirm that many international students and graduates experience significantly larger obstacles than their domestic counterparts when trying to find appropriate employment commensurate with their education. Students report that they need more help from their university/college and other local actors during their transition from study to work ([ICEF Monitor 2018; Varughese & Schwartz 2022](#)).

Transition to permanent residency

The intention among international students to obtain permanent residency in Canada is relatively high. The 2018 survey of the CBIE ([2018](#)) showed that approximately 70% of international students planned to stay and work in Canada upon graduation and 60% intended to apply for permanent residency. However, only about one-fifth (19%) of international students who entered Canada between 1990 and 2014 obtained permanent status within ten years of receiving their study permits ([Lu and Hou 2015](#)). A recent study found that about only 3 in 10 international students who entered Canada in 2000 or later became a landed immigrant within 10 years ([Crossman et al. 2022](#)). Their lower-than-expected transition rate falls short of the students' stated intention and the Canadian policy objective. International students and graduates need help and support in order to get a job in a skilled occupation to qualify for the Canadian Experience Class, to access up-to-date information on the immigration process, and to receive assistance with their application process. Since most of them go

through a three-step transition process (study permit - post graduate work permit - permanent residency), the lack of sufficient support during this lengthy period often results in them leaving Canada rather than staying.

Discrimination and mental health issues

The literature also highlights how many international students face discrimination in post-secondary institutions as well as in the labour market. In 2013, a survey of 1,509 international students indicated that 23% had experienced racial discrimination at school and one-fourth had experienced racial discrimination when interacting with people off-campus ([Ortiz and Choudaha 2014](#)). Another study in Ontario conducted in 2015 revealed that international students faced discriminatory behaviours from employers on racial, religious, and ethnicity grounds ([Scott et al. 2015](#)). Having institutional help and support is essential for them to deal with such experiences. A study of Chinese students conducted by Liu ([2016](#)) revealed that many students who suffer from culture shock, isolation and mental health issues do not receive effective support from campus services as most university staff who provide services to international students lack the necessary training. These studies point towards the urgent need for services and support to help students deal with discrimination and mental health issues.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN POLICY OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

There are two major issues which must be addressed if the government's policy objectives are to be met.

A. Policies focus on the attraction of students but not on post-arrival success

Canadian policies highlight the strategic role of international students in the country's economic development and future prosperity. Several government programs are designed to attract international students to Canada as they are considered significant for increasing the revenues of Canadian post-secondary institutions, for stimulating local economies and for building a highly skilled

labour force. Released in 2014, Canada's first federal International Education Strategy (IES) acknowledges that international students in Canada provide immediate and significant economic benefits to Canadians in every region of the country ([Government of Canada 2019](#)). The recent Canadian IES (2019–2024) has further emphasized the importance of international students in Canada's long-term economic success and competitiveness in the 21st century ([Government of Canada 2020b](#)).

International students are also a strategic component of Canada's Economic Action Plan, its international trade and innovation strategies, and its immigration and foreign policy ([Scott et al. 2015](#)). The government has restructured its immigration policies, providing two-step immigration pathways (through the Express Entry System) to facilitate international students' transition from temporary to permanent status. Canadian policies also support the integration of international students into the labor market by allowing them to work on- and off-campus ([Government of Canada 2020c](#)). Additionally, the post graduate work permit, which is valid for up to three years, allows them to stay and work in Canada after graduation and qualify for the Canadian Experience Class to obtain permanent status ([Government of Canada 2022](#)).

Although the federal and provincial governments have taken strong policy measures to facilitate the entry and transition to permanent residence of international students, they have largely ignored supporting their integration as they pursue their education and transition to the workforce. Most of the attention in government policy has been placed on recruitment strategies, overlooking the long-term social and economic adjustment challenges. No specific strategies for responding to student service needs and service provision for international students are considered in the policies. As a result, international students' integration into the Canadian PSIs and labour market is hampered by adjustment difficulties related to language abilities, poor connectedness to host communities, and perceived employer discrimination against them.

B. Lack of accountability to ensure government policy objectives are met

Another systemic problem is that currently there is no coordination between governments and the academic institutions to provide services addressing

the various social and labour market challenges and needs of international students while in the academic setting and in transitioning to the labour market. This is exemplified by the ineligibility of international students for federally funded settlement services. Yet, on the other hand, the federal government issued several targeted policies to support the ability of Canadian higher education institutions to continue enrolling large numbers of international students. For example, to promote the attractiveness of Canadian education to international students, the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces, created Edu-Canada, the international education division of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, now Global Affairs Canada ([Williams et al. 2015](#)). As part of the promotion of Canadian education overseas, Edu-Canada disseminates information on the advantages of studying in Canada which helps PSIs to recruit international students ([Edu-Canada 2015](#)).

However, simultaneously, provincial governments have reduced the funding for PSIs ([Guo and Guo 2017](#)). In response to the cuts of provincial government funding, most universities and colleges are treating international students as a crucial source of revenue. The rise of international student enrolments by PSIs is directly linked to the decline in government funding. Already some major institutions, "including the University of Toronto, are receiving more money from international students than they get in operating grants from their provincial governments" ([Usher 2018](#)).

Despite relying on international students for revenue, the PSIs often do not prioritize the well-being of these students. The International Student Offices (ISOs) of post secondary institutions are the primary centres where international students seek academic and employment support, but ISOs too often lack adequate resources and staff to provide the broad range of services required by the students, nor are there any accountability measures in place to ensure that these services are in place.

PROMISING PRACTICES

International students' restricted access to services is gradually changing as their vulnerability is becoming a public concern. A few community-based organizations and local settlement agencies have created partnerships with PSIs to provide

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services to international students. For example, International Student Connect (ISC), a three-way partnership between COSTI Immigrant Services, settlement agencies, and educational institutions in Ontario, connects international students and their accompanying family members to settlement services and community networks to support their successful settlement and integration in Ontario ([COSTI 2020](#)). Funded by the Ontario government, it is co-delivered by 16 service delivery agencies and 21 educational institutions. To date, the program has served over 18,000 clients. ISC provides an opportunity for coordinated service delivery between the program partners.

Recently, several provinces have provided funding to PSIs to introduce service programs for international students. Memorial University received provincial funding to introduce a Professional Skills Development Program for International Students as well as a Family Integration Support Program for their spouses and children ([Flynn & Bauder 2015](#)). Similarly, L'université de Moncton in New Brunswick has delivered a program titled "Destination Emploi," which seeks to retain Francophone international students as residents in the province by helping them gain employment, social integration into the community and immigration services ([Flynn & Bauder 2015](#)).

Despite these ad hoc advances by some settlement agencies and PSIs in some provinces, only one in three Canadian universities coordinated its language courses, information sessions, and counselling services with the support offered by local settlement services in 2019 ([ICMPD 2019](#)).

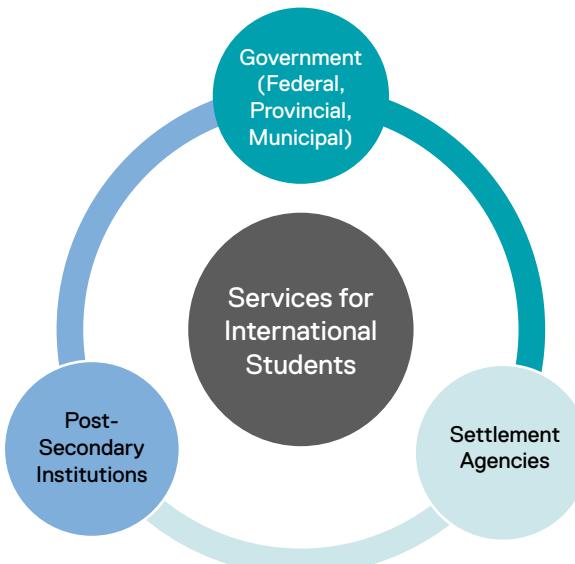
Moreover, these emerging ad hoc practices are promising but don't go far enough. The scope of these isolated programs is limited as only a small fragment of international students are benefitting from them. These programs generally include provincial governments, PSIs and settlement agencies, but NOT the federal government.

To move beyond the current state of isolated services and ad-hoc collaborations, Canada needs a comprehensive and collaborative federal policy framework that connects the roles of the governments, PSIs and local settlement agencies to provide pre- and post-arrival services to the international student population in order to achieve the goals of its immigration policy and international education strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. A collaborative service delivery model

Developing a collaborative partnership between the federal and provincial governments, PSIs and settlement agencies is essential to build a comprehensive service provision infrastructure focused on international students' success and to achieve federal and provincial policy priorities. The partnership can be built on an interconnected framework. The federal government can lead, in collaboration with the provinces, PSIs and settlement sector, the development and implementation of a policy to make service provision an integral part of the international student program. This would include the establishment of accountability mechanisms for PSIs to provide services and supports to international students, in collaboration with the settlement sector. Any financial contributions from the federal and provincial governments towards the delivery of these services would be conditional on the implementation of this policy. The provincial governments would collaborate with the PSIs and settlement agencies within their jurisdiction to build a service model for international students. PSIs and settlement agencies would take the lead role in designing and providing services to the students which recognize their distinctive needs, both in the academic setting and as they transition from study to work and ultimately to permanent residency.



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Specific recommendations on the collaborative model:

1. The PSIs and settlement service provider agencies would collaboratively deliver the support and services depending on their particular strengths.
 - Settlement agencies have a long history of providing pre- and post-arrival information, orientation, referral, employment, language, immigration, mental health, and networking services to newcomers. They can use their expertise and personnel to deliver these services to international students ([Flynn & Bauder 2015](#)).
 - The model of Settlement Workers in the Schools (SWIS), funded by the federal government, could potentially be adapted to provide individual and group sessions on university and college campuses. SWIS is a school-based outreach program that assists students in kindergarten to grade 12. This program helps newcomer students and their families transition into the Canadian school system and a new community ([Toronto District School Board 2022](#)).
 - PSIs have experience providing academic support to international students and they can play a leading role in delivering academic services and creating opportunities on campus for interaction between international and domestic students.
2. As the service needs of international students differ from those of newcomer permanent residents, the settlement agencies and PSIs can collaborate to develop or adapt specific service programs that reflect the diverse challenges and needs of international students. The diverse and intersectional identities of international students based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status also influence their social and economic integration and need to be considered.
3. Pre-arrival information is critical to counter the mis-information or potential exploitation by third-party recruiters and consultants.
4. The international student organizations on university and college campuses should be involved to identify the needs of the students, to

develop possible interventions and to evaluate and assess the programs and services offered. This would include programs that support vulnerable groups such as refugee, female, and racialized international students.

5. The students attending colleges might have different concerns and needs than those attending universities and these differences will have to be accommodated.
6. The experiences of international students are also connected to the local community context. Multiple factors, such as local labour market conditions, the size and socio-demographic make-up of the population, local community resources, as well as attitudes towards international students shape their challenges. Therefore, PSIs and local settlement agencies should work together to consider these factors when designing program interventions.
7. Along with general support to facilitate international students' social and economic integration, the partnership needs to be prepared to cope with emerging challenges, such as a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately affected international students ([Government of Canada 2021](#)).
8. Most importantly, these services, particularly enhanced language and employment training and networking opportunities need to continue to be made available to international students after their graduation so that they can successfully integrate into the labour market.

B. Programs and services

To support international students' adjustment and integration on and off-campus including into the labour market, it is important to include some targeted initiatives in the service model which are outlined below. Many of the recommended initiatives can be achieved in collaboration with PSIs, settlement agencies, and other community resources to enhance the international student experience and their success.

Specific recommendations on programs and services:

1. Provide pedagogical support to instructors of international students on curriculum development, teaching methods, evaluation methods, assignments and exams, diversity and inclusion measures and instructor-student relationships.

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2. Engage with international students and their organizations to understand the cross-cultural context when developing programs and methods of service delivery.
3. Provide culturally adapted academic services that take into consideration ethnolinguistic and religious differences, mental health literacy and the impacts of cross-cultural experiences of international students.
4. Develop programs to pair international and domestic students through cultural events, student clubs, volunteer programs and peer mentoring. These programs will help students develop respect for cultural diversity and increase their awareness and capacity to analyze social issues from different perspectives. Addressing issues of stereotyping, discrimination and racism should be a priority of such efforts.
5. Make counselling services available to international students with counsellors trained in cross-cultural competencies to assess the social and cultural factors that affect international students' mental health.
6. Focus career services for international students and graduates on advanced communication skills, early exposure to the labour market and tailored job application training.
7. Organize workshops, presentations and networking sessions to introduce international students and graduates to career opportunities and help local employers and business leaders become acquainted with them.
8. Create on and off-campus work opportunities, and provide internships and co-op positions in career-related fields to help international students enhance their work experience and develop their occupation-specific language and communication proficiency. This will improve their prospects for labour market integration after graduation.
9. Provide information and services to help international students deal with immigration-related paperwork, changes in immigration policies, study and work permit applications, post-graduate work permits and permanent residency.

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of international students and graduates do not adequately align with the key policy targets of Canada's International Education Strategy and federal and provincial immigration goals. Canadian policies are focused on attracting talented international students and introducing immigration pathways for them. However, the support services necessary for their successful academic, labour market, and social integration have been largely overlooked in the policy framework. In order to achieve successful integration and to retain these international students with Canadian education and experience, the federal and provincial governments must work proactively with academic institutions and settlement agencies to foster their sense of belonging. A collaborative partnership between federal and provincial governments, PSIs and local settlement agencies is essential to create a viable infrastructure that can respond to the service needs of international students and graduates while considering their diverse identities, local community contexts and local institutional resources.

About the author

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