

Welcoming Campus, Inclusive Community: Building Housing Infrastructure for International Students Symposium

June 16, 2025

8:30am - 4:00pm

Oakham Lounge, Oakham House,
Toronto Metropolitan University,
63 Gould Street Toronto, ON
(map available [here](#))

In person & Virtual ([link](#))

Funded by Migrant Integration in the Mid-21st Century: Bridging Divides Research Program, thanks in part to funding from the Canada First Research Excellence Fund.

Your Hosts



Dr. Zhixi Zhuang

Dr. Zhixi Zhuang is a Registered Professional Planner and an Associate Professor at the School of Urban and Regional Planning. As the Academic Director of the Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement and Founder and Director of DiverCityLab. Her research explores the growing urban diversity in Canadian cities and how city-builders can instill the values of equity and inclusion into planning policies and practices.

Specifically, she investigates the intersections of individual characteristics and the impacts on lived experiences in cities, and how diversity and differences shape places and communities.



Dr. Rupa Banerjee

Dr. Rupa Banerjee is the Canada Research Chair in Economic inclusion, Employment and Entrepreneurship of Canada's Immigrants and Professor of Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour. Her primary research interest lies in the employment integration of new immigrants to Canada.

She is particularly interested in the institutional barriers facing new immigrants in the Canadian labour market. In addition, she is interested in workplace diversity and ethno-racial discrimination, particularly as it applies to second-generation immigrants.



Dr. Sandeep Agrawal

Dr. Sandeep Agrawal is Associate Dean in the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and Professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta, where he established and was inaugural Director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning. He is a recipient of the Canadian Institute of Planners' national academic award for his notable impacts on city bylaws, legislation, planning policies and planning education.

He is also a researcher and Institutional Lead for Bridging Divides, where he continues to make significant contributions to urban planning through the lens of multiculturalism, human rights and equity.



Program Agenda

TIME	ACTIVITY
8:30 AM - 8:45 AM	Registration + Coffee
8:45 AM - 9:00 AM	Welcome, Land Acknowledgement & Opening Remarks
9:00 AM - 9:20 AM	Presentation 1: Housing experiences of international students in Canada: Insights from the 2021 Census by Dr. Feng Hou (Principal Researcher Social Analysis and Modelling Division, Statistics Canada)
9:20 AM - 9:40 AM	Presentation 2: International students' housing struggles and resilience in the GTA: Barriers, strategies, and impacts on wellbeing by Bridging Divides Research Team: Dr. Zhixi Zhuang (PI), Jack Krywulak (RA) & Mo (Mariam) El Toukhy (Project Manager)
9:40 AM - 10:00 AM	Presentation 3: Comparing housing experiences of international and domestic Students in Ontario and Alberta: Preliminary survey findings by Bridging Divides Research Team: Dr. Rushde Akbar (Survey Analyst)
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Panel 1: Exploring political, academic and public discourses: How does the housing crisis affect International Students? Facilitated by Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou. <i>Featuring The Honourable Ratna Omidvar C.M., O. Ont., Dr. Marshia Akbar, Dr. Sutama Ghosh, and Feven Haddish</i>
11:00 AM - 11:15 AM	BREAK
11:15 AM - 12:15 PM	Panel 2: Stakeholders' roles in addressing the housing crisis and enhancing community inclusivity Facilitated by Dr. Sandeep Agrawal. <i>Featuring Dr. Amira El Masri, Becky Shillington, Matthew Stein, and Mercedeh Madani</i>
12:15-1:15 PM	BUFFET LUNCH
1:15 PM - 2:15 PM	Panel 3: The imperative of building equitable and inclusive housing infrastructure for international students Facilitated by Dr. Rupa Banerjee. <i>Featuring Dr. Yolande Pottie-Sherman, Rylan Kinnon, Ashmita Sandhu, Mehnaz Lamia, and Amir Moghadam</i>
2:15 PM - 2:30 PM	BREAK + Coffee
2:30 PM - 4:00 PM	Round Tables: Collaborative reflection, discussion, and solution building
4:00 PM - 4:05 PM	Closing remarks

Presenters



Dr. Feng Hou

Feng Hou is a Principal Researcher with Analytical Studies and Modelling Branch, Statistics Canada and adjunct professor of sociology at Western University. His research focuses on the socioeconomic integration of immigrants and the second generation, dynamics of social diversity, and minority-majority social interaction.

He has published over 240 journal articles, book chapters and government reports in these areas. His research findings have served as a valuable resource for government departments in their efforts to monitor the economic outcomes of immigrants and make informed policy decisions.



Dr. Zhixi Zhuang

Dr. Zhixi Zhuang is a Registered Professional Planner and an Associate Professor at the School of Urban and Regional Planning. As the Academic Director of the Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement and Founder and Director of DiverCityLab. Her research explores the growing urban diversity in Canadian cities and how city-builders can instill the values of equity and inclusion into planning policies and practices.

Specifically, she investigates the intersections of individual characteristics and the impacts on lived experiences in cities, and how diversity and differences shape places and communities.



Jack Krywulak

Jack Krywulak is a research assistant at BD under Dr. Zhixi Zhuang and is conducting research under both the Citizenship and Belonging and Place and Infrastructure themes. Jack holds an undergraduate degree in Urban and Regional Planning from Toronto Metropolitan University (2024) and is currently a Master's of Arts student at Western University's Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism. Jack is interested in political philosophy, critical theory, discursivity and interpretation.



Mo (Mariam) El Toukhy

Mo El Toukhy is the project manager for various projects within Bridging Divides' research themes that explore newcomer agency, the barriers to integration in Western societies, and the supports needed to address them. An Urban Planner with a Master's in Planning and Urban Development from Toronto Metropolitan University, Mo focuses on centering community voices and learning from global Indigenous ways of being through a reflexive planning lens.

As a former International student who earned an undergraduate degree in Photography from OCAD University, Mo is deeply engaged with the experiences of fellow international students, hoping to inform policies that foster more inclusive urban futures in Canada.



Dr. Rushde Akbar

Dr. Rushde Akbar is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Toronto Metropolitan University. He earned his Ph.D. in Economics from York University, Toronto. His research interests lie at the intersection of international trade, labour economics, and development economics. His work has been presented at both national and international academic conferences.

Dr. Akbar recently published a paper examining the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) and the experience premium of international students in Canada. In addition to his research, he is an experienced educator, having taught at Carleton University, York University, and North South University. His teaching portfolio spans both undergraduate and graduate courses, delivered in-person and online.

PANEL 1 *Exploring political, academic and public discourses: How does the housing crisis affect International Students?*

Facilitated by Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou, discussions will explore political, academic, and public Canadian discourses related to international students, immigration policy, and the housing crisis.



The Honourable Ratna Omidvar C.M., O. Ont.

Ratna Omidvar is an internationally recognized voice on migration, diversity, and inclusion. In April 2016, Ms. Omidvar was appointed to the Senate of Canada as an independent senator representing Ontario. Senator Omidvar served as Chair of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology and as Deputy Chair of the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector.

Ms. Omidvar is a Director at the Century Initiative, a Councillor on the World Refugee and Migration Council and a Founding Committee Member of Lifeline Afghanistan. In November 2024, she was appointed as a Public Policy Fellow on Immigration at the School of Public Policy and Democratic Innovation at Metropolitan Toronto University.



Dr. Sutama Ghosh

Dr. Sutama Ghosh is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Ryerson University. Between completing her doctoral degree at York University in 1999 and joining Ryerson University as an Assistant Professor, Sutama taught in the Department of Urban Studies at York University and the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

Her major research focus is on the Migration and Settlement Geographies of Immigrants and Refugees to Canada, exploring the development of immigrants as socio-cultural-political and economic citizens of Canada, understanding their unequal access to housing and employment, and the impact of such inequality on their social identities and levels of integration into the Canadian society.



Dr. Marshia Akbar

Marshia Akbar is the Director of the BMO Newcomer Workforce Integration Lab and Research Lead on Labour Migration at CERC Migration. Her interdisciplinary research bridges policy, practice, and lived experiences to address pressing issues in international migration, employment integration, and social equity.

She examines employment challenges faced by immigrants and migrants with temporary status, including international students, post-graduates, and high-skilled temporary workers. Using a multi-sectoral, collaborative approach, she highlights the roles of diverse stakeholders in fostering equitable integration pathways.



Feven Haddish

Feven Haddish is the Manager, International Student Experience at the International Student Support (ISS) office at TMU. The ISS team supports international students and newcomers as they transition to a new country and university. They help students navigate systems in order to achieve their personal, academic and professional goals.

Feven is a consultant, educator, and project manager with over two decades of experience across 3 continents in higher education, equity advisory, and international program development. Feven served as an Adjunct Instructor and International Education Officer at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, where she designed and taught courses on anthropology and climate crisis, and developed global learning service projects leveraging indigenous knowledge in Indonesia and Thailand.



Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou

Dr. Triandafyllidou is the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, a \$10-million seven-year program. She pursued the opportunity with Ryerson because she sees Toronto as a hub of migrant integration, diversity and inclusion and because of the university's commitment to those attributes. Her main areas of research and teaching are the governance of cultural diversity, migration, and nationalism from a European and international perspective. Over the past 15 years, she has raised approximately 12 million Euro in research funds from European, international and national sources, and co-ordinated 30 international research projects in these research fields.

PANEL 2 *Stakeholders' roles in addressing the housing crisis and enhancing community inclusivity*

Facilitated by Dr. Sandeep Agrawal, discussions will share perspectives from HEIs, policymakers, and development and industry leaders to explore public and private partnerships.



Dr. Amira El Masri

Dr. Amira El Masri is the inaugural Director of the Office of International Affairs at McMaster University. Prior to that, she worked in a range of senior international education strategy-oriented roles nationally and internationally supporting institutions to embrace the transformative power of international learning and engagement.

She is an award-winning researcher whose research interests focus on international education policy in Canada and comparatively, the international student experience, the geopolitics of international education, and internationalizing teacher education programs.



Becky Shillington

Becky Shillington is the Director, Housing and Ancillary Services at Loyalist College, responsible for residence operations and strategic planning for student well-being support. She also leads as President of the Ontario Association of College and University Housing Officers (OACUHO), to support all facets of University and College housing operations and students' success. With over 10+ years of experience in leading the students' housing and residence life in post-secondary institutions in Ontario, Becky brings valuable insights into constructing comprehensive support systems for international student success in housing.



Matthew Stein

Matthew Stein, MSc, P.Eng., is the President and Founder of HOEM Management Inc., a Canadian student housing operator and developer. He holds an MSc in Management from the London School of Economics, where he wrote his thesis on designing student residences to foster community.

He also earned a CEMS Master in International Management (LSE and FGV, Brazil) and a Bachelor of Engineering from McGill University.



Mercedeh Madani

Mercedeh Madani is the Director of Housing Policy and Strategy at the City of Toronto's Housing Secretariat. She is a passionate housing leader driving transformative change by shaping system-level housing strategies and building strong partnerships with community organizations and government partners.

Mercedeh leads the development and implementation of a wide range of housing programs and policies, including the City of Toronto's HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan. She has played a pivotal role in delivering innovative solutions such as Toronto's Modular Housing Initiative, which created hundreds of deeply affordable and supportive homes for individuals experiencing homelessness.

PANEL 3 *The imperative of building equitable and inclusive housing infrastructure for international students*

Facilitated by Dr. Rupa Banerjee, discussions will address the specific housing needs of international students and shed light on innovative practices.



Dr. Yolande Pottie-Sherman

Dr. Yolande Pottie-Sherman is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador specializing in immigration, diversity, and demographic change. At Memorial, she co-leads the Adaptive Cities and Engagement Space, a research collective promoting social justice in small and medium-sized cities.

Her current research projects focus on the geographies of housing, immigration, and care infrastructure in Canadian cities and the role of immigration in Canada's child care workforce.



Ashmita Sandhu

Ashmita Sandhu is a second-year Master of Global Affairs student at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto. She combines her experience in law, policy research, and her perspective as an international student to address challenges faced by the international student community. As part of the strategy, policy, and research team at World Education Services, she has contributed to initiatives that advocate for clear information systems and equitable policies to support international student success



Rylan Kinnon

Rylan Kinnon is the co-founder and CEO of SpacesShared. He has spent a decade working in postsecondary advocacy, policy, program administration, and technology. As a partnership and consensus builder, Rylan believes in engaging as broad a base of stakeholders as possible when developing solutions to complex problems. Rylan has experience managing large teams and scaling technology companies.



Mehnaz Lamia

Mehnaz Lamia is a teaching assistant and staff member at OCAD University, where she earned her BFA in Creative Writing. As a migrant poet and storyteller, her work centers on the lived experiences of her intersectional identity and was featured with the City of Toronto, Nia Centre For The Arts, Toronto International Festival of Authors, Montgomery's Inn and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

She held the position of the international student representative for the Canadian Federation of Students and has done panels on international education with Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Metropolis Conference, TMU Dais and within the post-secondary education space.



Amir Moghadam

Mohammadmir (Amir) Moghaddam is the chair of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) and the University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union (UTGSU). He advocates for over 80,000 graduate students across Ontario, successfully negotiating province-wide student discounts and improved funding policies.

Under his leadership, UTGSU, Amir bridges the gap between advanced research and public understanding, a skill he applies to making complex union issues accessible to all students.

