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Dominik Formanowicz, Tingting Zhang, Rupa Banerjee, Rezwana Ahmed, & Isaac Garcia-Sitton

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Dominik Formanowicz
York University

Tingting Zhang
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Rupa Banerjee
Toronto Metropolitan University

Rezwana Ahmed
Toronto Metropolitan University

Isaac Garcia-Sitton
Toronto Metropolitan University

Series Editors: Anna Triandafyllidou, Richa Shivakoti, and Zhixi Zhuang

Abstract

Over the past two decades, global international student enrolment has surged, transforming higher education systems worldwide. International students were once seen as ideal immigrants, often transitioning to permanent residency (PR). However, in Canada, shifting public attitudes and recent policy changes reveal growing scepticism, reflecting broader immigration debates. This study examines the migration decision-making processes of former international students (FIS) from publicly funded Canadian universities. Using a grounded theory approach, it explores how privilege and precarity shape FIS's aspirations and capabilities, influencing their migration journeys. The findings challenge Canada's reputation as a universally appealing destination, highlighting the fluid and contingent nature of migration decisions. Systemic barriers—including employment challenges, discrimination, and restrictive policies—complicate decisions to stay. The study underscores the need for integrated policies connecting education, immigration, and labour markets, offering recommendations to enhance support for retaining and integrating international talent.

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Introduction

Like many countries, Canada has seen a significant increase in international students in the past two decades, reshaping its higher education landscape. The number of study permit holders grew from 122,655 at the end of 2000 (Crossman et al., 2022) to 1,028,850 by the end of 2023 (Woolf, 2024), driven by a reduction in public funding for post-secondary education since 2010 (Usher, 2021) and a decline in the domestic student population due to an aging demographic (Choi & Hou, 2023). Colleges and universities have increasingly turned to internationalization to generate revenue, with international students paying, on average, 5.3 times the tuition of domestic students (Moosapeta, 2023).

International students not only serve as a crucial revenue source for the education sector, they are also viewed by employers as a valuable labour supply (Crossman et al., 2022) and by policymakers as potential future citizens (Sharma, 2020). Consequently, the relationship between higher education, the labour market and immigration systems has become increasingly interwoven. Evolving policies governing student visas, work permits, and pathways to permanent resident (PR) status are designed to address the strategic importance of retaining high quality international students and integrating them into the workforce.

Existing literature often emphasizes the marginalization and underemployment of skilled immigrants in Canada, typically framed through human capital theory, which focuses on skill devaluation and job mismatches (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2019; Fortin et al., 2016). However, it often overlooks the role of privilege and personal agency in shaping migration decisions and outcomes (Paret & Gleeson, 2016; Robertson & Roberts, 2022). This study addresses this gap by examining the migration decision-making processes and experiences of former international students (FIS) in Canada, focusing on those from publicly funded universities, often seen as "ideal immigrants" (Scott et al., 2015). The study aims to elucidate how FIS's personal advantages and individual decision-making intersect with systemic challenges to shape their migration journeys.

To gain deeper insights, we conducted in-depth interviews and applied a grounded theory approach, which generates theories from participants' lived experiences rather than pre-existing hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006). This method allowed us to explore the complexity of FIS's experiences and examine how privilege, agency, and structural barriers impact their migration experiences and integration into the Canadian labour market. As the analysis progressed, themes resonating with the aspirations-capabilities framework (de Haas, 2021) emerged, highlighting how FIS make migration decisions based on their social, educational, and professional contexts. Participants described how they balanced their aspirations with available capabilities, influenced by their experiences and evolving circumstances. Our findings show that while FIS often leverage personal advantages, such as educational backgrounds and professional networks, these are frequently undermined by precarious circumstances, including restrictive immigration policies and inequitable access to the labour market.

The study makes three contributions. First, it empirically deepens our understanding of FIS's experiences by framing their migration journey as a dynamic and evolving process, rather than a series of fixed goals. Their migration is shaped by a mix of opportunities and challenges, with decisions adjusted based on changing situations and influenced by factors like immigration policies, education systems, job markets, and personal contexts. Our approach targets migrants' intentions while underscoring the contingent and flexible nature of decision-making, demonstrating how external factors shape migration experiences.

Second, the study contributes to theoretical development by critically applying and extending de Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework to the experiences of international university graduates. This framework is particularly suited for examining FIS, who often find themselves at a crossroads, needing to make important personal and professional decisions. The framework's focus on agency and decision-making processes allows an

exploration of how FIS navigate these choices, considering the factors influencing both their aspirations and their capabilities. We provide empirical validation of the framework for this subgroup while adding contextual nuances to diverse migration trajectories.

Third, the study identifies key challenges faced by FIS, providing valuable insights for policymakers. It underscores the importance of a coordinated and transparent international education program and immigration system, which can help attract and retain high-quality international students. Additionally, participant insights can guide post-secondary institutions in enhancing support systems to better address the unique needs of this population. Finally, understanding FIS's experiences can inform targeted community-based initiatives to facilitate successful transition and integration into the Canadian workforce and society.

Section two of the paper examines the historical development of international student policy in Canada. Section three synthesizes literature on the outcomes and experiences of international students. Section four delineates our theoretical framework. Section five explains our methodological approach, data collection, and analytical procedures, and section six presents our empirical findings. Sections seven and eight provide the theoretical and policy implications of our research and our conclusions.

Evolution of International Student Policy in Canada

Since the 1960s, substantial numbers of international students have studied in Canada's post-secondary system. In the early years, accepting these students was often viewed as a form of foreign aid, enabling youth from less-developed regions to gain Western education to improve conditions in their home countries (Poitras, 2019). With the 1976 Immigration Act, modern Canadian policy on international students began to take shape. Three significant principles emerged. First, international students were classified as "migrants," excluding them from tax-funded benefits. Second, they were seen as wealthy foreigners, not disadvantaged youth seeking education. Third, tuition fees were differentiated for them (McCartney, 2021). As government funding for post-secondary education decreased in the early 1990s, international students' tuition became vital to financial stability (Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Usher, 2021). Colleges and universities developed internationalization strategies, including active and aggressive recruitment campaigns (Bohman, 2014; Marom, 2023), sometimes engaging intermediary agencies (Chen, 2008).

The policy landscape further evolved in the 2000s. A notable milestone was the introduction of the Canadian Experience Class in 2008 streamlining the process for international students with Canadian work experience in "high-skill" occupations to obtain PR status after graduation. International students were now seen not only as revenue contributors but also as ideal candidates for settlement (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2016). Canada loosened access to post-graduation work permits to enhance the attractiveness of studying in the country. Before 2005, graduating international students faced strict rules requiring industry-specific work permits within their fields of study. Securing these permits was challenging; students had to obtain full-time job offers within 60 days of graduation. Many struggled to do so, complicating their transition to PR (Moltaji, 2019).

The post-graduate work permit program (PGWPP), introduced as a pilot from 2005 to 2007, provided graduates from designated learning institutions (DLIs) with automatic open work permits for up to two years. The PGWPP was subsequently expanded to all international students graduating from DLIs, including those in major cities, and extended to a maximum of three years, improving graduates' employment prospects (Moltaji, 2019).

Canada introduced the International Education Strategy (IES) in 2014 to establish itself as a leading global education destination, aiming to double the number of international students by 2022 (Government of Canada, 2014). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Immigration,

Refugees, and Citizenship Canada implemented policies to support the recruitment and retention of international students, helping sustain the international education sector despite global travel restrictions. As a result, over one million study permits were issued annually by 2023 (Garcia-Sitton, 2024).

International education policy in Canada has been criticized for its exploitation of international students (e.g., Brunner, 2022; Scott et al., 2015; Tamtik et al., 2020), potential fraud (Government of Canada, 2023), and the negative impact on public goods like housing and healthcare (e.g., Passifiume, 2023; Yakabuski, 2024). In January 2024, responding to public concerns about the expansion of the program, the Government of Canada announced a two-year cap on international student permit applications, projecting approximately 360,000 study permits in 2024, a 35% reduction from 2023 (Government of Canada, 2024). Despite this policy shift, international students continue to face challenges in the complex landscape of Canadian higher education and the broader socio-economic environment. While the new policy may decrease numbers, it underscores the ongoing need for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of international students and graduates to develop strategies that enable them to reach their full potential.

Experiences and Outcomes of International Students in Canada

The experiences of international students have garnered considerable scholarly attention (for a review, see Gutema et al., 2024), with studies examining their academic, psychological, social, and economic challenges, such as language barriers, adapting to academic norms, miscommunication with faculty and peers, stress, isolation, culture shock, financial constraints, inadequate housing, and daily life adjustments (e.g., Calder et al., 2016; de Moissac et al., 2020; Guo & Guo, 2017; Houshmand et al., 2014; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Others have explored international students' migration and transition decisions. Netierman et al. (2021) found decisions to stay or leave after graduation are influenced by familial obligations, employment prospects, and potential for PR. Robinson et al. (2023) emphasized the role of transnational social networks in shaping these decisions, highlighting how informal channels like family and ethno-racial communities provide crucial support. While some studies, such as Lu et al. (2009), have linked students' initial migration intentions to their eventual decisions, the broader literature underscores the dynamic nature of these decisions (e.g., Farivar et al., 2019; Geddie, 2013; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Studies on labour market outcomes show FIS who gain PR status tend to earn less than Canadian-born graduates but more than foreign-educated immigrants (e.g., Chen & Skuterud, 2018; Choi et al., 2023; Crossman & Hou, 2022; Hou & Lu, 2017; Picot & Hou, 2023).

While quantitative analyses offer a broad overview, they do not illuminate the factors influencing labour market integration. Qualitative studies suggest limited suitable employment opportunities, lack of Canadian work experience, inadequate professional networks, and perceived employer discrimination significantly contribute to labour market disadvantages (e.g., Guo & Chase, 2011; Liu, 2017; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Scott et al., 2015).

We addressed a gap in the burgeoning research on the experiences of international graduates, particularly regarding their transition to PR within the context of evolving immigration policies. While the literature has documented their challenges and the factors influencing their decisions, recent changes in the international student program and policy landscape necessitate a re-examination. We aimed to identify the factors that influence FIS migration journeys and outcomes, with a particular focus on how their agency, privilege, vulnerability, and precarity all work in conjunction to shape these dynamics.

Theoretical Framework: Aspirations-Capabilities

Based on our empirical data, we found that de Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework, originally developed by Sen (1999) in the context of development in the Global South, effectively describes the migration journeys of FIS. This holistic framework considers socio-cultural, historical, and structural influences on individual migration choices, offering a nuanced alternative to traditional "push-pull" theories. It captures the range of factors shaping the experiences of international students, allowing us to conceptualize their migration as dynamic processes with evolving pathways rather than fixed outcomes.

Aspirations encompass individuals' desires and motivations, shaped by personal and family goals, social norms, and cultural values (de Haas, 2021, p. 14). Capabilities refer to the resources and opportunities that enable individuals to realize their aspirations, including economic resources, social networks, education, and legal frameworks, which, in turn, are influenced by structural factors such as economic conditions and political policies. This dual focus allows researchers to view migrants as active agents rather than passive victims of global trends, recognizing their dreams and ambitions within the constraints of their social identities and circumstances.

Extending the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework to International Students in Canada

Recent research shows international students' motivations for studying and remaining in Canada extend beyond educational and economic opportunities (Netierman et al., 2022). The decision to study in Canada is often influenced by family, friends, and recruitment agents. Upon commencing their studies, international students face a range of positive and negative experiences that shape their perceptions of Canada and their decision to stay or leave. After graduation, perceived costs and benefits further influence this choice. While the aspirations-capabilities framework emphasizes individual choice and structural inequalities in migration outcomes, it does not capture the complexity of decision-making for multi-step immigrants like international students. We extended the framework to explore how decisions are formed in stages, influenced not only by socio-economic goals (e.g., economic prosperity, educational prestige) but also by external forces (e.g., family), experiences (e.g., racial discrimination), and assumptions (e.g., the value of PR status).

While the framework addresses agency, it does not fully account for constraints on agency. In fact, for many migrants, agency is limited, in line with Evans' (2007) concept of "bounded agency," whereby individuals possess autonomy within social, economic, and cultural constraints. Although they can make choices, their agency is bounded by external factors like institutional structures, societal expectations, and material conditions, and these shape available options, decisions and outcomes. This often results in a stepwise decision process, akin to that described by Schapendonk (2007) in other migration contexts.

It is crucial to listen to the voices of international students to grasp the nuances of their aspirations and capabilities. Their unique circumstances, personal histories, and contexts shape their decisions. What seems to capture this interplay of factors is the dialectic relationship of privilege and precarity, experienced by students simultaneously. Privilege manifests through access to resources, social networks, and opportunities that facilitate academic success and integration into Canadian society. Precarity arises from uncertainties regarding legal status, financial instability, and cultural adaptation.

Recognizing these dynamics enriches the aspirations-capabilities framework, offering deeper insights into the mechanisms driving aspirations and capabilities in the context of international student migration. Importantly, insights from FIS's experiences can be generalized

to other categories of international migrants, such as skilled workers or family migrants, where similar dynamics of privilege and precarity shape experiences and outcomes.

Methodology

To unravel the migration decision-making processes and experiences of FIS in Canada, we conducted semi-structured interviews with international student graduates who held a PGWP between 2008 and 2020 and applied grounded theory for data analysis. This sampling strategy situated the research within the contemporary immigration context, as 2008 marked the introduction of the PGWP in its current form.

We focused on Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) holders, assuming that these individuals intended to remain in Canada for a period after graduation, making them an ideal group to examine the aspirations-capabilities framework. This group of highly skilled migrants is in a transitory phase, facing significant challenges such as securing employment in their field of expertise and navigating the process of obtaining PR status. By selecting PGWPP holders, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the early stages of migration, a period marked by unresolved decisions and fluid circumstances. This approach allowed us to avoid selection biases associated with focusing solely on those who had already attained PR, enabling us to explore the complexities and transitional dynamics of this phase.

Participants were required to have graduated from a Canadian publicly funded university as international students and received a PGWP. We included university graduates at all levels of study (bachelor's, master's, PhD). We focused on university students, based on the premise that university and community college students often experience different educational and socio-economic conditions and should not be analyzed together (Skolnik, 2004). Efforts were made to maintain gender balance in the sample and interview FIS from diverse source countries.

During recruitment, international student alumni groups were contacted on social media and through professional and academic networks. When we established contact with potential participants, those meeting the criteria were asked to complete an online questionnaire with basic demographic questions. They were invited to an interview via a web-based video conferencing platform and received a token of appreciation of CAD 30 post-interview. Interviews on average lasted around 60 minutes.

Between July 2022 and April 2023, we conducted 36 in-depth interviews with FIS. The interviews were first transcribed using the tool provided by the video-conferencing platform and edited through manual transcription in preparation for analysis. We ceased interviewing upon achieving saturation, defined by data repetition, informational redundancy, and theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

Participant Demographics

Participants had a master's/professional degree (22), a bachelor's degree/certificate (12), or a doctorate (2). They identified as female (13), male (20), or non-binary (1); two preferred not to disclose their gender. They represented various fields of study, reflecting the broad spectrum of disciplines from which international students graduate. Participants came from 23 countries; the largest groups came from Iran (4), China (3), and India (3). This distribution aligns with the demographics of the international student population in Canada, as China, India, and Iran are the leading source countries of international university students (Crossman et al., 2021). Of the 26 participants who applied for PR, 24 were successful, while two were awaiting results. One additional participant was in the process of applying. Nine participants chose not to apply and left

the country, while one left after obtaining PR status. Table 1 gives an overview of demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Participants

Participant Number	Country of Origin	Pronouns	Highest Level of Education (Canada)	Field of Study
1	Columbia	he/him	Master's	Business
2	Germany	she/her	Bachelor's	Finance
3	United States	N/A	Bachelor's	Film Production
4	Nigeria	he/him	Master's	Computer Networks
5	Philippines	she/her	Master's	MBA
6	Bangladesh	she/her	Master's	Business
7	Hong Kong	he/him	Certificate, Bachelor's, Professional degree	Political Science, Urban Planning
8	Brazil	she/her	Master's	Film and Photography reservation and Collections management
9	United Arab Emirates	she/her	Bachelor's	Human Resources Management
10	Belgium	N/A	Master's	Sociology
11	Sri Lanka	they/them	Master's	Nursing
12	Mexico	she/her	Master's	Nutrition Communication
13	China	he/him	Master's	Computer Networks
14	Germany	he/him	Master's	Civil Engineering
15	Indonesia	he/him	Bachelor's	Social Work
16	Russia	he/him	Master's	Business Administration
17	United States	she/her	Master's	Photographic Preservation and Collections Management
18	China	he/him	Master's	MBA
19	Bahrain	she/her	Bachelor's	Journalism
20	India	he/him	Master's	MBA
21	Guyana	he/him	Bachelor's	Civil Engineering
22	India	she/her	Certificate	Business (International Management)
23	Benin	he/him	Bachelor's	Electrical engineering
24	Iran	he/him	Doctorate	Computer Science
25	Turkey	he/him	Master's	Business Administration
26	Iran	he/him	Master's	Information Systems
27	Iran	he/him	Master's	Chemical Engineering
28	Iran	he/him	Doctorate	Chemical Engineering

29	Philippines	he/him	Master's	MBA
30	India	he/him	Master's	Business
31	China	she/her	Bachelor's	Statistics
32	United States	she/her	Bachelor's	English
33	Benin	she/her	Master's	Economics and Administration
34	Hong Kong	she/her	Master's	Communications
35	Trinidad & Tobago	he/him	Bachelor's	Finance and Global Management Studies
36	Pakistan	he/him	Master's	Engineering

Data Analysis

We applied the grounded theory method, following Glaser and Strauss's (1968) framework, which integrates theory development and verification through an iterative process. Conceptual categories are generated from data and tested across contexts, with the aim of constructing theories that explain key behaviours (Blaikie, 2009). Grounded theory has evolved over the years, with critiques addressing the researcher's active role in interpreting responses, influenced by factors like academic status, race, gender, etc. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Charmaz (2006) advocated for a social constructionist perspective viewing grounded theory methods as adaptable practices rather than rigid prescriptions, emphasizing the importance of considering the researcher's positionality and the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant. Her observation that "reality is multiple, processual, and constructed" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 402) served as a foundational lens for our data analysis.

The research team's positionality significantly shaped this study. Three were former or current international students, one had held a PGWP, and three identified as racialized minorities. The team included individuals who navigated immigration processes, supported international students in Canada, and explored complex migrant identities. This diverse multi-positionality enabled a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of international education and migration dynamics.

Grounded Theory Coding

After transcribing the interview data, the research team individually assigned initial codes, which were then organized chronologically to reflect the natural flow of each participant's narrative. Categories included motives for coming to Canada, quality of life reflections, and ties with the country of origin. These initial codes captured themes such as migration journeys, housing market interactions, integration into university structures, job-search experiences, and future plans, highlighting participants' preconceived notions and aspirations, and their verification through lived experiences.

During the initial coding process, it became evident that participants' shifting goals and hopes, along with their ability to act on them, significantly influenced their outcomes. Since this aligned with the aspirations and capabilities framework (de Haas, 2021), the initial codes were refined into focused codes that distinguished between aspirations and capabilities, highlighting their evolving dynamics. Codes such as "family in Canada," "previous education," and "bringing a spouse from home" emerged, along with those focused on formative early experiences in Canada,
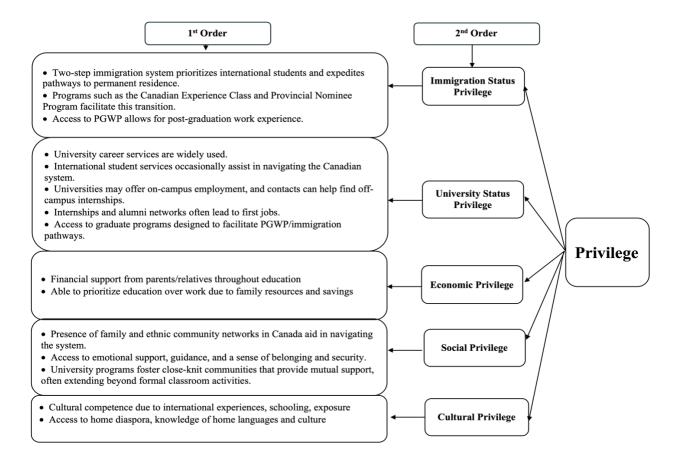
like "ideas of Canada before arrival," "interactions with student cohorts," and "housing arrangements during studies."
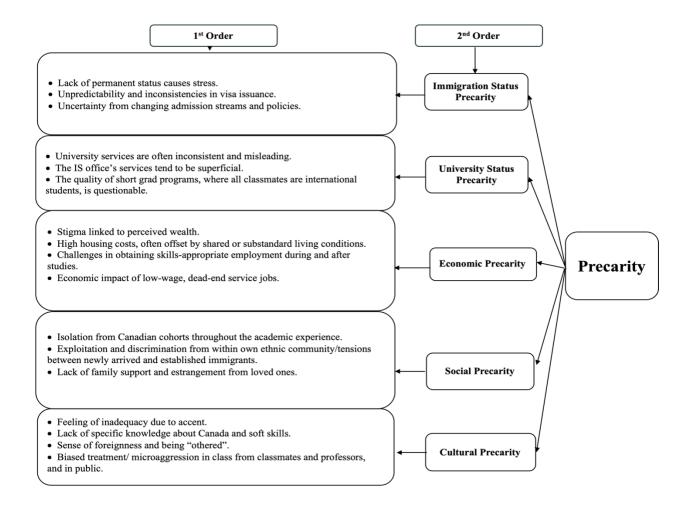
Using de Haas's aspirations-capability framework, we were able to analyze how aspirations and capabilities intersected and influenced each other. For instance, increased capabilities often reshaped aspirations, and new life goals emerged as capabilities, such as immigration status, evolved. Relative privilege and precarity were identified as pivotal in shaping capabilities and aspirations.

Findings

Figure 2 presents the outcomes of our grounded theory coding, illustrating the development of aspirations and capabilities. Participants' aspirations were largely driven by their privileged status; however, their capabilities lagged behind due to the precarious nature of their journeys. This created a complex interplay between privilege and precarity. When we examined their immigration, university, economic, cultural, and social statuses, we discovered a continuous shift between advantages and vulnerabilities within each sphere.

Figure 2: Data Structure

1st Order	2nd Order
• Lack of permanent status causes stress. • Unpredictability and inconsistencies in visa issuance. • Uncertainty from changing admission streams and policies.	Immigration Status Precarity
• University services are often inconsistent and misleading. • The IS office's services tend to be superficial. • The quality of short grad programs, where all classmates are international students, is questionable.	University Status Precarity
• Stigma linked to perceived wealth. • High housing costs, often offset by shared or substandard living conditions. • Challenges in obtaining skills-appropriate employment during and after studies. • Economic impact of low-wage, dead-end service jobs.	Economic Precarity
• Isolation from Canadian cohorts throughout the academic experience. • Exploitation and discrimination from within own ethnic community/tensions between newly arrived and established immigrants. • Lack of family support and estrangement from loved ones.	Social Precarity
• Feeling of inadequacy due to accent. • Lack of specific knowledge about Canada and soft skills. • Sense of foreignness and being "othered". • Biased treatment/ microaggression in class from classmates and professors, and in public.	Cultural Precarity

(All second-order themes point to: **Precarity**)

Immigration Status

Our participants experienced everyday precarity, even amid relative privilege, and the immigration system reinforced the simultaneous presence of both dynamics. The two-step immigration system prioritizes students' access to the Canadian labour market and offers fast-tracked pathways to PR. Participants strategically leveraged the priority given to international student graduates and were well-informed about options. One commented, "I did my numbers and I knew that just completing the MBA would give me probably close to enough points" (Interviewee 1). In the challenging Canadian landscape, such claims suggest a comfortable starting point.

At the same time, however, the immigration process – often taking years and involving extensive strategizing and documentation – was a significant source of stress. Participants said they took an intentional and well-informed approach to the process: "I was always on top of my paperwork and just showing them what they wanted to see" (19). Even so, the paperwork was never-ending: "I'm just always doing some type of application for the study permit, work permit, etc. So, I had a ton of those little pink papers" (21). To make things worse, the visa issuance process was seen as unpredictable and inconsistent: "You never know what's going to happen next" (22). A few participants said their visas did not arrive on time so they could not start their studies. In one case, a permit was issued at the last minute: "My student visa arrived literally 48 hours before my classes started" (9).

The immigration system is susceptible to global geopolitics and tensions, disproportionately impacting individuals from certain regions. One participant mentioned: "[The

conservative government was] only giving eight-month study permits to students like me [from specific countries] … I had lab mates from 'friendly' countries. They had study permits for four years" (24). Policies are also influenced by the temporary and ever-shifting agendas of the Canadian government. Reflecting on past experiences, many participants discussed their inability to accumulate Canadian experience due to either the campus-only work requirement or the 20-hours-a-week restriction. The precarity of the policy landscape was summarized as: "The policy keeps changing so if you want to do something you need to do as quickly as you can" (13).

University Status

Our focal population, university students, is often viewed as privileged, in contrast to community college or private college students or other temporary migrants. This status grants them access to specific services, such as high-quality career resources, that other migrants may not have. Such services, one participant said, "provide a lot of information to help us to find the opportunity, because as newcomers to Canada we don't know where to find the information … It's really a good information resource. Help us to start our career in Canada" (18). However, many participants perceived these services as inadequate. Despite their intended purpose of providing support, they frequently failed to address their comprehensive needs:

> The only encounter I had with the career services at the University left me a little bit disappointed. I ended up finding my own path alone. I think what the career services offered was a bit narrow-minded in terms of thinking very locally. I wanted blue chip companies. I wanted international experiences. And they were thinking, "What if we got sort of within walking distance to the university." (2)

For a few participants university contacts facilitated access to off-campus jobs: "[My professor] told me about an internship. I applied to and I got that. That was a paid internship. I did that over the summer. They didn't have a job after the internship, but … they were able to connect me with another job" (19). Universities also create tailored 'extension programs' such as one-year masters' programs or graduate certificates that specifically enable international students to qualify for the PGWP and smoothly transition to PR. One participant said: "As a master's student, I don't even need to find a job to get an offer. I just need to graduate from a master's program, and I can apply for PR through the provincial nominee program. So that was very, very easy actually" (18). Several acknowledged they took advantage of such programs to speed up their transition to PR. Despite the relative ease of obtaining advanced degrees and swiftly acquiring PR, extension programs have challenges. Several participants said the curriculum quality is often unsatisfactory and lacks rigour.

The heterogeneous experiences linked to university status significantly affected how participants assessed the quality of their education. The variations created disparities in student success, influencing their perceptions of capability building throughout their educational journey.

Economic Status

The economic status of participants reflected a duality, a source of both privilege and precarity. On the one hand, financial support from family enabled them to pursue higher education and focus on their academic goals. On the other hand, these advantages were tempered by challenges, including housing insecurity and employment difficulties.

Most said scholarships are scarce, leaving international students to bear the burden of high tuition fees. Only one participant mentioned receiving a small entrance scholarship that

provided temporary relief (19). The same participant expressed gratitude for parental support, acknowledging it allowed her to pursue her education without financial strain: "Thankfully, my parents were able to support me throughout the duration of the program" (19).

The presence of extended family and ethnic communities in Canada alleviated the financial burden for many participants. Some benefited from free accommodation provided by relatives. One participant stated: "My sibling who lives in Canada said, 'Why don't you just come to Canada? Even if you don't get a scholarship, you can live with us. So we will cover all your living expenses'" (5). Financial support from family allowed students to focus exclusively on their studies: "I wanted to work, but my dad said don't work at all. He stopped me, he said, 'I'm supporting you so, here's the money, just focus on what you're supposed to do, get it done, get good grades and that's it" (36). However, financial privilege was sometimes accompanied by stigma and the assumption of wealth. As one participant noted, "I asked how to get a job on campus, and they said, 'You're already paying international tuition, so you don't need it'" (32).

Even those with economic advantages encountered challenges securing affordable housing, particularly in metropolitan areas where universities are located. The high cost and limited availability of student housing often compelled participants to seek alternative arrangements. Many chose to live with relatives to reduce living expenses, despite lengthy commutes on public transport. However, geographic or familial constraints could limit this option, forcing students to seek accommodation with peers or acquaintances. Shared rental arrangements were common, with students relying on newfound connections to secure housing quickly, reflecting a sense of desperation. For some, individual rooms in substandard conditions, such as illegally converted basement apartments, become the only available option, highlighting economic hardships and precarious living conditions. One participant said: "I was able to secure a place to stay for a week or two through some contacts. Then during orientation, I met some classmates and we rented an apartment together for the year" (25). Another recounted: "At the beginning of half year, I moved four times. The first time was in [City M] but then because they cancelled the [public transit line], I moved again into [City V] … And the landlord was trying to sell the house, so moved again" (31).

Despite their aspirations for meaningful employment, participants mentioned barriers to skills-appropriate jobs. Many found themselves relegated to low-paying positions within the service sector, even those in STEM fields. The mismatch between educational backgrounds and available job opportunities led to prolonged job searches and compromises in employment quality. For instance, a chemical engineering student (27) worked as a sales associate for a year before securing a research assistant position in a related field.

In short, while some of our participants had strong financial support systems, notably familial and community resources, they also reported economic hardships, including high housing costs and limited access to employment aligning with their qualifications.

Cultural Status

Our participants tended to possess significant cultural capital, largely due to the transnational nature of their families. Many mentioned visiting Canada and other Western countries before their studies, and were confident of their understanding of Canadian culture. They capitalized on their unique cultural backgrounds and the diversity of Canadian society. One participant mentioned the benefit of being trilingual in the job market (36). She was able conduct focus groups in multiple languages and was a valuable asset to clients interested in reaching diverse markets. Another reported getting an internship as a student mainly because the employer shared a similar cultural background (34).

Despite their cultural capital, participants noted a sense of cultural precariousness. Beyond typical culture shock, they frequently felt inferior to their domestic peers. While many possessed adequate language skills, they struggled to understand dialects and colloquial

expressions and to participate in class discussions. Moreover, their accents could contribute to feelings of being singled out or marginalized. Participants in certain majors experienced heightened feelings of status precarity due to gaps in cultural knowledge specific to Canada. One felt exposed after receiving a very low score on a Canadian history quiz and being singled out by the professor. Others reported instances of their home country's culture or norms being viewed negatively in Canada. For example, one participant felt alienated by a professor who criticized aspects of their home country during a comparative class (3). The emphasis on "Canadianness" heightened perceptions of cultural inferiority. One participant said students from racialized groups were advised to change their names to more "generic English names" to improve their chances of a job interview (30). Many said they felt compelled to accept unpaid internships or other exploitative jobs to gain Canadian experience, which was highly valued by employers (1 & 35).

The challenges of cultural integration extended beyond the classroom, affecting participants throughout their education and into their professional journeys. The ongoing struggle manifested in various aspects of daily interactions, particularly in service-oriented jobs where disrespectful, discriminatory, even violently aggressive behaviours from customers towards employees with foreign accents or racialized minorities were common. Several participants mentioned challenges socializing with coworkers due to culturally exclusive professional norms in Canada that go against the cultural and religious norms of their home countries; this impacted their social integration within the workplace (19). Perceptions of cultural inferiority could also be subtly reinforced through seemingly positive interactions. One participant recounted receiving what was initially perceived as a compliment, only to later recognize it as a covert form of cultural discrimination:

> They were complimenting me, they said, "Well, yeah, you're different. You're not an average [Country I] student." And at the time, I was very happy about that because I received that as a compliment, and it took me years to reflect on that to realize that one. It was my own internalized racism towards people from where I come from, that made me feel good about being better than or being not average [my country] person. (30)

Social Status

Participants reported instances of both social privilege and social precarity. On the one hand, they profited from their unique social positions. Many had extended families, and ethnic community networks in Canada. These support networks helped them navigate the system, providing resources in housing, immigration, visa application, and employment opportunities. Beyond material support, they brought a sense of belonging and security, offering participants a 'home away from home, during the holiday periods' (35). In addition, participants often benefited from their university networks, such as student affinity groups. Many postgraduate university programs are "tightly knit" due to a significantly higher percentage of international students, as one participant observed: "Everyone, almost everyone knew everyone. We all kind of shared notes and our views" (6). This interrelated student network created close support, helping them with many practical issues, such as immigration applications. One participant recounted: "We're going through [the immigration application] together and we would joke around. There were only 500 [provincial] nominees of which we were ten of them" (6). Another noted: "I was very lucky that some of my friends and classmates, who did the PR application a few months before I did, were very helpful. They just asked me to send them documents and then viewed them" (5).

On the other hand, participants mentioned social precarities. One said she felt like a "leaf in the sea" (31), signifying her profound sense of vulnerability and disorientation. Many did not connect with domestic students. One participant noted:

The Canadian-born students were not as close as the rest of the cohort. They also bonded together from day one. They did a lot of things together like what they called the Canadian or non-international cohort, even though we were in the same classroom, and we did some of the activities together and so on. (1)

Some even felt isolated from their ethnic communities, exacerbated by co-ethnic discrimination. One participant shared the following co-ethnic racist encounter:

She [the landlord] was like, "Oh, you should be lucky that I am charging so much less money as compared to the other basement rentals. When I came here the basement I rented. It has rats in it, and I had to, you know. I was sleeping on the floor." I said, "Ma'am, times have changed. You came here 30 years ago. This is 2018. You are not supposed to do this." (22)

The interviewee further elaborated on another similar experience:

It was a cleaning company, … there was this old lady. She has been working in the same company for almost, I guess, 20 years or so. So, she was talking to me … "Oh, yeah, my daughter, she works at a bank … My daughter wouldn't do this [job]. Obviously, my daughter wouldn't work at a restaurant because she's born here." (22)

These examples highlight exploitation within ethnic communities, arguably expressive of the resentment and sense of superiority that earlier-generation immigrants may feel towards newly arrived students.

Some participants mentioned feeling estranged from and abandoned by parents and loved ones due to physical distance and misunderstandings. One participant said his family saw him as an underachiever: "My wife always says that 'Everybody moving up, what's wrong with you?'" (16). Another said: "I took a job as a barista … I don't think I ever told my mom, because she would have been like 'You have a master's and you're a barista,' and I'm like, 'You got to do what you got to do'" (33). A third expressed emotional turmoil because of the absence of physical contact with family: "Even if I could call my parents, if something was very bad, and I needed to cry on a shoulder. They're not there" (33).

When Privilege Meets Precarity: Does PR Bridge the Gap?

PR was viewed by many interviewees as a strategic response to the various dimensions of precarity, bringing international students closer to the benefits enjoyed by domestic students. PR status allows individuals to live, work, and study in Canada indefinitely, as long as they meet specific residency obligations. Importantly, it enables students to pay domestic tuition rates and more easily access funding, research grants, and professional licenses, thus enhancing their educational and career opportunities. PR also grants access to public healthcare, thereby eliminating the need for private insurance.

A significant number of participants indicated that their primary motivation for studying in Canada was to facilitate their migration process, viewing education as a means to that end. This does not suggest that they did not value education; rather, they specifically chose Canada as their destination because it offered the advantage of a pathway PR. One stated, "The main [reason] was to move to Canada. Education was a means to reach that goal" (16). Another echoed, "My entire program was working through the process of how to get permanent residence as quickly as possible" (21). For some, the decision to study in Canada was a trial period to assess their

compatibility with the country, reflecting the same pragmatic approach. This "one foot in and one foot out" mentality was indicative of their privileged position, allowing them the flexibility to return to their home country or a third country if their experiences in Canada did not meet their expectations. As one participant said, "If we discover that we don't like it. We will just go back and continue life. Life in [my home country] was fine. It was good. But we wanted something better, if possible" (16). A similar mindset led many to apply for work permits and PR after graduation so they could "give [them]selves a period of time to try to really live in Canada as a resident here to see how it works" (18). The narratives underscored the flexibility afforded by their privileged circumstances, allowing them to approach the potential for permanent migration with a level of cautious optimism and openness to various outcomes.

For other participants, the reason for coming to Canada was purely educational. One mentioned a lack of personal choice in the decision, attributing it to parental direction: "Canada wasn't really a choice of mine … My dad said, 'That's where you're going,' and I said, 'Well so be it'" (33). As they continued their education, some decided to pursue immigration based on a blend of factors, including peer influence, their own experiences, and the relatively low costs to apply for PR status. Others adopted a more ambivalent stance, undecided about whether to return to their home country or stay in Canada post-graduation, allowing their experiences and opportunities in Canada to guide their eventual decision: "I did not have a fixed plan to certainly come back to [my home country], or to certainly stay in Canada, so I left it open, and it just developed" (14). A small number had the additional responsibility of paving the way for other family members who wished to study or live in Canada in the future.

Ten of the 36 interviewees were no longer living in Canada. Notably, nine participants chose not to apply for PR. One reflected: "I'm very happy with the education I received. I loved the city, the people were all very friendly, I would recommend it. To me, it just ended up not feeling like home, which is why I left" (2). Another participant, despite successfully acquiring PR, also left the country. This individual, who wanted to start a business, found Canada too restrictive for their entrepreneurial ambitions. They explained, "That's when it dawned on me that it's in the Canadian mindset to be a worker. And there's nothing wrong with that. I'm not criticizing that necessarily. It's just not my mindset, and it's not where I belong … But I'm not a worker bee. So that's when I started realizing that Canada wasn't a good fit for me" (3).

Individuals who transitioned from international student to permanent resident often acknowledged the benefits that came with their new status. Yet the interviews revealed a persistent challenge: fully integrating into Canadian society. One participant stated, "It is still difficult to become a real Canadian. For a person who came from another country. I don't know why" (16). Participants also felt Canada was more of a transient phase than a permanent home: "It didn't feel like a settled community" (2); "I never felt like [Canada] was home. I think it was really like, passage" (10). One participant expressed a profound sense of social disconnection, "I do not feel I belong in the city. Yes, I have friends … Yes, professionally. I am connected to almost 500 people on LinkedIn, but that does not give me the sense of belonging to this [country] … I have to think about how it's going outside" (22). These reflections underline a common theme among our participants: while the legal and economic benefits were clear to them, feeling fully part of Canadian society was challenging.

A large part of this challenge was attributed to lingering effects of their precarious education and pre-migration experience. Some described feeling like perpetual "tourists" (9), unable to shake the sense of being outsiders despite being well-integrated on the surface. One said, "I still think of myself as a foreigner. Even though I'm fairly well integrate … I also don't feel Canadian" (32). Others described developing a hybrid identity, caught between cultures and not belonging to either: "I am a translator but like not actually in either" (32). This sense of being in-between suggests a blending of their original and adopted cultures, yet not fully integrating into the Canadian identity. This process seemed particularly complex for individuals who did not fit neatly into certain categories; one participant reflected on the ambiguity regarding his minority

status due to his appearance: "I do not visibly appear as a minority, although I do come from a third-world country … I always had that problem of trying to determine … do I qualify as a minority, or do I not?" (35).

Deeper anxieties about adapting to life in Canada emerged as well, not just in the present but well into the future, and participants questioned the feasibility of building a permanent and secure life in Canada. Many retained a strong connection to their home countries, even as their memories and feelings towards their homeland evolved:

> Will I get accustomed to the lifestyle here? I would say so. I went back home for three months, and I was not able to feel the same way … You want to get the same feeling that you had in the past, but it won't be the same. It is never going to be the same. (22)

One participant contemplated the practical challenges of aging in a foreign country: "This is [fine] for right now. So how is it going to be when I am 75 and I have to go to the grocery shop and maybe fall because of the ice or something like that" (8).

Participants' resources and mobility influenced their long-term plans, with many viewing the acquisition of PR or citizenship as a strategic stepping-stone towards broader global opportunities, rather than a commitment to settle permanently in Canada. The perspective that a Canadian passport or PR status provided a wider range of options was a common theme. As one participant succinctly put it, "If I get a PR. It doesn't mean that I have to stay here, but it gives me options" (24). Another shared, "Most of the immigrants think that they'll get the passport and go back home. I thought the same thing … there's no harm in that" (36). Another expressed a sentiment of flexibility and openness to living in different parts of the world, provided by a Canadian passport:

> Once I get my Canadian passport and I don't have to deal with visa stuff, I am open to evaluating life in other parts of the country or other parts of the world. But yes, my home base is always going to be Canada. But I'm open to experiencing life in other ways and other places once I have the Canadian protection and stuff. (30)

This view reflects a pragmatic approach to immigration to leverage the benefits of Canadian status for future mobility, viewing Canadian status as a valuable asset rather than an endpoint. Highly mobile FIS such as our participants may evaluate their options in a global context, ready to pursue the best opportunities for personal and professional growth, wherever that may lead them. Even among those who had chosen to stay in Canada for the time being, the spirit of adventure remained alive. One participant said: "I've lived in multiple different places and countries. I always have wanderlust and the itch to travel and move and have new experiences and stuff. And I've been in Canada for a long time now" (19). It seemed the security offered by PR acted as a catalyst, giving participants confidence and a "safety blanket" to explore and embark on new adventures, knowing they had a stable base to return to.

For some participants who initially came to Canada to fulfil their family's aspirations, obtaining PR was a pivotal moment of autonomy and self-determination, allowing them to prioritize their own desires. One stated:

> Okay, it's time that I do something just for me. I can leave now. They're okay, so I will leave … I didn't choose Canada. My dad came and thought it was the best place. So, I've always thought of Canada as I have more of a business-like relationship rather than with my home country. (33)

Her comment highlights the complex emotions and decisions of those navigating their identities and futures in the context of migration, family expectations, and personal aspirations.

In sum, the privilege and precarity of these international university students-turned-immigrants shaped their commitment to integration. The mindset of keeping options open reflected a broader perspective: "Who knows, the wind can blow any way" (6). While they had certain advantages, such as access to education and an easy pathway to PR, these benefits were accompanied by challenges related to their precarious status, including the complexities of the immigration system, adapting to a new cultural environment, and the difficulties of transitioning to the Canadian job market and society.

Discussion

The participants in our study navigated a complex combination of privilege and precarity, influenced by various factors, including immigration regimes, educational institutions, economic position, cultural capital, and social networks. While both aspirations and capabilities played crucial roles in determining their experiences of privilege and precarity within these themes, understanding their experiences requires critically assessing and extending de Haas's aspirations-capabilities framework. The framework overlooks the complicated narratives of skilled migrants such as university graduates: simply stated, their narratives do not always take a linear trajectory from aspiring to move, to achieving PR status, to establishing a new life in the host country, such as Canada. Nor does it focus on the process through which newcomers are continuously asking themselves 'Is it really worth it?', making and remaking their decisions based on a dynamic and multidimensional set of variables.

Our findings suggest that the aspirations component of the framework, while capturing the voice or agency of migrants, must also account for the bounded agency that shapes these aspirations. Bounded agency recognizes that while individuals are not powerless, they are also not fully autonomous, as their actions are always situated within a network of enabling and constraining factors. The aspirations of international students are therefore influenced not only by their personal goals but also by constraints such as convenience, familial opinions and obligations, broader social structures, and political contexts. These factors often lead them to make decisions that are satisfactory rather than optimal, reflecting the limitations inherent in their decision-making processes.

In this context, the capabilities aspect crosses over into the aspirations element, blurring the lines between them. The primary objective of international students may be to secure the opportunities that are readily available, guided by the belief that pursuing attainable goals (such as obtaining PR status in Canada) will remove the limitations of precarious status and enable upward mobility. However, the assumption underpinning the aspirations-capabilities framework—that the host country is invariably a desired destination—requires scrutiny. This assumption presupposes migrants will consistently aspire to immigrate and settle in the country, without accounting for factors such as disillusionment, evolving preferences, or curiosity about alternative opportunities. The oversimplified assumption of Canada's universal appeal diminishes the role of personal growth and evolution experienced by international students during their years of study and post-graduate work. It also obscures the complexities of evolving policy dynamics, university experiences, and labour market conditions.

This study had some limitations. First, as we mentioned, researcher bias based on our positionalities could have influenced the data coding. Second, theoretical sampling, aimed at achieving data saturation rather than representativeness, may not fully capture the diversity of FIS experiences in Canada. The results are therefore not representative of students graduating from other post-secondary institutions such as community colleges. Third, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of inaccuracies or recall biases, as participants may have interpreted and presented their experiences in ways that aligned with their personal narratives or social desirability. The participants came from 23 source countries with diverse socio-cultural

understandings of family, migration, and education. Their varied understandings of Canadian laws, culture, and citizenship may have influenced their decisions to stay or leave. Finally, while we included a mixed-gender pool, we did not specifically examine the impact of gender roles on participants' experiences and decisions. Traditional gender roles and familial responsibilities vary across cultures. Exploring the intersections of gender, culture, and migration could have enriched the findings.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

It is crucial for immigration policy to consider the agency of migrants. Skilled immigrants, even those educated in Canada, often do not stay permanently. In the global labour market, graduates' aspirations are not confined to one location; Canada is merely one of many options. Thus, it is unsurprising that PR status is the 'sweet spot' for immigrants. It represents a balance between the achievement of landing (with acquisition of certain rights similar to those held by Canadians) and a lack of full commitment. This dynamic may partially explain the paradox wherein immigrants continue to apply for PR status in record numbers, while onward migration rates are increasing (Bérard-Chagnon et al., 2024) and citizenship acquisition rates are declining (Hou & Picot, 2024).

To address the issue of immigrants' agency and their global aspirations, Canada needs to design a more robust system to welcome newcomers. The system should better integrate post-secondary educational institutions, the immigration system, and the labour market. The entire ecosystem of "becoming Canadian" needs better coordination and greater transparency, adopting a more customer-oriented approach. Canada should strive to maintain immigration policy stability by developing and maintaining immigration programs targeting international university students. These programs should be designed for continuity, with a comprehensive, long-term plan in place to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

The role of post-secondary institutions is critical. Adequate government funding and oversight could prevent institutions from relying on international students to offset budgetary constraints, fostering a genuine commitment to the educational and professional development of these students. For example, offering more opportunities for work-integrated learning might significantly improve the retention and transition of international students into the Canadian workforce, slowing or halting the depletion of this valuable talent pool and contributing significantly to Canada's economic and social development.

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