



# The Education-Immigration Nexus: Situating Canadian Higher Education as Institutions of Immigrant Recruitment

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Accepted: 24 April 2023 / Published online: 27 May 2023  
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## Abstract

A policy shift in the mid-2000s established a pathway between international study and immigration to Canada. Designed to facilitate the settlement of young, highly skilled, and Canadian-trained workers, these pathways are premised on the conception of international students as ideal immigrants. Yet, because higher education institutions enjoy wide latitude when it comes to selecting and admitting international students, this education-immigration nexus has gained scholarly attention and sparked an immigration and settlement debate. What are the implications of having an uncapped temporary foreign worker stream administered by higher education institutions? What are the downstream effects for graduates, employers, and communities as the higher education sector accepts greater numbers of international students every year? What does this mean for the composition of Canadian immigration in the longer term? This paper will highlight the importance and relationship between study, labor market access, and immigration to Canada, consider the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions in multi-step pathways to immigration, and discuss implications and future strategies which acknowledge the reality of this education-immigration nexus.

**Keywords** International students · Higher education · Immigration · Labor market integration · Canada

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## Introduction

The number of international students enrolled in Canadian post-secondary institutions has grown significantly in the past 20 years. Between 2001 and 2022, the number of holders of a valid study permit increased from 145,950 to over 807,750 (Government of Canada, 2022a). This increase is attributed to several push and pull factors that reflect a worldwide increase in border mobility for study purposes as well as national-level policy implementation in Canada more specifically (Bhandari et al., 2020). One important driver relevant to this study is the targeted recruitment efforts of higher education institutions (HEIs), along with provincial and federal government investments, to attract international students to study in Canada. A policy shift in the mid-2000s established a link between study in Canada and off-campus labor market access, first on a temporary basis and later through specific pathways to permanent immigration. This link between education and immigration is argued to facilitate the settlement of young, highly skilled “ideal” immigrants and these changes have not only translated into an increase in international students but have resulted in fundamental changes to the profile of both temporary foreign workers and, increasingly, permanent residents and naturalized citizens in Canada. Since a study permit in Canada carries with it temporary work authorization (part-time during studies and full-time during study breaks),<sup>1</sup> international students now exceed all other categories of temporary foreign workers admitted to Canada (Government of Canada, 2022b). As a result, the proportion of permanent residents who have studied as an international student in Canada continues to rise.

This education-immigration nexus raises important questions for immigration in Canada. What are the implications of giving higher education institutions the power to administer what is essentially an uncapped temporary foreign worker stream? What are the downstream effects for graduates, employers, and communities as the higher education sector accepts steadily increasing numbers of international students? Higher education institutions are admitting international students based not only on their own admissions criteria but also on the ability of prospective students to pay differential tuition fees which impacts not only who can study but also who can access preferential pathways to immigration (Brunner, 2017). What are the implications of international student recruitment for the composition of Canadian immigration in the longer term? While post-secondary education providers in Canada are de facto gatekeepers of an immigration pathway, they admit students according to their own institutional goals and objectives. Given the substantive impact that these institutions have, what responsibilities should they bear as participants and major beneficiaries of the now-existing connection between education and immigration? Sabzalieva et al. (2022) highlight the paradoxes in the current literature that

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<sup>1</sup> On October 7, 2022, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced that it was lifting the 20-h-per-week cap on the number of hours that eligible post-secondary international students are allowed to work off-campus during academic studies. The pilot will run from November 15, 2022, until December 31, 2023. IRCC cited the opportunity for international students to gain additional work experience and address labor shortages (IRCC, 2022).

at once sees international students as ideal immigrants while documenting their challenges to move successfully from study to migration pathways. This increasing intertwining of higher education and immigration is also explored in the work of Brunner (2021) in which the term “edugration” is introduced as a way to describe a distinct three-step immigration process which begins as a student, is followed by temporary worker status, and often results in immigration. Brunner calls for a more multi/interdisciplinary systemic engagement of this specific form of immigration that draws from literatures in both higher education and migration studies.

The link between study, work, and immigration is a recent phenomenon. Prior to 2001, international students did not have the right to work off-campus during their studies and could remain in Canada after graduation for one year only, and only in a related field (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2001). If international students wished to stay in Canada, they were required to leave and apply from abroad through a traditional foreign skilled migration program. In other words, the study-migration link had yet to be established. In contrast, today, international students that meet eligibility requirements (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2022b) receive work authorization without study-related employment restrictions and can seek off-campus employment more generally during their studies. They further receive up to 3 years of open post-graduation work authorization as well as preferential and specific immigration pathways that facilitate a permanent stay in Canada without having to leave the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, study permit holders received a range of exceptions and concessions allowing them access to postgraduate work rights even if their studies were conducted online, something which had not been allowed in the past. The government further provided one-time fast-track immigration pathways to permanent residence. Government policy now strongly supports a study-work-migration link in both rhetoric and practice. The increasing importance and interconnectedness of study, labor market access, and immigration thus raise questions about the role and responsibilities of higher education institutions as mediators of multi-step pathways to immigration in Canada. This paper examines the implications of this education-immigration nexus for policymakers and the post-secondary education sector and considers its future impacts on policymaking.

## The Dynamics of International Student Mobility

International students are targeted by several Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries as a source of skilled labor. These countries, including Canada, have initiated national and regional level promotion strategies to support the transition from temporary to permanent resident status (Hawthorne, 2010). Active recruitment of international students has contributed to consistent global growth over the past 20 years. In 2001, there were 2.1 million students learning across borders, growing to 6.1 million tertiary students worldwide by 2019 (OECD, 2021). While Canada’s share of international students also increased, mirroring a global trend, its overall share increased far more dramatically. Between 2014 and 2019, Canada’s share grew by 6%, which is double that of the 3% average OECD increase (OECD, 2021).

Given its growth and increasing prominence, the literature on international student migration is expanding, with three major lines of inquiry relevant to the current discussion. First, a traditional body of research explores the motivations of international students. A second line of research looks at the trajectories and outcomes of immigrants with international (host country) study experience. Finally, there is emerging research on the study-to-migration continuum which includes networks and multi-step immigration pathways. In addition to these general themes, recent scholarly work on international students and graduates in Canada, including their immigration pathways and outcomes, also informs this research.

There are many factors that influence the decision to pursue international study (Marrazol & Soutar, 2002). The global pattern of international student flows is explained by a combination of “push and pull” factors that encourage students to study overseas. “Push” factors operate within the home country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study. These scholars offer a range of explanations for what is driving students to leave their home country to study. “Pull” factors operate within a host country to make it attractive for international students to study there (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Some push factors include a lack of access to higher education and perceptions of the quality of higher education systems in the home country. These factors are also often tied to Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of “cultural capital” in which an international degree is seen as more prestigious or more valuable than one from the home country. This is particularly important when graduates return home and realize an advantage in the local labor market (Waters, 2006). Agarwal and Winkler (1985) also found access to be a principal push driver as well as the per capita income in the home country and the expected economic benefits of studying abroad. A refinement of these concepts suggests that as per capita income rises, there is an expansion of the middle-class population which translates into a related increase in student mobility (Sato, 2021).

Policies governing the ability of international students to work in a host country are cited as an important pull factor in the decision of where to study internationally, as does the ability to obtain work experience after graduation. Work opportunities are seen, however, as more influential for students from certain countries than from others, with students from Asia, and particularly India, noted to be especially motivated by the opportunity for post-graduation work (Bhandari et al., 2020). In fact, the ability to access a host country’s labor force correlates to the rise and fall of international student numbers in several international student-receiving countries. In the USA, a policy change in 2016 increased the post-graduation Optional Practical Training (OPT) program from 12 to 36 months for international student graduates in the Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Medical (STEM) fields, resulting in a surge in international student admissions and OPT participation in those fields (Ruiz & Budiman, 2018). In fact, the number of international STEM graduates participating in OPT grew by over 400% between 2008 and 2016 while the number of non-STEM graduates grew by only 88% over the same time (Ruiz & Budiman, 2018). There is also evidence that the policy change induced some international students to select STEM programs following the OPT change who may have otherwise sought different academic programs (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2019). When the UK made

changes limiting post-study work visas following graduation, Indian student enrolments fell by nearly 50% from 2011 to 2014, while their numbers increased by 70% in Australia, and 37% in the USA in the same period (Project Atlas, 2022). The UK policy was reversed in 2021 in response to falling enrolments allowing international graduates at the undergraduate and masters level to work post-graduation for 2 years and those with a doctoral degree for 3 years (UK Government, 2021).

The recruitment of international students by educational institutions is another pull factor that features prominently, whether as a result of institutional prestige, high rankings, or by special academic offerings or supports catering to international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This is related to increasing the overall awareness and knowledge of a potential host country and institution (Mazzorol, 1998). Personal referrals, recommendations, or approvals from parents, friends, and relatives also play a critical role (Geibel, 2020).

These traditional “push” and “pull” factors are complemented and expanded in the works of Abbott and Silles (2016) and Wen and Hu (2019) who point out that geographic distance to the home country is also a factor in selecting where to study and that as competition for international students expands, regional education hubs are emerging that challenge the idea of mobility exclusively to Western developed countries. More recently, Bhandari et al. (2020) argued that the factors driving international student mobility are best grouped by levels or stakeholders including the individual, institutional, national, and global levels. Irrespective of the labels used, there are a number of different reasons people choose to study internationally. Scholarship has established that immigration pathways are not the only factor in deciding in which country to study. Access to robust and well-paying differential labor markets and differentials in education capacity including institutional prestige and facilities are also considered to be key determinants (Weisser, 2016) along with non-economic factors including a country’s political stability, safety, environment, and quality of life (UNESCO, 2010). The perceived quality of instruction abroad and the perceived value of host institutions are other criteria international students and their families use when selecting their country of destination (Abbott & Silles, 2016). So while host country work experience and opportunities to immigrate are important factors in the decision to study international, they are not the only drivers in the selection of the study country destination.

In addition to the literature that explores why people choose to study internationally and the factors that drive this decision-making process, a second line of inquiry explores the trajectories and outcomes of those participating in an international study experience (Kim & Sondhi, 2019). These studies provide important insight into the experiences of those who select and find success in pursuing a study-migration pathway, and in understanding the obstacles and decision-making process of those who do not. Some also attempt to identify factors which can predict the migration outcomes of international student graduates (Hou & Lu, 2017).

Factors such as level of degree, geographic region of origin, and main funding source have been related to migration outcomes (Gupta et al., 2016). Hazen and Alberts (2006) found that whereas economic and professional factors were associated with international graduates remaining, personal and societal factors pushed them to return. Other associated factors include the gap in the unemployment rate

between the home and host country as a factor in staying in the host countries (Roh, 2015), along with the variation of stay rates of graduates in different disciplines and fields of study (Calder et al., 2016; Kim, 2011; Hawthorne, 2018; McGill, 2018; Walton-Roberts & Hennebry, 2019).

Post-study work experience in the host country is also often part of the continuum of a longer-term migration process (Tran et al., 2020). Studies related to the employment of international graduates find evidence for employer preferences for domestic graduates over international graduates and cite language proficiency, understanding of workplace culture, and uncertainties related to visa status for the differences in hiring between these two groups (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). The challenge of securing employment becomes an important factor in the multi-step transition process that is part of the education-migration nexus (Hawthorne, 2010).

While most migration theories focus on migrants and their motivations for mobility, there is an emerging line of inquiry related to the institutions and networks involved in the study-migration continuum. This research examines the role and institutional characteristics of the education-migration industry (Baas, 2019; Sidhu, 2002). Within the education-migration industry, there is a range of actors and institutions, including government, employers, universities, regulatory bodies, migrant organizations, and facilitators such as lawyers, agents, and consultants all negotiating to achieve their own objectives (Birrell & Perry, 2009; Salt, 2011). Government responses and policy contexts that create multi-step processes of migration for international students play a pivotal role in international student recruitment activities and the services of the other actors (Hawthorne, 2012; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). The study-migration continuum and related policies and incentives are also presented in several comparative studies, particularly those of leading receiving countries that include the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014; Gopal, 2016; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018).

Universities are seen as key actors in the internationalization of education and are active participants in these networks where the linkage of study and migration is increasingly in their interests, both from an academic and business perspective (Brunner, 2017; Salt, 2011; Schinnerl, 2021). Tamitik et al. (2020) concur that international education is becoming a core area of Canadian public policy which challenges not only the traditional roles and responsibilities of different levels of government but also the roles and purpose of the higher education sector.

In the Canadian context, Sweetman and Warman's (2014) work on the earning and employment outcomes of immigrants who held Canadian study or work experience examined different pathway options. They correctly predicted that new immigration pathways (the Canadian Experience Class) would dramatically increase the proportion of economic immigrants who are former international students. Lu (2015) looked at the characteristics of those international students who went on to become permanent residents in Canada and found that 25% of study permit holders between 2000 and 2004 had transitioned to permanent residence after 10 years. A similar study conducted by Choi et al. (2021b) as an update to Lu's work found that rates of transition to permanent residency for international students vary by sociodemographic characteristics, such as sex, age, level of study, destination province, and source country. They also found that

the rates of transition were stable across cohorts but noted that the time from when the first study permit was issued to obtaining permanent residence was increasing. The study also demonstrated that 29% of international students transition to permanent residence 15 years from arrival compared to 22% of first-time work permit holders who had arrived in the early 2000s.

This transition research is part of a recent series of studies conducted in collaboration with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) which looks at international students as a source of labour supply. These studies further examine the sociodemographic characteristics of international students (Choi et al., 2021a), their engagement in the labor market both during their studies (Crossman et al., 2021b) and after graduation (Choi et al., 2021c), and the relationship between pre-immigration study in Canada and post-immigration earnings (Crossman & Hou, 2022). This research finds that, in Canada, the share of international students studying at the diploma level within colleges and the masters' level within universities has increased relative to other program categories, while there has been an increase in concentration in the source countries of international students. The share of international students from the top 10 source countries increased to represent 75% of the international student population arriving between 2015 and 2019, compared with 68% for the cohort of international students arriving between 2000 and 2004. India and China were the top two source countries accounting for 34.4% and 16.5% of total international student admissions between 2015 and 2019. Combined, these two countries alone represent more than half of all international students admitted during this period (Crossman et al., 2021b). The series demonstrates that the Canadian federal government has a vested interest in international students as a pool of both temporary and permanent skilled labor that can contribute to both national and regional-level labour force growth.

There has indeed been significant policy change and a clear strengthening of the study-migration link in Canada which is part of a larger shift to expand immigration pathways for those transitioning from temporary status to permanent residence. In 2014, the Government of Canada launched the International Education Strategy (2014–2019), stating that international students are an important future source of skilled labor as they may be eligible for permanent residency through immigration programs after graduation (Government of Canada, 2014). This means that student selection by HEIs has an important downstream impact on the sociodemographic characteristics of the labour pool and of potential candidates for permanent residency and, subsequently, citizenship (Crossman et al., 2021a; Daily et al., 2010). This profound policy shift in treating international students as future immigrants requires us to pay greater attention to the role and purpose of higher education institutions in the selection and successful transition of international students to temporary workers and, eventually, permanent residents.

## The Evolution of Canada's Study-Migration Link

As a starting point in explaining the evolution of study and migration in Canada, we need to first understand the arc of international student enrolments over time. A 1986 publication on foreign students by the Council of Ministers of Education



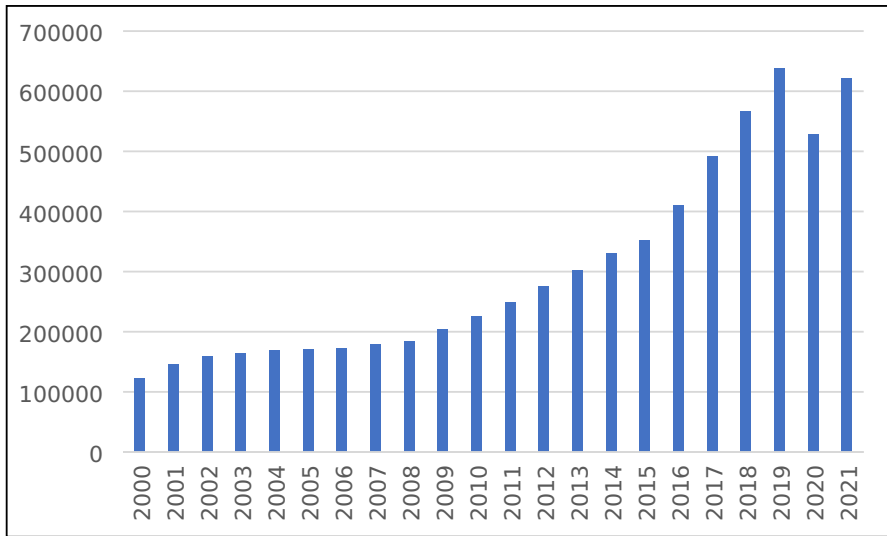
(CMEC) describes Canadian post-secondary institutions of attempting little organized recruitment of foreign students. A few institutions had advertised in foreign newspapers and a handful had sent representatives abroad. International student mobility during this time was mostly facilitated through the financial support of sending governments or donor agencies. Admission requirements for foreign students varied significantly as most institutions either restricted out-of-province applications or gave preference to, first, in-province applicants, second, out-of-province Canadians, and only then foreign students (CMEC, 1986). However, the 1990s marked increased international student recruitment activity by Canadian institutions of higher education in the face of both funding cuts and the deregulation of international student tuition rates (McCartney, 2021).

By 2007, Canada was considered an evolving destination for international study along with Japan and New Zealand (Dennis, 2013). Still, while attracting a modest number of international students, Canada continued to be eclipsed by major players which included the USA, the UK, and Australia, as well Germany and France. By 2013, Canada was considered a new player that had emerged in the international education market, increasing its market share to 5% in 2011 (OECD, 2014), a time when some of the most popular destinations, including the USA, the UK, and Germany, saw enrolment declines. Between 2015 and 2016, there was a substantial increase of 14.4% in international student enrolments in Canada, most of which was attributed to an increase in students from India studying at the college level (Kunin, 2017). This increase in international student enrolments translated into major economic benefits. By 2018, international students in Canada accounted for close to 170,000 jobs and \$21.6 billion of gross domestic product (GDP) (Government of Canada, 2020). To put this into perspective, in 2016, international student spending accounted for 14.5% of Canada's total value of export of services. International student spending is the 6th largest export sector for Canada, surpassing categories including liquefied petroleum, lumber, and wheat (Kunin, 2017).

By 2019, Canada ranked third in the top destination countries for international students behind the USA and Australia and continues to see strong and growing demand coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. International students represent 23.7% of all post-secondary students in Canada, which is the second largest share of international students after Australia, where international students account for 31.3% of total higher education enrolments (Project Atlas, 2022). In comparison, in 1998, the percentage of international students in post-secondary study in Canada was 3.8% (OECD, 2000). It is only from 2008 onward that international student enrolment trends by the number of study permits issued show steady increases (Fig. 1).

During the time of international student enrolment growth in Canada, substantive changes were also happening in migration policy related to international students. Prior to 2008, the speed of study permit processing was slow, and policies to work and remain in Canada after study were restrictive. International students were not able to work off-campus during their studies and were only allowed to remain in Canada post-graduation for one year if they were approved for a work permit after securing employment in a related field to their studies (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2001). Student visa applications were vetted to ensure there was no "dual intent" of international students coming to study. Dual intent is said to be present





**Fig. 1** Number of study permits issued in Canada 2000–2021. Source: IRCC Open Data Portal

when “a foreign national who has applied or may apply for permanent residence in Canada also applies to enter Canada for a temporary period as a visitor, student or worker” (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2001). If dual intent was identified, it was grounds for student visa refusal. Given that international students were expected to leave at the end of their studies, there were also no pathways to facilitate this form of skilled migration after graduation. International graduates were in fact required to leave and apply out of the country through other traditional skilled migration mechanisms if they wanted to remain in Canada. In other words, the study-migration link had yet to be established.

In contrast, by the end of December 31, 2022, there were 807,260 international students in Canada (IRCC, 2023), 78% of whom were studying at the post-secondary level. Today, international students in Canadian government-approved learning institutions undertaking academic programs of study receive work authorization during their studies, up to 3 years of post-graduation work authorization and preferential immigration pathways to stay permanently in Canada. Changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) regulations no longer treat dual intent as a *prima facie* ground for the refusal of temporary resident status.

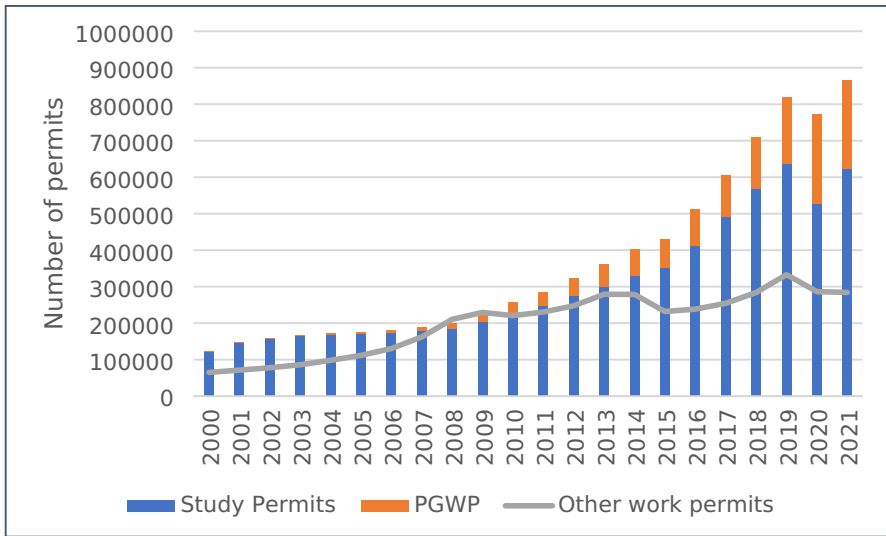
In particular, the introduction of the post-graduate work permit program (PGWPP) in the mid-2000s and the uncapped Canadian Experience Class (CEC) in 2008 paved the way for a “two-step,” and often “multi-step,” immigration pathway. For the first time ever, Canada had in place an explicit immigration pathway for international post-secondary students. The PGWPP allowed graduates who completed a degree from an approved designated learning institution to work after graduation for up to 3 years. The 2008 CEC program had a specific stream in which international student graduates could apply for permanent residence. The link between education and immigration was now formalized. Preferential

pathways to immigration clearly are an important consideration for international students when choosing a destination (ICEF, 2013). As a result of these policy changes, Canada has become a leading study destination. Since 2008, there has been continued liberalization and active recruitment of international students who are now considered an important source of temporary foreign workers and immigrants.

## The Implications of the Education-Immigration Nexus

The link between coming to Canada to study and the availability of work authorization both during study and after graduation, along with pathways to immigration, is a major driver of international student enrolment growth. Beyond the commodification of education, the creation of immigration pathways for international students has tied study and migration more closely together than ever before. What does this mean for the future of higher education? In this section, we explore the implications of ever-increasing numbers of international students on Canadian campuses along with the role of higher education institutions as immigration actors. In the same way that immigration policy change has helped to alter the landscape of the higher education sector by facilitating attractive study-work-migration pathways, the success of the sector in attracting international students in turn impacts the composition of Canada's temporary foreign worker pool and immigration in Canada. We highlight current trends, opportunities, and threats related to the intertwined education-migration nexus.

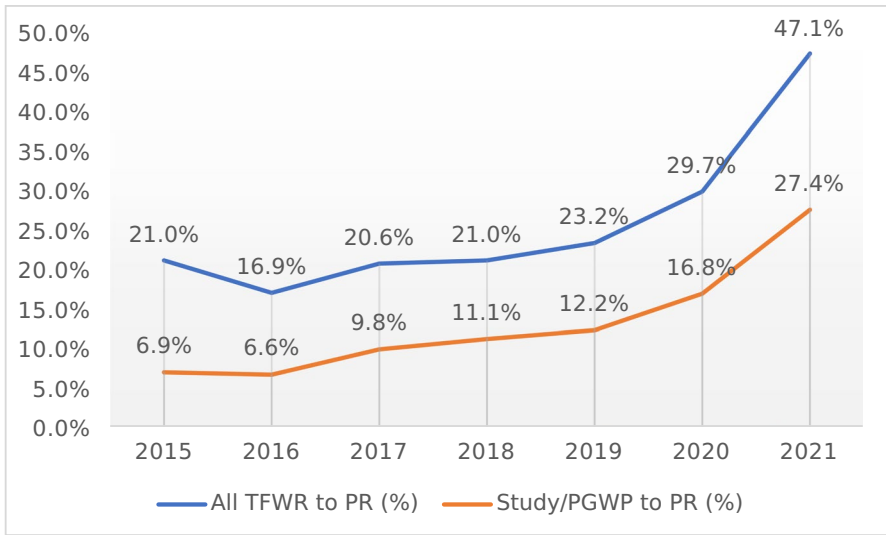
As HEIs sought to make Canada an attractive destination for international students, policymakers implemented a range of policy provisions that facilitated international student recruitment, including eased visa processing, temporary work authorizations, and preferential immigration pathways. These liberalized policies have become “selling features” in the competitive market for the product which is the international student. This has translated into more than 60% of international students in Canada declaring the intention of becoming a permanent resident (CBIE, 2021). This self-reported intention to remain at work after graduation is part of an annual survey of international students across Canada and suggests a high degree of interest in participating in post-graduation employment. This is supported by a Statistics Canada report which indicates that of the 2010–2014 cohort of international student graduates, 72% went on to hold another temporary resident permit after graduation. This percentage primarily includes either a post graduate work permit (33%), an international mobility program work permit (16%), or another study permit (22%). If only work permits are considered, approximately half of all international student graduates stay to work full time (Choi et al., 2021b). Even if the attainment of permanent residence is not guaranteed, to the extent that expectations of easy migration are part of the decision-making of international students, the higher education sector has become a *de facto* migration pathway. Going a step further, we argue that the higher education sector is not only a migration pathway, but it also has an increasing influence over selecting those who get to immigrate.



**Fig. 2** Number of temporary study and work permits issued from 2000 to 2021. Source: IRCC Open Data Portal

### The Growing Importance of International Students for Canadian Temporary Labour and Permanent Immigration

Current immigration policies make studying in Canada attractive for those with an interest to work temporarily or immigrate permanently. This has implications for immigration policy more broadly. In terms of temporary work authorizations, as the number of international students, and subsequently graduates, increase, they account for an increasing proportion of the total temporary foreign workforce in Canada. When both study visas and post-graduate work permit numbers are combined, international students and international student graduates represent the majority of all temporary foreign workers in the country (Government of Canada, 2022c). Figure 2 shows how international students and graduates with temporary work authorizations are increasing at a time when all other temporary foreign work permits have remained relatively stable. To further emphasize the scale of the relative increase over time, the rise in the number of international students coming to Canada combined with the enhancements to the PGWPP led to an unprecedented 15-fold increase in the number of PGWPP workers from 7400 in 2005 to 117,700 in 2016. In 2018, the 143,000 post-graduate work permits issued represented more than 30% of all open temporary work permits, with the most recent numbers indicating that in 2020, the number climbed to over 248,000 (Government of Canada, 2022b). This means that the primary source of temporary foreign workers in Canada are now students or international student graduates, which make up 60% of the temporary labor force in Canada. This proportion is actually expected to continue to grow as already larger cohorts of international students graduate and access a PGWP or other temporary work authorization (IRCC, 2022b).



**Fig. 3** Percentage of permanent residence applications granted from 2015 to 2021, by Pathway. Source: IRCC Open Data Portal

As the proportion of those with Canadian study experience increases in the pool of temporary foreign workers so, too, does the number of international student graduates who transition to permanent residence. In 2015, 32.8% of temporary work permit holders who transitioned to permanent residence had prior Canadian study experience. In 2021, that proportion had increased to 58.1% (Government of Canada, 2022c). Not only is the proportion of international students increasing within the temporary work category itself, but it is also an increasing percentage of all permanent residence admissions (Fig. 3). In 2015, 6.9% of those admitted to permanent residence had prior Canadian study experience, a percentage that climbed steadily until the COVID-19 pandemic to 27.4% in 2021 (Crossman et al., 2021b). So those holding temporary work permits make up an increasing share of all permanent residents (47.1% in 2021) and those with study experience make up an increasing share of temporary workers.

While the proportion of those with prior Canadian study experience increases for those obtaining permanent residence status, the gap between the number of international student graduates with a temporary work permit, on the one hand, and the number of people who receive permanent residence, on the other, is growing (IRCC, 2022b). The time to secure permanent residence also appears to be growing over time as well (Choi et al., 2021a).

As a means of further attracting international students to study in Canada, temporary foreign worker authorization is granted both during and after study. While they must also meet other financial, health, and security conditions through the student visa approval process, continued temporary and permanent immigration to Canada is increasingly accessed through higher education training. International students are admitted into Canada based on their successful admission into a Canadian-designated learning institution.

In Canada, along with other OECD countries including Australia and New Zealand, temporary foreign worker programs are generally open and uncapped, and such programs have expanded much beyond the size initially expected and intended (Brochu et al., 2020; Gregory, 2014). In Canada, this expansion of the number of temporary foreign workers is in large part the result of expanding international student and graduate growth. Importantly, higher education institutions' decision to accept increasing numbers of international students is coordinated neither within the higher education sector nor by provincial or federal governments. It is an institutional-level decision based on a given institution's needs and priorities. It is both uncapped and without restrictions. It is not dependent on general labour market needs or regional employment demand, even while granting extensive work authorization.

### The Challenges of the Study-Migration Transition

While this multi-step migration process is lauded as a win-win situation that allows both potential immigrant and host country to "try out" their migration intentions through temporary work opportunities, there are consequences of this strong association between higher education and immigration. In many respects, higher education institutions have become de facto immigration gatekeepers who decide how increasingly larger and larger numbers of prospective immigrants are selected, in the process extracting a tuition "fee" to allow them to enter the country (Brunner, 2017). The institutional and governmental rhetoric suggests that international students are "ideal immigrants" with high levels of education, good economic prospects, and an easy transition into citizenship, given their study time in Canada and language ability in English and/or French (El Masri, 2015; Sabzalieva et al, 2022; Scott et al, 2015; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). However, the Government of Canada's (GOC) Statistics Canada research suggests this is not always the case, with the average economic outcomes of international graduates below that of their domestic peers, both in the short and medium term (Crossman & Hou, 2022). Even with Canadian training, credentials, and acculturation that are so highly touted, international student graduates not only earn less on average than domestic students with similar skills, but the time it takes to transition to permanent residence is increasing with every new international student graduate cohort studied (GOC, 2020; GOC, 2021). These descriptive statistics are supported by the lived experiences of international students in both the academic literature (Kim & Kwak, 2019; Scott et al, 2015; Vosko, 2022) and in recent media portrayals highlighting the personal challenges of international students and their multi-step migration journeys (Garcia-Sitton, 2022; Keung, 2022).

This has sparked both calls for policy changes to ease the transition to permanent residence and a debate about who should bear the responsibility and the costs of supporting international students to do so. As the assumption and imagination of international students as "ideal immigrants" is being challenged (Sabzalieva et al, 2022; Scott et al, 2015), there are increasing calls to provide services and address obstacles that prevent international students from accessing permanent residence. Akbar (2022) calls for a collaborative service delivery model between all levels of government, post-secondary institutions, and settlement agencies, with a particular

call for federal government funding for settlement services that include language and employment training to assist successful economic integration, which traditionally have been offered only to those who have already secured permanent residence.

These are important and valid concerns about the experiences and expectations of international students recruited to Canada by higher education institutions. Federal and provincial governments will need to reflect on what policy success looks like in terms of the numbers of international students who transition to permanent residence. What statistics show is that an average of 32% of study permit holders observed in 5-year cohorts between 2000 and 2009 transitioned to permanent residence within 10 years. Those with an intermediary temporary work permit, one that followed work authorization during study, were more likely to transition to permanent residence (Choi et al., 2021b). Interestingly, these transition rates have been stable over time and across multiple cohorts, even as the number of international student graduates rise in number. A decade of similar rates of transition suggests a certain degree of satisfaction with the status quo on the part of the government and its immigration objectives. This does not bode well for those who wish to increase the proportional rate of transition beyond that 30% threshold, especially while at the same time demanding additional resources from the federal government to meet this goal.

What is absent is a discussion of the actual objective of immigration policy in relation to international students. Is it to have every international student with a desire to stay permanently able to do so? If the answer is yes, then a case could be made that the process should be made easier, more transparent, and more supportive of this goal. This will require an adoption of a multi-stakeholder policy framework, including the additional resources, that international students and advocates are calling for.

There is no indication, however, that federal or provincial governments have embraced permanent settlement as the objective of international student recruitment. Nor is there an indication that governments wish to cede their discretionary control of these pathways to permanent residence to post-secondary institutions. We argue that additional pathway steps and requirements are intentional, serving as a means of maintaining control over the unregulated, uncapped numbers of international students brought into Canada by higher education institutions. For this to change, higher education institutions would have to likely cede some degree of control over their international student admissions' practices. This could take on a number of different forms including a cap on numbers, or targeted admissions at a program level based on local labor market demand.

To be clear, international student recruitment is supported and encouraged by provinces and the federal government (Government of Canada, 2022d). It is not a disingenuous claim that international students in many ways are ideal candidates for immigration, and that there is good reason to communicate to prospective students that there are opportunities for work after graduation, including a sizeable chance (32% currently) to immigrate permanently. However, if higher education institutions want their international student graduates to be more successful in what is currently a competitive process to secure permanent residence, they can either press provincial and federal governments to increase the proportion of study permit holders who

can transition or, alternatively better support the development of student attributes necessary for a successful transition.

In particular, given that international students are generally younger upon graduation than Canadian students, the lack of pre-graduation work experience is a major contributing factor to the comparatively lower wage earnings of international student graduates, even when controlling for the level and discipline of training (Choi et al., 2021b). International postsecondary students are also less likely than Canadian students to combine school and work (Frenette et al., 2019) which is problematic for successful economic transition in both the short and longer term. This lack of work experience can also make securing post-graduation employment more challenging. In the national 2021 CBIE International Student Survey, close to half (48.5%) of international students indicated they were working. Of those who had worked or were working, 43% indicated having had difficulty finding work. Challenges in understanding Canadian workplace expectations and prospective employers being unfamiliar with regulations to hire international students were identified as areas that require a greater institutional role. Earnings of workers who had been international students lag behind those of Canadian citizen students, meaning their wage earnings grow in relative terms more slowly over time (Choi et al., 2021b). Developing work experience opportunities—especially discipline-of-study-related work experience—for students' pre-graduation is therefore essential for their longer-term immigration transition success. Institutions, governments, and employers who are interested in the successful long-term transition of international student graduates will need to focus their efforts here. Likewise, if international students are serious about securing a permanent residence, they will need to focus on their studies and take on discipline-related work for its long-term benefits. That means understanding and planning for the costs involved in coming to study and arriving financially prepared to study full-time and gain relevant work experience to move through the multi-step migration process.

## **Policy Implications of the Study-Migration Nexus for Canadian Higher Education**

What are the implications of the developments examined in this article for higher education? First, if migration is a motivation for the majority of international students coming to Canada to study, then any policy changes that make immigration pathways more restrictive (or more liberal) will also have an effect on international student demand. Looking at experiences in other jurisdictions, in particular Australia and the UK, it is evident that HEIs are not immune to these types of policy shifts, irrespective of their past policy successes (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). McCartney's (2021) review of international student policy in Canada since the 1970s rightly points out both the agency of higher education institutions in crafting their own recruitment strategies, and also how the state through its immigration policy can have a profound effect on international student institutional policy.

Given that those who have previously held a study permit in Canada comprise an increasing proportion of those holding temporary foreign worker status and also



an increasing share of the total of those that become permanent residents, what should the role of higher education institutions be in facilitating immigration? What are the responsibilities of higher education institutions when it comes to ensuring that the international students they admit receive the touted experience and acculturation benefits that studying in Canada afford them? While both provincial and federal governments enable these pathways through policy and investment, higher education institutions are the ones who lobbied for changes to immigration pathways to make it easier to recruit international students and continue to do so (Schinnerl, 2021). Salt (2011) calls for a more informed and balanced approach to the retention of international students in the UK and Brunner (2022) and Akbar (2022) recommend a systems or multi-stakeholder approach in Canada. While ethical tensions are multi-scalar and often paradoxical and complex (Brunner, 2022; Sabzalieva et al, 2022), the focus on recruitment strategies without adequately addressing student service needs for successful longer-term integration must change (Akbar, 2022). The immigration-education nexus is perhaps now well established (Brunner, 2017; Sabzalieva et al, 2022), but the relationship between recruitment for study purposes and pathways to permanent immigration is only beginning to be understood.

## Conclusion

Since the mid-2000s, significant changes to Canadian immigration have facilitated generous post-graduation work opportunities in terms of post-graduate work permit duration, Canadian labor market access, and several pathways to permanent residence for international student graduates post-study (Trevena, 2019). As a result, Canada has become a leading destination for international students, with federal and provincial governments keen to reap the economic dividends of this expansion. The resultant education-immigration nexus has made admission to a post-secondary institution a first entry point for immigration, thus turning institutions of higher education into powerful gatekeepers as students are selected based on factors that reflect the interests of post-secondary institutions, most obviously a students' ability to pay international tuition fees.

Higher education institutions need to reimagine their role in student success after graduation to account for their migration gateway status in two major ways. The first requires institutionalizing the knowledge that a large proportion of international students have intentions to immigrate to Canada. This will mean a shift in international student support and advising beyond successful completion of a credential and maintaining legal status in Canada to a more wholistic understanding of the intentions of study. It requires acknowledging that these intentions to immigrate are often a major driver for people choosing to study in the first place. For many, it is immigration that is the end goal and their immigration journey starts in our post-secondary system. A multi-stakeholder approach is needed to ensure that the time during studies serves as the beginning of longer-term settlement success. This means knowing which international students have the intention to settle and providing settlement support within institutions or drawing on the expertise and services of settlement agencies. It means

a more concerted effort to educate and work with employers to provide study-related work opportunities to international students as well.

The second major way higher education needs to reimagine its role in international student success is to ensure that prospective fee-paying international students have better knowledge about the finances needed, the immigration process itself, and the challenges and chances of securing permanent residence prior to arrival. This will encourage proper preparation, manage expectations, and ensure a higher likelihood of permanent immigration success (Esses et al., 2018). This is a tricky ask for those who measure success by the numbers of international students, but an important one. Canada and Canadian higher education institutions have a lot to offer those who desire to include study as part of their path towards immigration. There is a clear link from post-secondary study to temporary work and then permanent residence through government policy. Many who wish to stay are successful, but there are many that struggle and are not finding the “easy pathway” they expected. Higher education institutions and their agent representatives need not oversell the prospects of coming to Canada to study nor measure success only in terms of the numbers recruited. Recruiting international students to our Canadian institutions is not only an export service or a means of generating revenue. It is a means for becoming Canadian. It needs to be treated as such.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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