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From Classroom to Citizenship: Higher Education's Role in Migration Policy

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Key Ideas

• **Many countries increasingly merge education and migration policies**, viewing international students as ideal immigrants—a policy trend called '*edugration*.'

• **Higher education institutions around the world are now major migration actors.** Universities and colleges not only attract potential immigrants through international student recruitment. They also control access to immigration pathways through admission, graduation, and tuition policies. Governments also rely on schools to collect immigration data and promote integration. **These new roles are shifting higher education's societal role**.

• **Edugration approaches differ**. Some countries, like Canada and Australia, use high international student tuition fees to subsidize public higher education. This can distort education and labour markets. Other countries, like Germany, do not charge high tuition. Instead, they focus on selective recruitment to fill workforce demands..

Recommendations

• **Governments should ensure that public colleges and universities have enough funding and freedom to focus on their main job** — teaching and research — without being expected to do the work of immigration offices.

• **Governments should either take away immigration responsibilities from higher education institutions, or provide schools with enough support and funding to offer reliable, high-quality services.**

Since post-secondary institutions control admissions and graduation, and now increasingly support students' transition to work and immigration, they have become key migration players.

As governments seek highly skilled immigrants to address labour shortages and aging populations, the number of international students staying after graduation has grown significantly.[1] Targeted policies merge education and immigration by turning international students into potential permanent residents. Relying on international students as a source of immigrants is known as "edugration."[2]

According to CMS Postdoctoral Research Fellow Dr. Lisa Ruth Brunner and her colleagues, the edugration process involves three competitive steps: students must (1) be admitted to and graduate from a recognized academic program; (2) show they can succeed in the local job market, often through temporary work; and (3) qualify for an immigration pathway to stay permanently. Since postsecondary institutions control admission and graduation, and increasingly support students' transition to work and permanent residence, schools have become key immigration players. This reshapes the role of universities and colleges, making them central actors in migration governance. Brunner and her colleagues compare the emergence of federal edugration policies in Australia, Canada, and Germany between 1990 and 2019.[3] In each country, government policies linking education to immigration reshaped higher education institutions' roles in similar ways. However, each country's policies also have some key differences. In some countries, including Canada, international student tuition has become a major financial resource for universities and colleges as public funding declines.

Key Findings

Early Adopters: Australia and Canada

Australia was the first to adopt edugration formally in the late 1990s, linking international student recruitment to economic immigration and positioning students as future workers. Canada followed a decade later. In both countries, higher education systems are largely focused on attracting tuition-paying international students. The students attend schools ranging from prestigious public universities to small private colleges. Like in Australia, Canada saw rapid growth in international student enrolment at lower-ranked Canadian colleges. This then came with similar political attention to international students and government efforts to regulate edugration more closely. Schools' financial strategies conflicted with federal goals for population growth and immigrant selection.

Chasing Science and Technology Students: The German Approach

Germany's adoption of edugration was more gradual, shaped by national and European Union (EU) policies. Although Germany began focusing on international education in the 1990s, the country struggled to compete with Anglophone countries like the US and UK. In the 2000s, policy changes like the German Residence Act and the EU Blue Card system allowed international graduates to stay and work. Unlike in Australia and Canada, German post-secondary institutions charge no or low international student tuition fees. But like the other countries, international students came to be seen as 'ideal immigrants' for the labour market. Today, Germany focuses on recruiting students in areas like science and technology. Schools help students transition into the job market after graduation—a significant new role for the German higher education system.

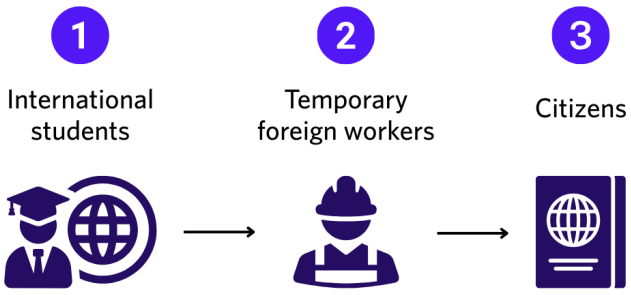

Figure 1. Three-step migration (edugration)

New Societal Roles for Higher Education

Between 1990 and 2019, higher education institutions in Canada, Australia, and Germany took on four key migration governance roles:

- Attracting students from abroad
- Controlling who was admitted, what tuition they paid, and who graduated into the labour market
- Collecting data on international students' status and reporting it to the government
- Assisting students in transitioning into the local labour market, e.g., through career and language support

These changes have significant implications. Schools are no longer just places of learning—they also shape the population of a country. Schools' decisions about admission standards, tuition levels, and graduation requirements help determine who is able to stay in the country and eventually become a citizen—whether school administrators realize it or not.

The reliance on higher education institutions to take on roles that they are not designed or regulated to handle creates a complex situation. Although edugration can appear to be a 'triple-win' for governments, higher education institutions, and international students, all three have different objectives. When those objectives misalign, edugration becomes difficult to manage. This is especially likely when international education becomes marketized.

As universities and colleges struggle with limited funding, and they are pressured to help the government meet immigration goals, schools confront conflicting missions and values. This can have unintended consequences. For example, in Australia and Canada, public institutions developed targeted academic programs for international students to generate income, and this led to a concentration of international graduates in a few industries, affecting labour markets. International students can also face public backlash and years of uncertainty over visas. Not all students recruited to study will qualify for permanent residency.[4] This can result in accusations of broken promises.[5]

Methods

This study examined how government policies used language to shape ideas about edugration. Researchers reviewed existing research and federal policy documents to understand policy change in Australia, Canada, and Germany between 1990 and 2019. Using van Leeuwen's[6] framework, the researchers examined four ways that governments justify policies: authority (who supports it), moral reasoning (what is considered right or wrong), practical benefits (how it helps society), and storytelling (using examples to make a point).

Conclusion

Edugration policies continue to evolve. In Australia and Canada, international students are now a topic of political debate, challenging the idea that all are 'ideal immigrants.' Still, the broader policy trend of using higher education as a tool for immigration remains. Countries that face long-term demographic challenges continue to compete for 'the best and the brightest'.

The growing role of higher education in migration policy has major effects. One is the reputational, logistical, and ethical risks of relying on international student tuition to finance public higher education. But, as Brunner and colleagues argue, there are other important issues beyond funding. As universities and colleges act as magnets for international students, they also act as gatekeepers for who can migrate, surveillants of those on a temporary visa, and refiners of future immigrants. In taking these roles, the edugration system raises critical questions about the true purpose and autonomy of higher education.

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