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Canada's Higher Education Sector as Immigration Actor

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Key Ideas

• **Higher education institutions are key actors in Canada's immigration system.** By driving growth in international student enrolment, universities and colleges shaped both the scale and composition of temporary and permanent immigration.

• **Rapid growth in international enrolments produced unintended system-wide pressures.** Institutional support and immigration capacity did not keep pace with growth in admissions.

• **International graduates face uneven labour market outcomes.** Many encounter employment barriers, lower earnings, and limited opportunities to use their Canadian education to secure permanent immigration status.

Recommendations

• **Expand institutional support systems** to help international students navigate employment and immigration pathways.

• **Coordinate international student recruitment with labour market and immigration realities.** Higher education institutions should consider housing, services, and workforce realities, while the government should provide clear, stable immigration policies and pathways for qualified graduates.

• **Ensure transparency in policy objectives.** Governments should clearly communicate that international student policies are not designed primarily for permanent settlement.

Any policy changes that make immigration pathways more restrictive (or more liberal) will also have an effect on international student demand.

Canada's global reputation as a destination for international students is rooted in policies that intentionally connect education, work, and immigration. These policies—particularly the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP)—have enabled students to study in Canada, obtain Canadian work experience, and later apply for permanent residency.

Dr. Sandra Schinnerl, CMS Postdoctoral Research Fellow, and Dr. Antje Ellermann, CMS Co-Director, explore how this education–immigration linkage has contributed to extraordinary growth.[1] Over the last two decades, international student numbers rose from roughly 146,000 in 2001 to over 807,000 in 2022. While this expansion has supported institutional revenues and supplied employers with a stream of temporary workers, it has also shifted the role of higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs now act as front-end selectors of future immigrants, admitting students who may later seek permanent residence.

Yet, the immigration system was not designed to guarantee that international students can stay. While the federal government supports their recruitment, permanent residency selection criteria remain highly competitive and not tailored to the growing volume of graduates seeking to transition. This mismatch has produced a widening gap between students' expectations and the system's capacity to accommodate them.

Key Findings

How Higher Education Became Central to Canada's Immigration Pathways

Over the last twenty years, Canada has become a popular destination for international students. The number of international students pursuing higher education in Canada has skyrocketed, increasing from approximately 145,950 in 2001 to at least 807,750 in 2022.[2] Many of these international students choose to work during their studies or after graduation, resulting in international students making up the majority of temporary foreign workers (60%) in Canada, more than any other work permit category.[3]

For many of these students, higher education in Canada is a means to a larger permanent immigration end. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Canada introduced the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP), which allows international graduates to work in Canada for up to three years after their studies. Through this work permit program, a multi-step pathway to permanence emerged. International students could gain a Canadian education, acquire valuable local work experience, and then leverage that experience to apply for permanent residency. This pathway through the PGWPP made Canada not only a top destination for those seeking a degree, but also a future.

Challenges to Labour Market Transition

The rapid growth of Canada's international student population has created a record number of international graduates looking for work. The number of PGWPP holders grew 15 times—from 7,400 in 2005 to 117,700 in 2016. By 2020, this figure had climbed to over 248,000.[4] As the pool of PGWPP holders grew, it created an imbalance where the supply of new labour began to significantly outpace the growth in available jobs. This made it much harder for graduates to secure the quality of employment needed for a successful transition to permanent residency.

For these graduates, finding a job is key to staying in Canada. However, even with Canadian credentials and cultural experiences, many international graduates struggle in the job market. Those who successfully find a job also tend to earn less than Canadians with similar skills.[5] Research shows this is due to several key barriers, including language, limited Canadian work experience and professional networks, unfamiliarity with local workplace culture, and the perceived investment risk for employers hiring candidates with temporary visa statuses.[6] These barriers make it challenging to secure employment that aligns with the skill level and duration requirements for the permanent residency application.

A System Strained by Growth

Investment in Canadian education often signals a desire and expectation for long-term settlement for international students; neither institutional recruitment practices nor federal immigration policies guarantee this outcome. The pathway that once appeared straightforward and uncapped now presents uncertainty, longer processing times, and heightened competition for settlement.

Recent policy changes—including caps on study permits, attestation letter requirements, revised cost-of-living thresholds, and restricted PGWPP eligibility—reflect federal efforts to restore system integrity and sustainability. These changes also underscore the findings of the original 2023 research which highlighted that the education–immigration relationship was becoming unsustainable.

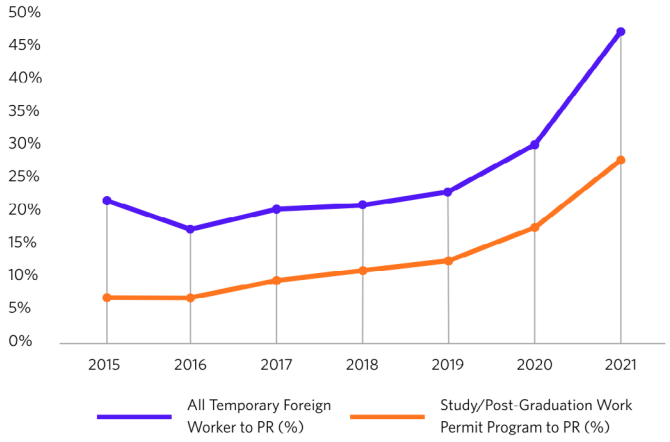

Figure 1. Percentage of permanent residence applications granted from 2015 to 2021, by Pathway. (Source: IRCC Open Data Portal)

Methods

The study utilized data from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and conducted a comprehensive analysis of international student enrollment trends, immigration policies, and labour market outcomes from 2000 to 2022.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions have become integral actors in immigration, but their recruitment practices have not fully accounted for the realities of labour market absorption or permanent residency capacity of their expanding international student enrolments. International graduates with an interest to stay in Canada permanently can face barriers that contradict their assumption that Canadian education naturally leads to successful settlement. HEIs have a critical role to play in both managing expectations and appropriately preparing international student graduates for the challenges of immigration transitions, particularly in a new landscape with decreased non-permanent and permanent immigration targets.

A sustainable model requires greater policy coherence and transparency. Governments and institutions share a responsibility to provide students with accurate, timely information about post-study opportunities and to give due consideration to how admissions relate to the pathways realistically available after graduation. Without such coordination, international students will continue to navigate unnecessary uncertainty.

References

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Citation

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Sandra Schinnerl is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for Migration Studies and a Senior Economist with the Government of British Columbia, focusing on Immigration and Integration Policy. Sandra's work broadly examines the changing relationship of post-secondary institutions in providing support, skills and preparation for international students interested in migrating to Canada. Sandra earned her PhD at the University of British Columbia.

Antje Ellermann is Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on the politics of migration and citizenship in the global North. She is the author of the award-winning The Comparative Politics of Immigration: Policy Choices in Germany, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States (2021) and States Against Migration: Deportation in Germany and the United States (2009), both published by Cambridge University Press.