



World
Education
Services

International Student Policy Brief



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Executive Summary

Canada has long championed its international student system for the benefits it offers to international students, Canadian students, and the country at large. But Canada's international student policies and their outcomes have faced intensified scrutiny in recent years, leading to a series of significant policy changes. The policy reforms to the international student system sought to suppress rapid growth in international student numbers. But these reforms, coupled with changes to the broader immigration system, have come at a cost. They have failed to address international students' vulnerability to systemic issues, such as unethical recruitment, excessive tuition fees, and insufficient support services. Moreover, because of the new reforms, current international students in Canada are now at risk of losing their immigration status.

At this moment, measures need to be put in place that mitigate the effects of policy changes on international students who came to Canada before the reforms were announced, as well as measures that strengthen accountability in the sector more broadly. Improving the conditions under which international students are recruited, study, and work will lead to better international student outcomes and enhance Canada's reputation as a good place to study. International students have been a critical source of funding for the post-secondary sector, and they also enrich Canada by strengthening ties to countries across the globe.

Key Issues

- **Unsustainable Financial Model:** Post-secondary institutions have relied heavily on international tuition fees to offset declining government funding. Since 2010, international tuition revenue has increased by 554 percent, compared with just 23 percent for domestic tuition. This financial dependence has led to aggressive and, at times, unethical recruitment practices.
- **Disrupted Study-to-PR Pathways:** Policy changes in 2024 have weakened international students' ability to transition to permanent residence (PR). Many students now face increased uncertainty and risk losing their immigration status.
- **Systemic Vulnerabilities Persist:** Issues such as unethical recruitment practices, disproportionate tuition fees, lack of access to essential services, and insufficient student representation in policymaking remain unaddressed.
- **Rising Anti-International Student Sentiment:** Anti-international student rhetoric, as well as hate incidents targeting international students, have intensified.

Summary of Recommendations



Convene a collaborative, **multi-sector roundtable to design and implement accountability measures** and robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms within the international student system.



Establish an International Student Advisory Council to provide student feedback on international student conditions and policies.



Develop a clear and stable pathway to PR explicitly designed for future international students.



Implement a **one-time work permit extension and dedicated pathway to PR** for international students and recent graduates who were in Canada before the policy reforms took effect.



Expand eligibility criteria for federally funded settlement services to include current and former international students.



Set minimum standards for the provision of key services, including academic, settlement, career, and immigration services, as well as health and mental health supports.



Create a **regulatory body to oversee education agents**.



Collaborate with top sending countries to enable **monitoring and enforcement of international student recruitment standards**.



Develop fiscal strategies to enable the sustainability and long-term financial health of the post-secondary sector.



Prohibit exorbitant differences in tuition fees between domestic students and international students.

WES urges the federal and provincial governments, as well as post-secondary institutions, to adopt these recommendations. Their aim is to create a more equitable and sustainable system for international students that benefits both Canada's long-term labour market sustainability and the international students that will be part of our future workforce. By addressing these issues, Canada can reaffirm its commitment to fostering a welcoming environment for international students while ensuring the long-term health of its educational and immigration systems.

Context

The post-secondary sector relies on international student dollars

Growth in international student enrollment has roots in the decline in provincial funding for public post-secondary institutions. Institutional budgets have risen, but [since the 2008 global financial crisis](#), government funding has declined. Reductions in government funding are particularly stark in Ontario. According to the 2023 [Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability](#), provincial funding in Ontario in 2021-2022 was only 44 percent of the per student funding level in the rest of Canada for college students and 57 percent of the per student funding for university students.

International students have provided critical revenue growth for the post-secondary sector. According to [The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2024](#), a report by Higher Education Strategy Associates, “international student fees have accounted for 100% of all increased operating spending since about 2010.” Revenue from international student fees rose 554 percent, versus only 23 percent for domestic students in the same time frame.

International student recruitment has been encouraged by the federal government

Through successive international education strategies and other initiatives, Global Affairs Canada leveraged Canada’s brand to increase international student recruitment. For example, the [International Education Strategy 2014-2019](#) sought to further Canada’s appeal as a leading destination for scholars and echoed calls for a “clear long-term strategy [...] to ensure that Canada maintains and increases its market share of the best and brightest international students and researchers.”

Canada differentiated itself from its competitors in the race to recruit international students by offering the possibility of permanent residence. This became an important part of the marketing of Canada abroad, whether by [provincial governments](#), the federal government, or by [post-secondary institutions and education agents](#).



Wouldn’t it be nice to apply all of your Canadian educational credentials and work experience to pursuing a career and building a life in Canada? Express Entry, the Provincial Nominee Program or the Atlantic Immigration Pilot can be your path to permanent residency. After all this, maybe you too can become Canadian, eh?”

—*Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) promotional video*¹

1 The promotional video appears to have been posted in 2018. It remained available both on the IRCC website and on YouTube in December 2024.

The [International Education Strategy 2019-2024](#) makes numerous references to permanent residence, as well as the study-work-stay continuum.

The message of study and stay appealed to the global market for education, and it spread effectively. As an [international student in Brampton](#) said, “Everything we heard—from word of mouth, from immigration consultants and in promotional material from the Canadian government itself—gave us the impression [Canada] was a heaven for international students, a place to study, work and become a citizen.”

Unsustainable growth undermines Canada’s offer as a study destination

Government promotion and immigration policies, alongside recruitment efforts by post-secondary institutions and education agents, led to huge growth in international student enrollment. But Canada lacked sufficient oversight or accountability mechanisms to guide this growth, and unscrupulous activities flourished.

Motivated by financial rather than educational goals, certain institutions rapidly increased the proportion of international students on their campuses. There have been numerous reports of [unethical recruitment practices](#). And as the population of current and former international students in Canada grew, transition to permanent residence—a key driver of international student recruitment—slipped further out of reach for many international students.

Although IRCC only issues study permits to enroll at institutions recognized by provinces and territories as Designated Learning Institutions (DLIs), there is no evidence that the DLI process has the rigour in criteria or enforcement to ensure that those post-secondary institutions that abuse the system lose their DLI status.

Changing Policy Landscape

Over the past year, Minister of Immigration Marc Miller made a series of announcements that dramatically altered the country's international education landscape. The reforms have been primarily aimed at reducing the number of international students in Canada through annual caps on new study permits. They have also changed the value proposition of study in Canada by limiting post-study work, which makes it more difficult to become eligible for permanent residence. The reforms align with the government's aim that by the end of 2026, temporary permit holders make up no more than 5 percent of the population.

Minister Miller has also introduced changes to the broader immigration system that will affect international students and graduates, such as reforms to the [temporary foreign worker program](#) (TFW Program), [elimination of Express Entry points](#) for having a job offer, and a reduction in [planned immigration levels](#).

Policy changes affect international students already in Canada

The majority of international students—around 90 percent, according to [a 2022 study](#)—need multiple temporary permits to qualify for permanent residence (PR). But changes to the international student system and immigration system make it harder to obtain subsequent temporary permits. For example, it is now more difficult for people holding a post-graduation work permit (PGWP) to transition to the TFW Program while they qualify for PR. This [weakens the chain](#) between initial study permit, work permit, and PR.

In some cases current international students who change their study program may become [subject to the new PGWP restrictions](#). Affected students will need to take into consideration the new rules if they want to remain eligible for a PGWP.

The need for a transition plan for those already in Canada

In its efforts to reduce the number of international students, the federal government has changed the work and immigration landscape for them. An unintended but easy to foresee consequence of the policy changes will be a large-scale loss of immigration status. The Canadian government needs to create a plan to mitigate the effects of the reforms on those who were in Canada before the changes were announced.

According to surveys, [90 percent of international students](#) either plan to apply for PR or may apply for PR. Indeed, this was the opportunity advertised to them, and it influenced their choice of Canada as a study destination. Now hundreds of thousands of international graduates are at risk of losing their authorized immigration status due to circumstances they could not have anticipated.

Current and former international students are reporting a sense of deep [uncertainty and apprehension](#). Their study and career goals often reflect years of planning. The financial investment of international students into the Canadian post-secondary system is billions of dollars annually. The personal and emotional investments students and their families have made to secure a future in Canada are beyond measure.

The policy reforms, as they stand, are set to balloon the population of undocumented individuals in Canada. The negative consequences of undocumented status are **well-known**, and an increase in the number of undocumented people will strain other parts of the immigration system. With limited options, former international students may apply for refugee status or seek permanent residence based on humanitarian grounds. Many claims will be well-founded, and the applications will require due consideration. But these claims will increase existing processing backlogs in other immigration programs.

From a policy perspective, it is likely simpler to create transition plans for eligible students and recent graduates who came to Canada under the old rules than it is to cope with a large-scale loss of status.

Incidents of anti-international student hate have increased

The past year has seen public support for immigration plummet, as well as an increase in hate directed at both **immigrants** broadly, and international students specifically. Harassment and hate speech, whether **online** or **in person**, exacerbate uncertainty and fear among international students in Canada. Statements, including those by politicians, that **blame international students for long-brewing economic woes** likely contributed to the rise of anti-international student and anti-South Asian hate, as well as further straining international student mental health.

Vulnerabilities in the international student system persist

Reforms to the international student system have prioritized reducing the number of students and have not meaningfully tackled systemic issues that have led to international student exploitation and vulnerability. The current suite of reforms will eliminate some fraudulent schools and programs. However, WES remains concerned about the lack of measures in place to ensure the well-being of international students and to secure the long-term health of the post-secondary sector more broadly. These concerns include:

- Unethical recruitment practices, as documented by CBC's *The Fifth Estate* episode "**Sold a Lie**"
- Inadequate access to services and social supports, including **mental health** resources
- Disproportionate tuition fees paid by international students **compared with fees paid by their domestic student peers**
- Lack of student voices when decisions are made about international student policies and support systems
- Unsustainable funding model for the post-secondary sector

Recommendations

WES recommends that IRCC introduce measures that mitigate the impacts of recent policy changes on international students and graduates currently in Canada. Furthermore, WES recommends that federal, provincial, and territorial governments seize this moment to significantly strengthen accountability within the international student system. Improving the conditions in which international students are recruited, study, and work will lead to better international student outcomes and strengthen Canada's reputation as a good place to study. Many of these recommendations could be implemented via a [Recognized Institution Framework](#), a policy IRCC has proposed but not yet enacted.

Enhanced coordination

The IRCC Strategic Review called for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to immigration. WES agrees that success depends on actively engaging a wide range of partners from all provinces and sectors. This is true for the immigration system as a whole, and it also applies to international education. A coordinating body allows players within and beyond government to collaborate on objectives and implementation to ensure a more responsive and aligned system.

WES recommends the creation of a collaborative, multi-sector roundtable to design and implement international student system accountability measures. Robust compliance, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms must be a central priority of the roundtable.

Seek input from current and former international students

Without input from international students, there is a risk that decision-making processes overlook the impacts of policies on international students. The recent policy changes have not directly intervened in the systemic issues that enable vulnerability and may in fact have deepened that vulnerability. International students have few formal channels through which they can raise their concerns. Policymakers should seek feedback from international students and organizations that represent them. The Canadian Bureau of International Education recently [called for an advisory council composed of international students](#) to ensure more frequent and systematic engagement with international students on an ongoing basis.

WES recommends the establishment of an advisory council of international students to provide student feedback on the conditions faced by international students, as well as policy proposals that affect international students.

Establish pathways to permanent residence

Even before the policy changes of 2024, international students and graduates faced challenges navigating Canada's immigration system. Canada has over 50 PR programs. Each has distinct eligibility criteria, and each is potentially subject to change. This makes it difficult for international students to predict their likelihood of being granted PR.

WES recommends that IRCC develop a stable pathway to PR designed for international students, with clear eligibility criteria and clear information about selection targets.

The past year has been particularly volatile regarding immigration policy. The reforms affect the likelihood of transitioning to PR and may lengthen the process. A longer timeline for PR, then, necessitates that an international student who wants to stay in Canada hold more consecutive temporary permits, but the TFW Program rules have been changed as well. International students on a permit about to expire, especially a PGWP, have little time to ascertain what the new rules mean for them. Considering that government materials strongly implied that an investment in Canadian education set people up to receive PR, applying these changes to students already in Canada is patently unfair. And although it is well-known that sudden immigration policy changes lead to loss of status, no policy has been put in place to mitigate or delay the risk of loss of status for this group.

WES recommends that IRCC create a one-time temporary work permit, as well as a pathway to PR, for eligible international students and graduates who were already in Canada when reforms to immigration policy and international student policy were announced. A pathway to PR for this cohort could resemble the program [introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Increase support services

Moving to a new country to study entails transition. And with transition come challenges. Canada should ensure that resources are available to support the education, health, and well-being of international students. Support for international students varies widely across institutions and jurisdictions, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of services provided. For example, international students may be eligible for settlement services in Quebec, and some municipalities offer assistance to international students. However, many provinces and municipalities offer no such services. Similarly, post-secondary institutions differ in the level of support they provide to international students and graduates.

WES recommends the creation of minimum standards at the provincial, territorial, or institution level for essential services including academic, settlement, career, and immigration services, as well as health and mental health supports.

WES recommends that IRCC expand eligibility criteria for federally funded settlement services to allow provision of services to current and former international students.

Regulate student recruitment

The global reputation of Canada's education and immigration systems depends upon fair practices in recruiting international students. The complexity of Canada's systems—the post-secondary sector, as well as visa and immigration systems—means that international students are reliant on agents and legal representatives and vulnerable to misinformation. International students should be able to expect that information provided by the Canadian government, Canadian institutions, and any agents thereof is accurate and complete.

WES recommends the establishment of a dedicated regulatory body to oversee education agents, including aggregators and their subcontracted agents. This body would institute and enforce a standard of practice, as well as grant licensure to agents and maintain a registry of licensed agents. Violations of regulatory standards would result in discipline and ultimately removal from the registry and revocation of licensure.

WES recommends that IRCC and Global Affairs Canada collaborate with top sending countries to enable monitoring and enforcement of recruitment standards.

Financial health and tuition fees at the post-secondary level

The post-secondary sector is a public good. Canada cannot deliver on its goals without being able to provide educational excellence at the post-secondary level. Educational excellence requires more than funding, but it cannot be delivered in the absence of appropriate funding. This is a critical issue for all Canadians and the future of Canada.

Budgetary pressures have contributed to the ambitious and sometimes unscrupulous recruitment of international students. This has been enabled by a regulatory gap, with no rules governing how much post-secondary institutions can charge international students.

WES recommends that provinces and territories develop a funding strategy that ensures the long-term fiscal health of the post-secondary sector without financial dependence upon international students.

WES recommends that provinces and territories prohibit exorbitant differences in tuition fees between domestic students and international students. WES advocates a consultation process involving stakeholders, such as post-secondary institutions, student representatives, and policymakers, to establish fair tuition fee structures for international students.



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