

NAVIGATING THE CROSSCURRENTS: CANADIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN AN ERA OF FEDERAL POLICY SHIFTS AND FISCAL CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract

The Canadian college sector is facing a systemic crisis driven by the perfect storm of chronic provincial underfunding and abrupt federal immigration policy shifts. This moderated discussion explores how reforms to Canada's immigration laws with respect to international students have triggered a crisis for Canadian postsecondary institutions, including substantial budget losses, program cancellations, and significant human costs for international students and college and university employees. Through professional perspectives from advising, department leadership, faculty, and executive, the authors detail institutional responses to fiscal constraints and operational uncertainty. Using case studies from Seneca Polytechnic, Durham College, and Conestoga College in Ontario, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, the moderated discussion highlights the precarious reliance on international tuition and the resulting erosion of campus community. Ultimately, the authors argue that this crisis necessitates a new social contract for Canadian higher education, urging a fundamental transformation of funding models and a renewed focus on institutional integrity and public purpose.

Keywords: colleges, immigration, internationalization, precarity, funding, sustainability, crisis

Résumé

Le secteur collégial canadien traverse une crise systémique provoquée par une « tempête parfaite » : un sous-financement provincial chronique conjugué à des changements brusques des politiques fédérales en matière d'immigration. Cet article de discussion explore comment les réformes des lois canadiennes

sur l'immigration concernant les étudiants internationaux ont déclenché une crise pour les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire, entraînant des pertes budgétaires substantielles, des annulations de programmes et des coûts humains considérables pour les étudiants ainsi que pour le personnel des collèges et des universités. En croisant les perspectives professionnelles du conseil aux étudiants, de la direction de département, du corps professoral et de la haute direction, les auteurs détaillent les réponses institutionnelles face aux contraintes budgétaires et à l'incertitude opérationnelle. S'appuyant sur des études de cas d'établissements comme Seneca Polytechnique, les collèges Durham et Conestoga en Ontario, ainsi que l'Université polytechnique Kwantlen en Colombie-Britannique, cet article de discussion met en lumière la dépendance précaire aux frais de scolarité internationaux et l'érosion de la communauté qui en résulte sur les campus. Enfin, les auteurs soutiennent que cette crise nécessite un « nouveau contrat social » pour l'enseignement supérieur canadien, préconisant une transformation fondamentale des modèles de financement et un engagement renouvelé envers l'intégrité institutionnelle et la mission publique.

Mots clés : collèges, immigration, internationalisation, précarité, financement, pérennité, crise

The Canadian postsecondary sector is facing the perfect storm. A sector that once celebrated the internationalization of its campuses and programs and looked forward to recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is now struggling to understand how changing Canadian federal immigration policy for international student mobility and postsecondary admissions from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) will impact their institutions in 2026 and beyond.

Two converging forces are exacerbating the challenges for Canadian postsecondary institutions. First, it is no secret that Canadian colleges and universities have been chronically underfunded from the provinces over the past few decades (Brennan et al., 2021). The deficiency of provincial funding has driven institutions to look at increasing revenue from international students whose average tuition fees are often five times higher than domestic students at the undergraduate level (Kirby, 2024). This fiscal reality made international students a lifeline for Canadian postsecondary institutions. These students are also a financial contributor to the Canadian economy. International students are

such a boon to the country that Canada's International Education Strategy 2019–2024 proudly stated that “in 2018, international students in Canada contributed an estimated \$21.6 billion to Canada's GDP [gross domestic product] and in 2016 supported almost 170,000 jobs for Canada's middle class” (Global Affairs Canada, 2019, Message from the Minister of International Trade Diversification). In 2022, international students injected about \$30.9 billion to Canada's GDP, which is about 1.2% of Canada's total GDP. These contributions also translated to 361,230 jobs to support the Canadian economy (Roslyn Kunin and Associates, 2023). Given that Global Affairs Canada commissioned the Roslyn Kunin and Associates report, the federal government is well aware of the economic benefit that international students contribute to Canada.

For years, colleges and universities had leaned heavily on international enrolment to offset declining domestic numbers and stagnant provincial funding. While the underfunding of Canada's postsecondary sector is a perennial challenge (Kaplan, 2025; McGrath, 2025), the changes to Canada's immigration policies that

dictate how international students can enter Canada, stipulations about their stay, and limitations to post-graduation work permits (PGWPs) have raised anxiety, uncertainty, and internal conflicts for colleges and universities.

Since 2024, the Liberal federal government has enacted comprehensive policy reforms aimed at regulating international student mobility (Alhmidi, 2025; ICEF Monitor, 2025; IRCC, 2024a, 2024b; MacDonald, 2024; Ronson, 2025; Usher, 2024b). These measures include the imposition in January 2025 of a national cap on the total number of international students permitted to study in Canada, alongside the introduction of new administrative instruments and procedural frameworks designed to actively manage and influence the academic, social, and immigration-related experiences of international students across the country. The cap reduced international student approvals to 437,000 annually and introduced Provincial or Territorial Attestation Letters (PALs) as a new gatekeeping mechanism for study permits (IRCC, 2025a). This added administrative layer has significantly constrained access to study permits, disproportionately affecting applicants from countries with lower approval rates, and intensifying institutional uncertainty (IRCC, 2025b; Lone, 2025; Rodrigues, 2025).

Section 220 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (2025) requires international students to remain enrolled at the Designated Learning Institution listed on their study permit. While intended to promote compliance, this provision significantly limits students' ability to change programs or institutions in response to evolving financial, academic, or personal circumstances. Moreover, further restrictions have been placed on the spousal open work permit, with eligibility limited to spouses of doctoral students, some master's students, and students in select professional bachelor's programs. Spouses of most college students are excluded. This change disproportionately affects families from low- and middle-income countries who must rely on spousal employment to cover tuition and living expenses.

These sweeping immigration policy changes have been described by many as a "blunt

instrument" that drives away international students, crushes postsecondary operating budgets, and undercuts the viability of academic programs (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2023; MacDonald, 2024; Sidway, 2024; Steven & Everson, 2024). The secondary impacts of these policy changes and the subsequent financial shortfall include aggressive deficit mitigation strategies, the elimination or scaling back of academic programs, and the loss of critical jobs and positions. A sector that was once cautiously optimistic about recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is now overcome with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

As the storm worsened, blame was passed around like a hot potato. The federal government pointed to "bad actors" among colleges who had overrecruited international students (Dhillon, 2024). Meanwhile, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/SEFPO, 2025b), the union representing college faculty, blamed both provincial underfunding and college administrations for chasing international tuition dollars. The Ontario government deflected, citing federal policy changes as the root cause (Alhmidi, 2025) and ignored their own provincial responsibility to adequately fund higher education.

The federal government had long signalled its intent to curb unchecked growth in international student enrolment, warning that if provinces and institutions failed to act, it would intervene. Reports from Ontario's Office of the Auditor General (2021) and the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability (2023) had also flagged the risks of overreliance on international student tuition. Strategic plans and financial statements showed exponential growth for the colleges and the financial boon international students brought. The institutional arrangements, legislation, ministerial directives, and reporting requirements suggest that oversight mechanisms existed (Kaplan, 2025).

This moderated discussion emerged from a collaborative partnership among five college and university professionals working across British Columbia and Ontario. It builds on a discussion panel convened alongside the Ca-

nadian Society for the Study of Higher Education conference in May 2025 (Al-Haque et al., 2025). The panel was guided by the following prompt: “Colleges and universities have been significantly impacted by recent social and political changes, including shifts in immigration policy, federal election outcomes, declining public funding, and increasing demand for workforce training. How are institutions responding to these changes, what challenges have they encountered, and what opportunities are emerging in this evolving landscape?” Drawing on our distinct institutional roles, each contributor in this moderated discussion expands upon their insight and experiences into how colleges and universities are navigating new fiscal realities and federal immigration policy changes affecting international students.

The discussion begins with the on-the-ground perspective of Oleg Legusov, an International Student Advisor from Seneca Polytechnic, who details the specific policy changes and their disorienting effect on students. Next, Janine Knight-Grofe, the Director of International Education at Durham College explores the operational and strategic scramble to respond and adapt to these sweeping institutional changes. Then Anne Charles, a recently retired faculty member from Conestoga College offers a candid view of growing faculty precarity, internal division, and the erosion of a sense of community. Next, Alan Davis, a former President of Kwantlen Polytechnic University provides an institutional perspective on the staggering financial implications and the difficult path forward. Rashed Al-Haque, the Associate Director of Policy Development and Planning at Camosun College, then synthesizes key ideas shared by the contributors, with thoughts toward the future for the sector. Through our distinct but complementary perspectives, we hope to demonstrate that the sudden shifts in federal immigration policy have done more than create a financial crisis: they have exposed the deep-seated vulnerabilities of Canada’s postsecondary sector, forcing a painful but essential conversation about its future sustainability, purpose, and values.

THE IMPACT ON STUDENTS: NAVIGATING IMMIGRATION UNCERTAINTY AND ITS IM- PACT ON INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

**By Oleg Legusov, International
Student Advisor at Seneca
Polytechnic**

Recent changes to Canadian immigration policy have reshaped the educational landscape for Seneca Polytechnic’s international students. Previously a stable and attractive pathway for education and immigration alike, Seneca Polytechnic must cope with shifting government priorities and the student anxieties they create. What was once a relatively predictable system has become increasingly uncertain. International students at our College must deal with sudden policy shifts, new eligibility requirements, and prolonged application processing delays. These changes have redefined not only who comes to Canada but also what they can expect once they arrive. The new rules extend beyond technical adjustments to immigration procedures. They raise foundational questions of accessibility, equity, and institutional capacity, with consequences felt by international students and the colleges that host them.

Although not codified as an official policy, processing times for new study permits and extensions have lengthened substantially. Extension applications, previously processed in about two months, increased up to four months in May 2025 (Minks, 2025). Such delays risk leaving students in “limbo status,” unable to confirm enrolment, pay tuition, or continue their employment.

The federal government has changed the eligibility criteria for PGWPs, which allow some graduates to remain in Canada for up to three years to gain employment experience. The permits are now limited to programs deemed to be aligned with labour-market priorities (IRCC, 2026). Health care, skilled trades, and technology programs are prioritized, while other

fields are in effect devalued. This pragmatic, outcome-oriented logic narrows educational choice by channelling students into programs dictated by policy rather than their personal or academic interests.

Compounding this challenge, the discontinuation of the Student Direct Stream (SDS), an expedited processing channel for students from countries such as India, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and several African nations (IRCC, 2024b), has substantially reduced access for Global South applicants, who previously benefited from shorter wait times and more predictable outcomes (TOI Education, 2025). Collectively, these measures have reshaped the international student experience, introducing new layers of risk, financial burden, and uncertainty.

Shifting Recruitment Strategies

The new immigration policies are altering how Seneca recruits international students. The cap on the number of international students who can come to Canada and the PAL quota system compels us to become more selective in issuing offers. Colleges have incentives to prioritize applicants from countries with historically higher visa approval rates to minimize the risk of “wasting” PALs on students likely to be refused. This logic, although rational, undermines diversity and equity, disadvantaging students from countries with low approval rates, which tend to be in the Global South.

Heightened competition for the limited number of PALs has transformed the recruitment marketplace. Seneca is competing fiercely with other postsecondary institutions for a finite number of international students. Some institutions have turned to specialized immigration support firms, such as BorderPass, to help streamline applications and reduce the risks associated with rejections.

Seneca has also enhanced our efforts to attract international students already in Canada. High school students on study permits represent a safer pool of applicants. Their immigration history is established, and their likelihood of approval is higher. Finally, Seneca is increasingly deploying financial incentives to attract international students, such as generous entrance

scholarships, signalling a shift toward a more marketized and competitive recruitment environment.

Challenges in International Student Advising

If quotas have reshaped recruitment, uncertainty has largely reshaped international student advising. Advisors must work in a constantly shifting environment where the rules governing study permits, PGWP eligibility, transition to permanent residency, spousal work permits, and other aspects of the international student experience can change at short notice. Advising international students has always been a complex task, requiring expertise in immigration and education. Under the new regime, my role has become increasingly fraught. Misinformation, even when unintended, can derail students' educational and immigration trajectories, putting at risk not only their education but their futures in Canada.

Restrictions on institutional mobility are a prime example. I must explain to students that changing their program, even for reasons such as financial hardship or mental health, could place them in violation of their study permit. Similarly, new spousal open work permit restrictions force advisors to deliver unwelcome news to students who had expected to bring spouses to Canada, obligating these staff members to act more like counsellors than advisors.

Extended processing times further complicate advising. Students facing study permit expiration are often left in legal limbo for months while awaiting extensions. Advisors must navigate these situations carefully, balancing encouragement against realism.

Finally, the rise of external immigration consultants adds another layer of complexity. Many students, frustrated by delays and anxious about outcomes, turn to private firms for advice, often at substantial financial cost. Seneca advisors are then left to correct inaccurate or misleading information, which places a strain on institutional resources and student trust.

The cumulative effect of these changes is a fundamental shift in how colleges recruit and support international students. Even though

the stated goals of the new policies are to ensure integrity, manage growth, and align education with labour-market needs, the unintended consequences are profound. Students face heightened barriers, families encounter financial strain, and colleges' international student advisors and recruiters are tasked with managing risks beyond their institutional responsibilities. Advisors spend less time on student development and more time mitigating immigration risks. The sector's role as a space of opportunity and inclusion is thus compromised.

OPPORTUNITY IN UNCERTAINTY: REIMAGINING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN CANADIAN COLLEGES

By Janine Knight-Grofe, Director, International Education at Durham College

This section of the moderated discussion explores how Canadian colleges, particularly Durham College, are responding to recent immigration policy shifts by reimagining the international student experience. In light of the recent immigration policy shifts and the major disruptions to students' lives described by Oleg Legusov, staff at Durham College where I work have been reimagining the international student experience. Through the collective efforts of staff, Durham College has strategically revised student supports in ways that hold potential for improved institutional resilience and inclusivity.

As has been established, the traditional recruitment environment for Canadian institutions has changed (Usher, 2024c). No longer are thousands of students being turned away from institutions that have reached their maximum capacity—instead, postsecondary institutions, and especially colleges, are doubling down on neoliberal internationalization. That is, institutions, particularly colleges, are hyper focused on competing with other institutions in order to continue to attract international students and

support the institutions' financial bottom lines. And competition is required. At colleges in Ontario, over 60% of operational funds come from tuition fees (Usher, 2024a).

However, with the drastic and rapid changes to immigration policies, it has become difficult to attract international students who are skeptical of whether they remain welcome in Canada and what their future will look like if they choose a Canadian education. For this reason, more and more students are looking for institutions that offer not just academic excellence, but a holistic, transformative experience (Gutema et al., 2024).

At Durham College, we've chosen to meet this moment not with hesitation, but with resolve. Indeed, while this period marks a crisis for all, at Durham College we also see it as a rare opportunity to reimagine the international student experience, and to do so in ways that are community connected, inclusive, and future focused.

Institutional Strategy

Our new Strategic Vision (Durham College, 2025) anticipated the high-flux environment we now find ourselves in. It built in the flexibility needed for all areas of the College to respond quickly and cohesively. This has been a critical asset. When immigration rules shifted and funding cuts were announced, we were able to act swiftly. However, the speed of these changes meant that some decisions, particularly around budget reductions and staffing, had to be made with limited time for consultation. Like many institutions, we experienced the pain of layoffs and program adjustments, and the emotional toll of those decisions is still felt. Yet these challenges have also pushed us to think differently about how we operate and what we value.

One of the most exciting developments has been our exploration of other forms of internationalization. Thinking beyond student mobility, we're considering how to internationalize the experience of all learners and staff, at low cost and regardless of their physical location. This includes virtual exchanges, global classrooms, and partnerships that align with our commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Devel-

opment Goals (SDGs). We're also seeking new funding sources and collaborative opportunities that reflect our strategic vision for future-proofing our graduates and our institution.

We are embedding intercultural competencies, sustainability literacy, and global problem-solving skills into our programming. These are not optional extras; they are essential attributes for the next generation of leaders, innovators, and changemakers.

While strategic planning has enabled institutional agility, the human impact of these changes, particularly on international students, requires equally thoughtful and compassionate responses.

A Seamless Journey

The current climate of immigration uncertainty has imposed a significant human cost on international students, manifesting in heightened anxiety, financial distress, and emotional strain. A qualitative study by Park and Shimada (2022) in the United States found that abrupt policy changes trigger severe psychological distress and uncertainty about visa status, employment prospects, and academic continuity. Here in Canada, the current uncertainty has students reporting feelings of isolation, cultural displacement, and fear of deportation, all of which undermine their sense of belonging (Ankita, 2025). Maintaining a welcoming and inclusive campus environment under these conditions is increasingly challenging while growing the number of international students remains financially essential. For this reason, we are prompted to reflect deeply on what growth can look like, not just in terms of enrolment, but in terms of impact. We're asking ourselves: How can we support international students to become catalysts for innovation and community development? How can we ensure their time at Durham College is transformative, not transactional?

The answers to these questions are taking shape. To meet these evolving needs, colleges, including ours, are adapting student services by expanding culturally responsive mental health supports, offering individualized immigration advising, and integrating flexible, trauma-informed approaches to student engagement. Dedicated

international student advisors offer personalized guidance on everything from visa renewals to academic planning. We've expanded our mental health services to include culturally sensitive counselling and multilingual support, recognizing that international students often face unique stressors related to homesickness, cultural adjustment, and academic pressure. We also launched a peer mentorship program that pairs new international students with experienced peers who can help them navigate campus life, build community, and access resources. Our International Student Welcome events include orientation sessions tailored to the needs of newcomers, covering topics such as banking, transportation, health care, and intercultural communication. These events are designed not just to inform, but to foster belonging and connection. Housing support has become a critical area of focus. With rising rental costs and limited availability (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023), we've partnered with local housing providers to secure safe and affordable accommodations for incoming students. We also offer workshops on tenant rights, budgeting, and navigating the Canadian rental market, practical knowledge that empowers students to make informed decisions.

Career readiness is another pillar of our support strategy. Working with our career development office, international students have access to resume clinics, mock interviews, and employer networking events. We've also introduced specialized programming that helps students understand Canadian workplace culture and employment regulations. As international students approach graduation, we offer the Graduating International Student Experience, tailored to their unique needs and equipping students with critical post-graduation resources. These efforts are essential not only for retention but also for fostering resilience and empowerment among international students. Regardless of whether international students remain in Canada after completing their studies—and noting that 70% intend to do so (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2024)—they will leave Durham College not only with credentials, but also with confidence, connections, and a clear sense of purpose.

Going Forward

Certainly, the road ahead is not without its challenges. The persistent immigration shocks that come in rapid succession create uncertainty and strain for students and institutions alike and the resulting funding constraints limit our ability to scale up promising initiatives. As well, the emotional impact of these rapid changes on staff, faculty, and students cannot be underestimated.

However, these challenges also present opportunities. They force us to be more intentional, more collaborative, and more innovative in our approaches. Colleges, by their very nature, are well-positioned to respond to change. Our nimbleness, our community connections, and our focus on applied learning give us a unique advantage in times of flux. Therefore, uncertainty, while uncomfortable, can be a powerful catalyst for growth and to imagine new possibilities.

At Durham College, senior leaders see internationalization as central to the success of our students and the economic vitality of our region. We are embracing this moment as a chance to reinvent the international student experience, and in doing so, to shape a future that is more inclusive and more resilient, for students and for our institution.

A FACULTY PERSPECTIVE FROM ONTARIO'S COLLEGES: LIVING THROUGH THE FALLOUT OF FEDERAL IMMIGRATION POLICY

By Anne Charles, Faculty Member at Conestoga College

I recently retired from Conestoga College under the 2025 Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive Program, a cost-cutting measure triggered by declining revenues and a dramatic drop in international student enrolment. My reflections are shaped by decades of experience as a full-time professor, protected by a Collective Agreement, and immersed in the evolving landscape of Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology (CAATs). What follows is not a policy analysis

per se, but a lived account of how federal immigration policies reshaped our institutions and the lives within them.

Prelude: 2012–2024

A direct result from earlier international education policies was expansion. Growth in my College from 2012–2024 was staggering, with new programs, new campuses, and new faculty. Despite the disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, Conestoga grew from a mid-size college with a full-time student enrolment count of 10,461 in 2012–2013, to the largest college in Ontario with 41,393 full-time students enrolled in the 2023–2024 academic year (Charles et al., 2025).

Deferred maintenance and campus upgrades resumed as funding improved. Increased student numbers led to space shortages, prompting faculty offices to be repurposed as classrooms or labs. Remote teaching made backpacks mobile workstations. Zoom-based school meetings introduced many new faces, requiring repeated orientation and discussions on academic integrity, wellness, and peer mentoring. The term “course lead” emerged informally as new faculty sought guidance. Institutional memory became vital. The learning management system standardized course delivery, offering pre-made materials. However, faculty lacked copyright over their work, adding stress, especially when materials were created during unpaid time due to insufficient preparation allowances.

Inside the Classroom: Shifting Demographics and Rising Tensions

Before the international student cap, classrooms had become increasingly diverse, with international students bringing rich perspectives but also unique challenges. Language barriers, cultural differences, and varying academic preparedness and expectations required new pedagogical approaches. Faculty were expected to adapt. In-service professional development support for teaching and learning was widely available in my College with contract faculty being paid an hourly rate to take courses; full-time faculty did not receive additional compensation.

However, the rapid growth in international enrolment had created a system that was unsustainable, and when the policy changed, the collapse was swift. Faculty felt the tremors immediately as programs were suspended or cancelled, and campus expansions were paused. My colleagues, many of whom had been working on contract for the College for decades, together with more recent contract hires, found themselves without work, and in some cases with their emails unanswered. The layoffs were not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they were people we taught alongside, mentored, and relied on. The emotional toll was palpable (Alhmidi, 2025).

The Human Cost of Layoffs and Cutbacks

The layoffs that followed the Colleges' budget shortfall were staggering. OPSEU/SEFPO estimates that nearly 10,000 jobs have been lost across Ontario colleges, including formal layoffs, voluntary retirements, and non-renewals (Alhmidi, 2025; OPSEU/SEFPO, 2025b). At Conestoga, the atmosphere shifted overnight. Emails announcing departures became routine. What little we had in terms of sense of community that was already strained by the rapid growth, began to fray. The ripple effects extended beyond campus walls, into families, communities, and local economies.

In meetings and conversations, I often heard frustration from contract faculty who felt undervalued. Some contract faculty referred to full-time faculty as "privileged"—a term that stung but also reflected a painful truth about the tensions resulting from the stratification within our ranks and the stressors from exponential growth. Even among full-time faculty, the pressures mounted. For us, the collective agreement and the Standard Workload Formula (SWF) offered some protection, but the demands of teaching, adapting curriculum, and supporting our colleagues and students in crisis stretched many of us thin.

The crisis also reignited long-standing tensions around employment equity. Partial-load faculty (i.e., those contracted to teach 7–12 contact hours weekly) had gained some security protections and benefits following the 2017 faculty strike, but part-time (those who teach fewer than 7 contact hours) and sessional (teach more than 12 contact hours per week) faculty

were excluded from union representation. That changed in April 2025, when the Ontario Labour Relations Board recognized their vote to join OPSEU/SEFPO (2025a). It was a historic moment, that many celebrated, but it also highlights how long these educators had been left out of the conversation.

Even with unionization, the path forward remains uncertain. The lack of a separate bargaining unit for part-time and sessional faculty at present means that negotiations are complex. Meanwhile, the disparities persist.

Looking Ahead

With fewer international students confirming their enrolment in Fall 2025, more layoffs and last-minute program suspensions (including in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields) continue. The College even with its budget surplus of \$121.8M in 2024–2025, now has 1,518 fewer faculty, the vast majority of whom were contractual (Williams, 2025). As Ontario colleges brace for further cuts and restructuring, the role of faculty must be included in forward discussions and recovery plans. Faculty have academic and professional insights into what works and what does not. We understand the needs of our students, and we have lived through the consequences of policy decisions. The upcoming federal Auditor General's inquiry that commences in 2026 (Singer, 2025b) may shed more light on the matter, but in the meantime, we must continue to speak out.

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IRCC POLICY CHANGES AT KWANTLEN POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

By Alan Davis, Former President of Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Ontario's colleges were the primary intended target of IRCC's policies (Ouellet & Crawley, 2024), but the fact that the rest of Canadian postsecondary institutions have had to endure the same approach, with no differentiation to re-

flect local needs and circumstances, has had a devastating impact on colleges and universities across the country. As the former President of Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), I share how federal policy changes are affecting us on the west coast.

KPU is a special purpose, regional teaching university serving the area of metro Vancouver lying south of the Fraser River in British Columbia. It evolved from being a community college, and continues to reflect those roots in its programming, its academic policies, and in the work and attitudes of its instructors. In the fiscal year 2023–2024, the annual operating budget peaked at about \$285 million. KPU offers four-year degrees in Arts, Business, Science, Health, Design, and most importantly for international students, one- and two-year certificates and diplomas and upgrading pathways that are comparable to those found in colleges and institutes across Canada.

In recent years, the international student population at KPU, largely drawn from the Punjab in India, grew significantly, peaking in fiscal year 2022–2023 at 8,064 or 38% of the total student headcount of 21,076. (The calendar, academic, and financial years are all different at KPU. The focus here is on impacts driven by reduced revenues, so the fiscal year of April 1 to March 31 is used.) KPU experienced some challenges with this higher concentration of international students, with some instructors concerned about the impact on academic life, the community sharing stories about the lack of appropriate housing (KPU has no student residences), and some students seeking financial and other help.

Our University responded to these issues in several ways. It planned enrolment targets to reduce the overall ratio of international students; it made successful efforts to diversify its international student population; it added a wide array of additional services and supports for international students; and it generated new scholarships and grants for international students. In 2023, it was reported that the overall satisfaction and success of international students was even higher than that of domestic students (Marin, 2023).

The benefits of having such a robust level of international student activity were many. From the revenue generated by international student tuition, KPU was able to invest significantly in additional academic and student services across the institution, Indigenous leadership, an Office of Equity and Inclusive Communities, new programs in emerging areas (such as Entertainment Arts), applied research support, an expanded Teaching and Learning Commons, and sustainability initiatives.

For many years, KPU's operating grant from the province of British Columbia did not grow with inflation, and, like many others across Canada, the institution was encouraged to rely on tuition and fees to balance the budget and to achieve its mission. In recent years, provincial funding has improved, but the dependence on tuition and fees, especially from international students, has remained substantial. KPU has also had to rely on other sources of revenue to offset its operational costs.

KPU was always aware that there was a risk to this reliance on international student revenue, such as geopolitical tensions, major disasters (although KPU fared well during the COVID-19 pandemic years), and the ability to compete in a dynamic and aggressive recruitment arena. KPU never thought the risk would be from the Canadian federal government.

At first, there was optimism. The robust recruitment team in KPU International, with its diversification approach, seemed well-positioned to rebuild and stabilize the flow of international students. This hope persisted despite the extra hoops that IRCC continued to establish. The hope also endured through the constantly changing rules around PGWP eligibility, rules that were based on spurious labour market data that fail to reflect local circumstances. However, in addition to all the policy changes and difficulties, the rate of approval of study permits for fully qualified students dropped significantly, for no apparent reason.

The impacts on KPU have been significant and are expected to get worse. KPU was fortunate to be able, with the support and approval of the provincial government, to use some substantial surplus funds (acquired from a land sale)

for targeted expenditures over a few years, thus softening the financial impact in the short term.

Enrolments in international students for fiscal year 2024–2025 dropped to 30% of the total student population, reducing total revenues by \$40 million.

In fiscal year 2025–2026, international students are projected to be 25% of the total student population, and the total revenues from international tuition and fees will be reduced by another \$49 million. The reduction in the projected number of students means that fewer class sections, especially in Business and Arts, will be needed. Even with the allocation of nearly \$26 million of expenses to the land sale surplus, roughly 100 jobs will be lost at KPU. The picture for fiscal year 2026–2027 is even worse and the one-time, deferred revenues will run out in about 2028–2029.

There are numerous ideas being discussed to cut costs, re-think how work is done, and look for new streams of revenue. KPU will be forced to adapt and to re-focus its priorities, to do less with less. The internal tensions at KPU are difficult, especially (and understandably) between the labour unions and the administration.

The budget reductions, organizational restructuring, and tense relationships between labour unions and administrations are some examples of the impact of the sudden IRCC policy changes. Repeated meetings with IRCC representatives during 2024 and 2025 have so far had almost no effect save for changes to some of the most egregious policies, such as excluding degrees in Nursing offered by colleges from the list of eligible programs for PGWPs.

IRCC shows no interest in the impact on Canada's higher education sector, saying that funding for the sector is the province's responsibility (Stevens, 2026). The arrival of a new Minister (Singer, 2025a) has given some hope of a more rational and collaborative approach, and the announcement of a review by the Auditor General of Canada into IRCC is welcome (Singer, 2025b).

A CALL FOR STRUCTURAL RENEWAL: TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR CANADIAN COLLEGES

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The perspectives gathered here paint a stark and unified picture. The abrupt changes to Canada's federal immigration policy in 2024 and 2025 did not just create a challenge for Canadian colleges but triggered a full-blown systemic crisis across the postsecondary sector. In this section, I will synthesize the discussion from my colleagues above and express some of my own insights as a college administrator, policy-maker, and higher education researcher.

The shared experiences of college and university professionals in this discussion demonstrate how abrupt and poorly thought-out federal policy changes are impacting students, faculty members, administrators, college finances, and the ability of advisors to support international students. What began as a set of bureaucratic hurdles for institutions due to restrictive immigration policies quickly cascaded into the profound human cost of job losses and fractured internal communities, including conflict between faculty members and administrators. Meanwhile, college and university presidents, administrators, and Boards grapple with staggering financial deficits and simultaneously try to reimagine a more sustainable and resilient future.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a story that goes beyond budget lines, deficits, and any single policy decision. Rather they expose the deep-seeded vulnerabilities of a postsecondary education sector that relies on the political currents of the day and the money international students bring into Canada. While it may be easy to point the finger at federal immigration policy changes, postsecondary institutions must remember that IRCC's policy shifts are not necessarily the cause of the crisis but rather the trigger that exposed the precarious

environment in which Canadian postsecondary institutions exist. Diminished provincial funding to colleges and universities, increased competition for international students, ever-changing federal immigration policy, and strained institutional commitments to supporting all students have created an anxious institutional environment where distrust and conflict fester. While the governments turn their back against legitimate concerns of the higher education sector, ordinary people are left to paddle through the storm. International students face greater restrictions and financial barriers due to changing visa and employment restrictions, college employees fear job losses, and administrators find themselves in conflict with their colleagues. Any attempt to address the systemic issues that give rise to these problems is eclipsed by the fractured institutional community.

While it is important to adapt to changing federal policy landscapes, a path forward requires a more robust and fundamental transformation of the entire postsecondary education sector, guided by critical questions geared towards the viability of public higher education in Canada. There questions include, but are not limited to: “what is the core public purpose of higher education as we approach the midpoint of the 21st century?,” “how should that purpose be sustainably funded?,” “how can institutions rebuild trust between administration, faculty, and students in the wake of such profound disruptions?,” and “how can the sector work with federal and provincial governments to create predictable, humane, and sustainable policy, rather than imposing whip-lash-inducing changes?”

Addressing all these questions in detail is out of scope for this moderated discussion; however, several realities remain. Postsecondary institutions continue to provide higher education access for a diversity of students, educate a new citizenry, and train Canada’s future labour force. Canada’s future success is thus contingent on the success of Canadian colleges and universities. It is in the federal and provincial governments’ best interests to work collaboratively with the postsecondary education sector to achieve Canada’s social and economic goals. The funding model for higher

education must be re-examined fundamentally. Just as provinces need to allocate more money into the sector to support lifelong learning, skills upgrading, education, and training, colleges and universities need to adopt a multipronged approach to maintain institutional viability and think critically about their reliance on international students to be financially healthy. There needs to be a renewed focus on rebuilding trust and relationships between all stakeholders at the institutional level. College and university administrators and employees must meet in the middle to respectfully resolve grievances and conflict through established labour relations practices. During these conversations, employees, including faculty members and administrators, must remember to centre students and their learning. Last, all levels of government and the postsecondary sector must communicate more effectively to better understand each other’s concerns, restrictions, and possibilities. The challenges laid bare through the perspectives shared by all the professionals in this moderated discussion is a call to forge a new social contract for postsecondary education in Canada. This new social contract must not be built on volatile policy changes, political agendas, and neoliberal thinking but rather on a renewed commitment to public investment, institutional integrity, and the human beings at its heart.

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