

A NEW ERA? A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA'S RESPONSE TO FEDERAL INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POLICY

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Abstract

Canada's federal and institutional policies have long been aligned to attract and retain international students and skilled immigrants. This policy landscape shifted dramatically in January 2024, when Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada announced a national cap on study permits. This article examines the impact of these new federal policy measures on research-intensive universities. Specifically, it asks: (1) How did universities interpret and respond to these policy changes? and (2) How did they adapt organizationally? Drawing on institutional theory and a case of the University of Manitoba, we introduce the concept of *crisis isomorphism* to explain how universities may navigate abrupt policy disruptions. The study contributes to understanding the shifting terrain of internationalization in Canada amid heightened federal intervention.

Keywords: international students, federal policy, internationalization of higher education, policy analysis, institutional theory, University of Manitoba, Canada

Résumé

Les politiques fédérales et institutionnelles du Canada ont été longtemps bien alignées pour acquérir et retenir les étudiants internationaux et les immigrants qualifiés. Ce paysage politique a considérablement changé en janvier 2024 quand Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada avait annoncé une limite nationale sur les permis d'études. Ce papier examine l'impact des mesures de ces nouvelles politiques sur les universités élevées en recherche. Spécifiquement, sa demande : (1) Comment est-ce que les universités ont interprété et répondu à ces changements politiques? (2) Comment est-ce qu'ils ont adapté organisationnellement? S'appuyant sur la théorie institutionnelle et un cas de l'Université du Manitoba, on introduit le concept de crise d'isomorphisme pour expliquer comment les universités pourraient naviguer les

perturbations soudaines en politique. Cette étude contribue à la compréhension du terrain changeant de l'internationalisation au Canada parmi les interventions fédérales amplifiées.

Mots clés : étudiants internationaux, politiques fédérales, internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur, analyse politique, théorie institutionnelle, Université du Manitoba, Canada

INTRODUCTION

After years of federal policies designed to support the recruitment and retention of international students, the January 2024 announcement by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) came as a significant shock to provinces and higher education institutions alike (Government of Canada, 2024a). The federal government introduced a two-year cap on post-secondary study permit applications, representing a 35% reduction in new international student permits (Government of Canada, 2024b). These measures were implemented at a time when Canada had surpassed one million international students and was widely regarded as a global leader in international education (Greenfield, 2024).

Simultaneously, leaders of Canada's research-intensive universities advocated for more targeted federal policies to attract graduate students and research talent, emphasizing their importance to Canada's position as a global knowledge economy (U15, 2025). Against this backdrop, the federal government announced additional restrictions on September 18, 2024, including extending study permit caps to master's and doctoral students. Beginning in 2025–2026, all international students were required to obtain a Provincial (Territorial) Attestation Letter (PAL; Government of Canada, 2024c). These restrictions directly challenge the strategic priorities of research-intensive universities, which view international graduate recruitment and retention as central to strengthening Canada's research ecosystem, innovation capacity, and global competitiveness (Government of Canada, 2024c). The Auditor General's 2026 report notes that reforms initially intended to

reduce international student numbers by approximately 10% resulted in significantly larger declines. For example, Manitoba experienced a 62% decrease (Office of the Auditor General, 2026, p. 41).

Grounded in institutional theory, this article examines the impact of these federal policy changes on research-intensive universities through a case study of a major research university in Manitoba. Specifically, it asks: (1) How did the institution interpret and respond to the policy changes? and (2) How did they adapt organizationally? It more broadly examines these policy shifts as a recalibration of federal involvement in international education and raises important questions about institutional adaptation and intergovernmental dynamics.

Internationalization as both policy and practice varies across institutions, jurisdictions, and sectors (Tamtik et al., 2020). By focusing on Manitoba—a prairie province that remains underexamined in the literature yet highly dependent on immigration and international students—this study addresses a significant regional gap. The case illustrates how sudden federal intervention at a national scale triggers regional impacts and institutional-level strategy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars note that, until 2010, Canada was distinctive in allowing universities to shape their own internationalization agendas with minimal federal direction (Trilokekar et al., 2009). Although education remains under provincial jurisdiction, the federal role has gradually expanded, becoming more visible with the 2014 International Education Strategy. This strategy

signals a more coordinated national approach, outlining global priorities alongside financial and migration management commitments (Bozheva, 2024). Even prior to this, federal policies, particularly through IRCC, had begun linking international education with immigration pathways, positioning Canada as a global leader in attracting and retaining international students (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018; Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2017).

This expansion was supported by coordinated federal–provincial governance, particularly through Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs), which created dedicated streams for international students from study to permanent residency. By 2022 all provinces had established such streams (Bozheva, 2024), reflecting a stable, multilevel governance model linking immigration and higher education. However, this alignment shifted significantly in January 2024, when the federal government announced caps on incoming international students with limited provincial consultation (Brunner, 2025). This marked a clear departure from earlier expansionary policies and disrupted established governance relationships.

Prior to this period and in contrast to rising nationalism elsewhere, Canada had maintained an open and welcoming stance, with international student numbers rebounding strongly after COVID-19 to exceed one million by 2023 (Brunner & Cervantes-Macías, 2025; Buckner et al., 2022; Desai-Trilokekar & El Masry, 2022). However, post-COVID, public policy discourse surrounding international students shifted notably. Rather than being framed as contributors to economic growth and innovation, students were increasingly portrayed as causes of housing shortages and labour market pressures (Brunner & Trilokekar, 2024; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025). These anti-immigration narratives reinforced pressures on the government to introduce restrictive measures. The resulting policy changes have had significant governance implications: provinces have been forced to recalibrate independently, and institutions—many reliant on international student tuition—are facing acute enrolment declines and financial strain (Liddle, 2025). These developments signal a

move away from coordinated multilevel governance toward a more fragmented and contested policy environment (see Stein et al., 2025), fundamentally reshaping the governance and political framing of international education in Canada.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional theory, a central strand of organizational theory, examines how universities evolve in response to pressures from their external environments, including government policy reforms (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Olsen, 2007). Beyond environmental adaptation, several strands of institutional theory (e.g., critical institutionalism, institutional logics) explicitly foreground the role of power and agency in processes of institutional change (Oliver, 1992; Scott, 2005), recognizing that universities are not merely passive recipients of external pressures but can actively shape their responses. Within this tradition, universities are typically understood as adaptive organizations and/or complex systems that respond strategically to regulatory, normative, and cultural expectations.

Our article is grounded in the concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), a foundational mechanism within institutional theory that explains why organizations in different contexts often converge in structure and practice. Isomorphism provides a lens for understanding how and why universities may respond similarly to comparable external pressures (see Oliver, 1992). *Coercive isomorphism* arises from formal and informal pressures exerted by governments and regulatory bodies; for example, stricter regulations on IS mobility create conditions in which compliance is required or strongly incentivized. Such pressures encourage convergence as institutions adjust to maintain legitimacy and secure critical resources. *Mimetic isomorphism* occurs when universities imitate the strategies of more established or successful institutions in order to manage uncertainty and enhance legitimacy or efficiency. *Normative isomorphism*, by contrast, stems from profession-

al networks, accreditation regimes, and shared academic standards that shape common organizational approaches.

Rapidly shifting policy environments introduce an additional layer of complexity to institutional responses. In higher education scholarship, scholars have increasingly invoked the concepts of “crisis” and “crisis management” (Karlsson & Offord, 2023; Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018), particularly in the context of COVID-19. Crises are generally understood as infrequent but consequential events characterized by ambiguity, urgency, and potentially severe impacts (Simola, 2014). They represent moments of disruption in which established norms, routines, and values are unsettled, compelling organizations to make high-stakes decisions under compressed timelines and heightened uncertainty (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018; Karlsson & Offord, 2023).

Building on this literature, we propose the concept of *crisis isomorphism* to describe a distinct form of policy convergence triggered by acute and immediate crisis conditions. This term suggests a larger, systemic convergence driven by institutional needs, rather than mimicking quick coping strategies under pressure (see Lee & Carruthers, 2024). While institutional responses in such contexts may resemble mimetic or coercive processes, crisis isomorphism differs in important respects. Convergence occurs not primarily because policies are formally mandated (*coercive*), demonstrably effective best practices (*mimetic*), or professionally endorsed (*normative*), but because they signal decisiveness, control, and risk mitigation in a volatile environment. Under crisis conditions, policies spread rapidly due to urgency, political pressure, reputational risk, and the imperative to demonstrate responsiveness. Resilience and survival, rather than long-term strategic alignment, become the dominant logics shaping institutional behaviour.

The concept of crisis isomorphism is particularly salient for understanding institutional responses during the recent period of abrupt and unforeseen policy shifts in Canadian internationalization context. After years of relatively coordinated policy development supporting

internationalization, the sudden introduction of restricted study permits and other federally regulated measures created acute uncertainty—especially for institutions that had become financially dependent on international enrolments. For research-intensive universities such as the University of Manitoba, these developments necessitated rapid shifts in recruitment strategies, financial planning, policy orientation, and program delivery under compressed timelines. In this context, coercive federal constraints generated substantial financial and procedural pressures, challenging not only operational stability but also institutional identity and long-term sustainability within the provincial higher education landscape.

METHODOLOGY

We employed a comprehensive policy review alongside a qualitative case study approach to collect and analyze data. The study began with a systematic review of federal policy documents to critically examine policy approaches, shifts, and associated messaging related to international students and international education. These policies were further analyzed within the broader context of national trends in immigration, nationalism, and populism, consistent with principles of critical policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009; Young & Diem, 2017).

Case Study: University of Manitoba

A qualitative case study design was selected to explore organizational responses at the institutional level. Case study methodology enables in-depth examination of complex social phenomena within their real-world contexts (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Our case focused on the University of Manitoba, where we examined institutional processes unfolding in response to recent federal policy changes, particularly within a research-intensive university setting.

Manitoba, a prairie province in central Canada, has a population of approximately 1.5 million (Statistics Canada, 2025). While all Canadian provinces have recorded growth in international

students' numbers, Manitoba has consistently ranked among the top performers, second only to Ontario in year-over-year growth (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018). Strong provincial policy support has reinforced this trend. In November 2001, Manitoba became the first province to introduce a dedicated provision for international students, and by 2010, the province had established the *International Education Stream: Graduate Internship Pathway* to attract highly educated international graduates (Bozheva, 2024, p. 1458). Over time, Manitoba's programs became province-exclusive in their selection of international graduates. By 2010, while most provinces offered only one international student-designated immigration stream, Manitoba had five, demonstrating a clear provincial commitment to positioning international students as future immigrants (Bozheva, 2024). Manitoba is also the only Canadian province with an *International Education Act* (2016), providing a regulatory framework to support its internationalization efforts.

The University of Manitoba, the province's largest research-intensive institution, is a cornerstone of the local knowledge economy, generating over \$7.3 billion in economic activity supported by international students (UM News, 2023). As of fall 2024, the University's student population totaled 31,331, with international students representing 21.3% of the student body (University of Manitoba, 2025a). Internationalization is central to the University's mission. Its Institutional Strategic Plan, *Momentum: Leading Change Together (2024–2029)*, emphasizes welcoming "the increasing numbers of first-generation and international students" (University of Manitoba, 2024a, p. 7).

Thus, the selection of the University of Manitoba as a case study was important for several reasons. First, Manitoba is a smaller province, with fewer higher education institutions than provinces such as Ontario or British Columbia. As a result, federal policy changes may exert a heightened impact on the provincial higher education ecosystem, creating an amplified crisis context. Second, as a research-intensive institution, the University of Manitoba enrolls a substantial proportion of international gradu-

ate students who contribute significantly to the research workforce. This makes the University particularly sensitive to policy shifts affecting international students' study permits and immigration pathways. Third, institutions in smaller provinces often adopt creative strategies to sustain research capacity and internationalization goals, potentially revealing innovative responses shaped by what may be described as "crisis isomorphism." Finally, the relative accessibility of institutional policies, public statements, and internal communications supported the feasibility and rigor of our qualitative case study.

Data Sources

The study draws primarily on document analysis. Federal data sources included policy reports, government-issued press releases, and official statements from IRCC. Institutional data included public announcements, Senate and Board of Governors meeting minutes, admission guidelines, and program-level directives at the University of Manitoba. Internal communications, including email correspondence, were accessible to one of the authors due to their administrative role within the institution. The use of internal documents complied with the University's formal ethics approval process to ensure confidentiality, regulatory compliance, and responsible reporting. These internal materials provided additional insight into institutional decision making processes. Data were collected systematically between January 2024 and January 2025, capturing a period of significant policy transformation.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify patterns and trace shifting policy dynamics. All documents were read multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of policy developments and institutional responses. Both deductive and inductive coding strategies were used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell, 1998). Deductive codes were derived from the research questions (e.g., reactions to policy change, organizational re-

sponsiveness), while inductive codes emerged directly from the data (e.g., capacity constraints, reputational risk). Themes were interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework and relevant scholarship.

FINDINGS

Federal Policy Changes

Prior to the 2024 announcement, the federal government had published two international education strategies: *Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity* (2014–2019), followed by *Building on Success: Canada's International Education Strategy* (2019–2024). Both these strategies signalled a consistent message of encouraging growth. However, in January 2024, the federal government reversed this earlier orientation, announcing a series of restrictive policy measures.

Effective September 1, 2024, a two-year cap was introduced on international student admissions and visa processing, targeting a 35% reduction in undergraduate enrolments while exempting graduate (master's and doctoral) and K–12 students (Government of Canada, 2025a). Additional regulations were put in place for financial requirements, work permits, and spousal work permits. International undergraduate students were now required to obtain PALs from their intended province of study to confirm inclusion in annual study permit allocations (Government of Canada, 2026). Overall intake targets were reduced, with a further 10% decrease planned, lowering the 2025 and 2026 international student target to 437,000 (Government of Canada, 2026). Several other mobility restrictions were intensified (see Government of Canada, 2024d, 2025b). Of particular significance to our article is the September 2025 announcement that extended the intake caps and PAL requirements to master's and doctoral students (Shank, 2026). Overall, these rapid policy changes reflect a shift toward a more restricted, monitored, and regulated framework for international students, with preferential treatment largely limited to graduate students and those in fields aligned with critical labour market needs.

Outcomes and Impact of Federal Policy Changes

As a result, Canada experienced a dramatic decline in international student enrolments (Government of Canada, 2025c). Graduate programs have been particularly affected, with study permit approvals down 35% in early 2024 and only 17,500 graduate students approved in the first half of 2025. This reversal of years of steady growth has led to double-digit enrolment declines across key disciplines, including engineering, medical residencies, and the sciences (ApplyBoard, 2024). The financial impact was felt across the sector, with reports indicating widespread staff layoffs, faculty terminations, and program closures, all direct outcomes of the federal policy changes (see Nash, 2024).

University administrators have criticized this policy rollout as haphazard, cumbersome, and poorly communicated (MacDonald, 2024). Overall, the post-secondary sector responded with dismay and confusion (Greenfield, 2024). Although eventually federal policy lifted previous caps on graduate students and aimed to provide preferential treatment for master's and doctoral students, recognizing their economic value, our study indicates these measures have been insufficient. Graduate admissions continue to be significantly impacted within an overall policy environment that remains highly restrictive (MacDonald, 2024).

Institutional Impact and Response to Federal Policy Changes

The 2024 federal cap on study permits placed significant financial pressure on Manitoba's higher education institutions, threatening both revenue streams and programs dependent on international student enrolment. The federal government allocated international students' study permits based on the population share of each province and territory (Manitoba Government, 2026). Manitoba received 10% fewer study permits than the previous year, translating into hundreds of lost students and millions in foregone tuition revenue—estimated at \$5–7 million (Manitoba Government, 2026; University of Manitoba, 2024b).

The University of Manitoba witnessed large decline in new international applications. In a matter of two years—from fall 2023 to fall 2025—it lost over 700 international students, with graduate student enrolments dropping close to 80% (University of Manitoba, 2026). The university also hosts students from the International College of Manitoba (ICM), a private institution that offers on-campus courses to international high school students preparing for university admission. Between 40% and 50% of international students admitted to the university come through ICM (University of Manitoba, 2024b). The federal policy changes have disrupted this pipeline, further compounding financial and enrolment pressures.

Initially, universities considered raising tuition fees for domestic students to offset revenue losses. However, Board of Governors meeting minutes indicate that higher domestic enrolment would not compensate for declining international student numbers. The University of Manitoba's relatively low tuition covers only a fraction of program costs, leaving significant budgetary pressure despite increased domestic enrolment (University of Manitoba, 2024c).

Manitoba's Minister of Advanced Education and Training, Renée Cable, criticized the federal government for making its policy decisions largely "without consultation and without consideration for the real-world impacts on provinces" (Manitoba Government, 2026, para. 2). She described the approach as a blunt, nationwide measure that disproportionately harms provinces like Manitoba, emphasizing: "We want international students here...we want them to stay and build a life here" (Shebahkeget, 2024, paras. 5, 27). Cable highlighted the steep declines in enrolment and revenue, noting that the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology closed after international enrolment dropped by more than 55%. The policy "created uncertainty for students and post-secondary institutions... sending a message abroad that international students aren't valued here" said Neil Cooke, the Institute's CEO (Hobson, 2026, para. 2).

Institutional Response by Way of New Organizational Policies and Procedures

In the fall of 2024 during Senate meetings, the first order of business for University of Manitoba President Dr. Benarroch was reporting on international student updates, underscoring the issue's significance as an emerging policy crisis. Graduate international students, in particular, were a matter of serious concern. In November 2024, President Benarroch reported that "new international graduate student enrolment at the University had decreased by 28% compared to the previous year" (University of Manitoba, 2024d, p. 4). By January, coinciding with application deadlines, the reported decline had reached 50% (University of Manitoba, 2024e). Consequently, a central concern became how to attract international graduate students and secure their enrolments early in the admissions cycle.

Immediately following the announcement of the federal cap, an email to graduate-level administrators stated: "This [federal cap] will require changes to our admission process moving forward" (University of Manitoba, personal communication, September 19, 2024). Subsequent administrative meetings acknowledged the challenges of adapting admissions policy amidst policy uncertainty and continual regulatory changes, including uncertainty regarding the number of PALs to be allocated. One proposal involved requiring students to submit a small deposit upon accepting an admission offer (University of Manitoba, 2024e); however, this measure was ultimately deemed inappropriate and was not implemented.

In response to the federal cap, the University shortened admissions deadlines: "We are recommending that this deadline be decreased to 10 days" (University of Manitoba, personal communication, December 11, 2024). This adjustment aimed to secure enrolments more quickly and manage intake numbers under federal constraints, thereby reducing the risk of losing applicants to competing institutions. Applied to both domestic and international stu-

dents, the policy shift signalled procedural fairness while demonstrating the University's effort to maintain institutional control amid external uncertainty.

To further mitigate volatility in this policy environment, graduate administrators were advised to "have your admission committees meet and review applications as soon as the application deadlines pass," "rank order the applications," and "consider how the potential reduction in international students in your graduate programs will affect your offering of graduate courses" (University of Manitoba, personal communication, October 7, 2024). The University also acted proactively at the programmatic level. Board of Governors documents outlined several action items, including the "revision and redesign of program and course offerings," "working to expand high-demand programs," "increasing supports for student retention and graduation," and the "revitalization of learning spaces" (University of Manitoba, 2024c, p. 6). By asking programs to assess how reduced international enrolments might affect graduate course offerings, the University explicitly linked admissions decisions to long-term program sustainability.

Throughout these institutional discussions and policy adjustments, there was sustained interest in understanding how graduate programs at other universities were responding to the recruitment and retention challenges posed by the federal cap. Discussions focused on strategies adopted by other Canadian institutions, recognizing that competition for international graduate students was shaping institutional responses nationwide. Maintaining the University of Manitoba's competitiveness—while remaining attentive to its regional context and constraints—became a dominant logic shaping institutional decisions.

President Benarroch noted that federal policy changes had created conditions of "uncertainty and a chill" and "significant confusion" for international applicants, observing that many had opted to pursue studies elsewhere (University of Manitoba, 2024b, p. 8; University of Manitoba, 2024c, p. 4). These comments highlighted the volatility of the policy environment

and the complexity it generated for urgent and responsive institutional action. Concerns were raised about broader provincial implications such as Manitoba's labour force (University of Manitoba, 2024b). However, most importantly, the President highlighted the financial insecurities and impacts the new policy environment created. He warned of the declining enrolments resulting in "a \$5 million to \$7 million decrease in annual tuition revenue" (University of Manitoba, 2024b, p. 8). The most significant declines were reported among applicants from specific countries, including Nigeria and Ghana. Applications from India also decreased substantially, with recent political tensions between Canada and India exacerbating recruitment challenges (University of Manitoba, 2024b).

On January 24, 2025—four months after the initial federal announcement—the allocation of PAL letters was finalized. The University of Manitoba received over 1,000 PALs, exceeding initial expectations. An email issued that day emphasized institutional adaptability and collaboration "as we navigate this new process together," reinforcing the need for institutional stability. Implementing institutional changes required making high-stakes decisions under compressed timelines and a context of crisis. Not only were operational adjustments within academic units required, but also formal policy revisions needed ratification through governance processes, including amendments to admissions deadlines.

These administrative adjustments also increased staff workloads, requiring rapid adaptation of established workflows. For example, the staff member overseeing PAL letter distribution informally earned the nickname "our PAL-Lady." Personnel were required to quickly master new procedures while navigating evolving guidelines and heightened administrative demands. This additional strain occurred in the post-COVID context, a period already marked by staffing challenges and organizational fatigue. The University's response depended heavily on organizational staff expertise, cooperation, and commitment in managing externally imposed policy shifts.

In this moment of disruption, the University found itself seeking new risk-mitigation strategies and establishing new pathways to demonstrate responsiveness. It intensified efforts to recruit domestic students, particularly from Manitoba's rural, northern, and Indigenous communities. President Benarroch reported that "the University increased the allocation for marketing over the previous year's allocation of \$885,000" (University of Manitoba, 2025c, p. 7). This shift reflected growing competition for domestic students, including from institutions in other provinces, and marked a broader recalibration of institutional strategy—from reliance on international enrolments toward a more locally anchored recruitment model. Expanding domestic recruitment, alongside increased online and remote course offerings, required several units to develop targeted marketing initiatives and programmatic adjustments tailored to local students, signalling a survival strategy reflecting resilience and a strategic pivot in orientation for the University.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we analyze our findings further in context of our research questions: (1) How did universities interpret and respond to these policy changes? and (2) How did they adapt organizationally?

Institutional Response: Crisis Isomorphism in Action

The responses of the University of Manitoba to federal IS policy caps illustrate how research-intensive universities engage in *isomorphic behaviours* when confronted with sudden external pressures. Confronted with coercive constraints from IRCC, the University adapted several internal policies and procedures such as its admission policies (e.g., shifting deadlines), enrolment planning (e.g., programmatic adjustments, enhanced student financial support), and internal governance structures (e.g., accelerated admission processes). However, in making these changes it closely examined and kept largely in conformity with actions taken by

other Canadian research-intensive universities (see Bosede, 2025; Legusov et al., 2026). Here, discussions within organizations like the U15, a national association of 15 leading research universities across Canada, reinforced both normative and mimetic forces of isomorphism across Canada's research-intensive universities. In this sense, the University of Manitoba's responses are not isolated; they are embedded within a broader national context, where research-intensive universities respond in several parallel fashions to federal interventions. This pattern underscores how institutions converge in structure and practice.

However, there is a nuanced difference one observes in analyzing organizational behaviour during this time of crisis. Here, our concept of *crisis isomorphism* is particularly useful in explaining this convergence across institutional response. Unlike traditional coercive or mimetic isomorphism, crisis isomorphism emphasizes how institutional responses are shaped not only by formal mandates or peer imitation but also by the urgency, high stakes, and political scrutiny inherent in a crisis environment. Faced with immediate restrictions, the University rapidly adapted recruitment strategies, revising international recruitment targets, prioritizing specific programs, and restructuring internal coordination mechanisms—strategies mirrored by other research-intensive institutions across Canada—demonstrating parallel vulnerabilities and rapid alignment and conversion of strategies. However, this policy convergence is driven less by the adoption of "best practices" or professional norms, and more by the need to maintain stability, mitigate risk, and signal compliance in a volatile policy context.

Consequently, convergence emerges not primarily from interprovincial imitation or normative professional alignment, but from a common crisis logic that reshapes incentives and constrains the range of viable institutional responses nationwide. Crisis isomorphism, therefore, highlights how sudden, high-impact policy shifts continue to catalyze coordinated behaviours across diverse organizational and provincial contexts—even in the presence of differing local conditions, strategic priorities, provincial policy regimes, and funding models.

Carving New Pathways: Agentic and Adaptive Organizations

While isomorphic pressures—including crisis-driven isomorphism—encourage uniform institutional approaches, universities often reinterpret or selectively adopt policies to align with local values, provincial priorities, or institutional missions. Institutional responses vary because geography, status, and culture shape how policies are enacted (Foskett & Maringe, 2010; Stensaker et al., 2008). State-level policy thus serves as a key impetus for examining institutional responses, and while institutions engage with state directives in multiple ways, they can align with, resist, or reshape policy depending on their characteristics and context. As Cerna (2014) emphasizes, university strategies and national policies can act in synergy—as seen in past periods—but they can also be inconsistent, mismatched, or even in conflict, as exemplified by the current Canadian context.

Our case study demonstrates how the University exercised agency while complying with federal directives, by being adaptive and responsive. Organizational adjustments to policies and processes—such as streamlining admissions, shortening decision timelines to secure international student commitments, and implementing operational systems to track recruitment, admissions, and program risk—enabled the institution to reduce reputational risk and maintain its legitimacy. Under an extremely complex and volatile policy climate, organizational changes—such as new staff responsibilities, enhanced internal communication, and revised governance processes—reflected organizational formalization, centralization, and professionalization (Stensaker et al., 2008), but were also salient features of the institution carving new pathways. They are examples of the institution showcasing its agency and ability to adapt as an organization as it seeks legitimacy, both nationally and globally.

Notably, the shift toward domestic recruitment, the development of new program delivery models, and developing of new regional partnerships represent a substantive reorientation of the University's mission, with federal policy

prompting a move from a global research focus toward a more regionalized approach. While organizational behaviour is reinforced by isomorphic pressures, it can also generate tensions when restrictive federal policies clash with global aspirations. Our case exemplifies such tension, resonating with Lee and Carruthers's (2024) concepts of "isomorphic mimicry" and "path reset," where crises disrupt norms, routines, and values and compel organizations to quickly shift. Importantly, these crisis-driven changes reshape Canadian research-intensive universities and their strategies, priorities, and roles as international institutions beyond the immediate shock.

While our article has focused on institutional-level response to these abrupt and disruptive federal policy changes, it also addresses more broadly Canada's story of shifting government–university relations and the resetting of internationalization policy for Canadian higher education. Canada was distinctive in its approach until 2010, when Canadian universities largely determined their own internationalization agendas with minimal federal direction. This changed when in the 2000s, the federal government began to take a more assertive role in shaping and defining Canada's internationalization strategy, with IRCC steadily expanding its influence as the "gatekeeper" of Canada's internationalization agenda (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2016, p. 555). There was little contestation of this gatekeeping role as a stable and mutually reinforcing policy context emerged between the federal government, the provinces, and educational institutions.

All this changed when recent federal policy shifts disrupted this alignment and coordination. This disruption in policy alignment has generated new tensions in university–government relations with, as our article illustrates, universities increasingly left to manage the consequences of unilateral federal decisions affecting the funding, role, and restricting institutional decision making as both local and global actors. Competing demands on institutional credibility complicate universities' ability to engage in long-term strategic planning. Research-intensive universities, in particular, receive mixed

signals from the federal government: While there is recognition of the need for distinct policies supporting international graduate students and researchers, broader policy restrictions have reduced the attractiveness of Canada as a destination and constrained institutions' ability to pursue their internationalization goals.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the impact of new federal policy measures on research-intensive universities, focusing on how institutions interpret and respond to these changes. Drawing on institutional theory and a case study of the University of Manitoba, we showed that while institutions often engage in isomorphic behaviours when confronted with sudden external pressures, they also reinterpret or selectively adopt policies to align with local values, provincial priorities, and institutional missions. We introduced the concept of *crisis isomorphism* to describe a distinct form of policy convergence triggered by acute and immediate crisis conditions. More broadly, this article contributes to understanding the shifting terrain of internationalization in Canada.

In this regard, it is worth asking whether this period represents a new era for the internationalization of Canadian higher education. The answer is not straightforward. Canada's federal structure remains intact, and the absence of a federal ministry of education means that higher education formally continues to be a provincial responsibility. There is still no explicit federal role in governing higher education, although Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada could, in some respects, be viewed as functioning as a *de facto* federal actor influencing international higher education policy. Given this, important changes are evident.

In attempting to respond to rising anti-immigration sentiment and growing nationalist pressures, IRCC policies increasingly conflict with provincial and institutional goals, which do not necessarily see international students as a policy problem and are invested in the messaging around the value of international students. Direct federal policy interventions have constrained both provincial and institutional

agency, while reductions in international graduate student numbers are disproportionately affecting critical university programs linked to research, innovation, and talent development. Thus, universities' ability to advance their internationalization agendas has been significantly affected. For provinces such as Manitoba and research-intensive institutions like the University of Manitoba, federal policies are overlooking specific regional and institutional needs, undermining both local priorities and global ambitions. These developments are reshaping university-government relations, signalling a potential new era characterized by contested priorities, reduced institutional agency, and an urgent need to reconcile national policy objectives with regional and institutional realities (Brunner et al., 2025; Desai-Trilokekar & El Masry, 2022; Trilokekar & Jones, 2020).

Looking further into the future, as domestic public opinion is becoming even more critical of international students and immigration, it remains uncertain how provinces and research-intensive universities will respond and whether they will assert greater agency in shaping the future direction of internationalization. The current government under Prime Minister Carney has introduced measures to further reduce international study permit targets (Liddle, 2025), while at the same time creating exemptions for international graduate students (U15, 2025) and providing additional funding for Tri-Agencies to attract and support international talent.

Collectively, these developments raise critical questions about whether such measures reflect a more targeted and differentiated approach to international student recruitment and retention, the extent to which they represent an effort to reconcile national policy objectives with regional and institutional imperatives, and whether they are an indication of increasing influence of federal authority in shaping governance dynamics with implications for the balance of authority across levels of governments, the redefining of internationalization priorities, and, ultimately, a signal of yet another new era in Canada's internationalization policy.

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