

# STANDING IN THE DOORWAY: REPRESENTATIONS AND REALITIES OF PUNJABI INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CANADA

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## Abstract

This article examines the construction of international students, particularly Punjabi international students, in Canadian policies and mainstream media discourses post-COVID-19. It then juxtaposes these representations with the perspectives of students themselves, as captured through a survey with Punjabi international students transitioning out of British Columbia colleges and teaching universities. Our analysis reveals the fraught dialectic between the policy landscape, media discourses, and Punjabi international students' trajectories. On a policy level, when international students are perceived to hold high economic value with low social costs, they are welcomed; when that perception shifts, they are "Othered." Similarly, media discourses represent Punjabi international students in complex and often contradictory ways as victims, system abusers, commodities, and strains on infrastructure. In contrast, Punjabi international students largely see themselves as young people striving to build better futures, buying into the "Canadian dream" while simultaneously navigating processes that render them vulnerable to exploitation and Othering.

**Keywords:** Punjabi international students, media analysis, international students, colleges, edugration, Punjab, student trajectory

## Résumé

Cet article analyse la construction des étudiants internationaux, en particulier des étudiants internationaux pendjabis, au sein des politiques canadiennes et des discours médiatiques dominants dans l'après-COVID-19. Il juxtapose ensuite

ces représentations avec les perspectives des étudiants eux-mêmes, recueillies au moyen d'une enquête menée auprès des étudiants pendjabis en transition depuis des collèges et des universités axés sur l'enseignement en Colombie-Britannique. Notre analyse met en évidence la dialectique tendue qui se déploie entre le paysage politique, les discours médiatiques et les trajectoires des étudiants pendjabis. Sur le plan des politiques publiques, lorsque les étudiants internationaux sont perçus comme générant une forte valeur économique tout en engendrant de faibles coûts sociaux, ils sont accueillis favorablement ; lorsque cette perception se modifie, ils sont « altérisés ». De même, les discours médiatiques représentent les étudiants internationaux pendjabis de manière complexe et souvent contradictoire : tantôt comme des victimes, des abuseurs du système, des marchandises, ou encore comme un poids pour les infrastructures. En contraste, les perceptions des étudiants internationaux pendjabis mettent en lumière de jeunes personnes qui s'efforcent de construire un avenir meilleur, adhérant au « rêve canadien » tout en devant naviguer des processus qui les rendent vulnérables à l'exploitation et à l'altérisation.

**Mots clés :** étudiants internationaux pendjabis, analyse des médias, étudiants internationaux, collèges, éducation, Punjab, trajectoire étudiante

## INTRODUCTION

From the early 2000s until just after the COVID-19 pandemic, international post-secondary students were positioned in Canadian public policy discourse as valuable economic commodities, both for Canada's higher education (HE) system (as contributors of high differential tuition fees) and the country's overall prosperity (as "ideal immigrants"; Brunner, 2022). However, this framing began to shift in 2022 (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025). Alongside (a) intensifying international student recruitment by lower-ranked teaching-focused institutions, (b) deteriorating Canadian public attitudes toward immigration (Neuman, 2024), and (c) decreasing support for the governing federal Liberal party, official policy discourse began framing international students as being of diminished "quality" and the source of unsustainable "demands" on Canadian housing and social services (Brunner, 2025; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2023b). In 2024, the Government of Canada responded by instituting its first-ever cap on post-secondary study permit applications and significantly narrowing international

students' pathways to permanent residency, signalling the end of an era in which international students were framed as a largely unproblematic resource.

Importantly, this shift occurred not long after India replaced China as the top source country of international students in 2018; by December 2023, 41% of Canada's international students were Indian (IRCC, 2024a). While Indian international students are almost universally discussed as a homogenous group in Canada, many among this cohort specifically came from the Indian state of Punjab. The Canadian federal government has not proactively collected study permit data disaggregated beyond citizenship, making it difficult to confirm the exact number of Punjabi international students in Canada. However, there are strong transnational linkages between Canada and Punjab, with significant out-migration of Punjabi students in recent years (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2024). According to the 2021 census, Punjabi was the most-spoken Indo-Aryan mother tongue in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). Among non-permanent residents (a category primarily made up of work and study permit holders), Punjabi was the most

common mother tongue after English by a wide margin, and Sikhism was the most common religion (Statistics Canada, 2022, 2023). Thus, a large proportion of international students in Canada during the past 10 years were presumably Punjabi—yet this subpopulation is poorly understood (Sharma & Peng, 2025), including in the field of HE.

This article addresses this gap by exploring both the framing of Punjabi international students in Canadian society and their lived experiences. To do so, we first describe Canada's post-pandemic international student policy context and present our theoretical framework. We then outline our mixed-methods study, which juxtaposes an analysis of hegemonic Canadian English news media representations of Punjabi international students with survey data on the experiences and perceptions of Punjabi international students in British Columbia (B.C.) as they transitioned into the workforce. Put into conversation, our findings expose the contradictions between Canada's dependency on international students, the lived realities of those who responded to Canada's recent recruitment initiatives, and the eventual construction of Punjabi international students as "problems." Our article also underscores the need to move beyond treating international students as a single monolithic policy category, since subgroup experiences are constituted through historical and structural forces that cannot be captured by broad national or institutional labels alone.

## Policy Context

Since the 21st century, several Global North countries have come to rely on international student mobility as "an important feeder for labour migration" in the so-called global race for talent (Kamm & Liebig, 2022, p. 180). Because international students are often presumed to be the "best and the brightest," they are recruited as potential immigrants expected to easily integrate into local labour markets. This occurs through education-migration, or *edugration*, pathways, following (a) study, (b) post-graduation work, and (c) permanent residency stages (Brunner, 2021). Edugration has been particu-

larly important in Canada, where international undergraduate students pay, on average, more than five times the domestic tuition rate (Statistics Canada, 2025) and comprise an important component of HE institutional budgets. Canada's post-secondary schools, labour market, immigration system, and export economy all became dependent on international students over the past 25 years, with the number of study permit holders growing from 122,620 in 2000 to a peak of 1,040,985 in 2023 (IRCC, 2024a).

Indian students comprised a significant proportion of this growth. India was included in Canada's fast-track Student Direct Stream study permit application program from 2015 until its closure in 2024. During this period, the number of Indian study permit holders jumped from 48,755 in 2015 to 427,085 in 2023 (IRCC, 2024a). This growth was especially intense at the college level (IRCC, 2023a), where India was the most common country of birth among international students (Wall & Anderson, 2024). Indian international students faced unique and intense challenges and disruptions during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic; they have also been impacted by growing racism and hate targeting Canada's South Asian communities (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025; Neuman, 2025). However, their often-strong desire to immigrate to Canada drove many to endure difficult, stressful conditions (Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024; Stick et al., 2024).

Among Indian international students, Punjabi students stand out in several respects. Punjabi international students often come from agricultural families in rural areas. The decline and instability of the agriculture sector (Government of Punjab, 2020), in addition to a drug crisis and limited job opportunities, have pushed many young Punjabis to seek opportunities elsewhere (Lokniti-CSDS & Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021) in an attempt "to forge class mobility and claim proximity to urban modernity" (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2024, p. 56). Edugration has emerged as a key mechanism for this mobility, resulting in "a clear blurring of the line that separates 'migration for education' and 'education as a pathway to immigration'" (Sharma & Peng, 2025, p. 5017).

Punjab became a key sending region for Canadian teaching universities and colleges in particular, giving rise to a booming industry bolstered by institutional recruiters, independent education agents, English testing centres, and other actors promoting Canadian study as a route to post-graduation work and eventual permanent residency (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2024; Marom, 2022a). As Canada established explicit education pathways to citizenship for international students, lower-ranked and comparatively affordable Canadian institutions came to be perceived as viable entry points to long-term settlement. This shift was especially consequential for newer cohorts of Punjabi international students, many of whom came from more modest socio-economic backgrounds than earlier international student cohorts and were attracted to access less-expensive and less-competitive institutions. These perceptions were further reinforced by the rapid expansion of international education recruitment networks in Punjab. However, for many students, limited access to reliable information about institutional quality, labour market outcomes, and immigration policy meant that the promises associated with these pathways were often overstated or misunderstood. An emerging body of literature describes economic, academic, social, and psychological challenges for Punjabi international students in Canada (Apna Health, 2021; Baughan & Minhas, 2018; Kahlon, 2021; Marom, 2022b; Marom & Kahlon, 2023). Intersecting conditions structured a distinctive pipeline to Canada, which, while lucrative for many actors (such as education and migration agents), created conditions for misinformation and economic exploitation among students (Kaur & Mehra, 2025).

The challenges faced by Punjabi international students were exacerbated by an increasingly hostile environment for international students in the post-pandemic period. By 2023, IRCC was explicitly singling out international students for putting “an unprecedented level of demand” on both the job market and, “in a more pronounced way, on the housing market” (Cable Public Affairs Channel [CPAC], 2023a, 19:25). In December 2023 and January 2024, IRCC

increased the accompanying required proof of funds and capped post-secondary study permit applications (IRCC, 2024b), closing the door for many who had hoped to study in Canada. Later, in October 2024, a reduction in Canada’s immigration levels planning made permanent residency for those already in Canada more difficult to obtain, while post-graduation work permit eligibility changes in November 2024 introduced language proficiency requirements and tied diplomas and certificates to labour-shortage fields for qualification, making access to the labour market after graduation more difficult. These and other restrictive changes were justified due to “pressure on housing, health care and other services” (IRCC, 2024b, para. 1).

Importantly, international students were impacted unevenly by such changes. Signalling a renewed focus on the “quality of students, education and client services over quantity” (IRCC, 2023b, slide 7), the international student policy changes particularly targeted those enrolled at HE institutions (a) at the college level, and/or (b) operating as private, for-profit entities. A large proportion of students enrolled at such institutions were Indian and, more specifically, Punjabi. When then-IRCC Minister Marc Miller said Canada had become “targeted for abuse and exploitations by some unsavoury actors” (CPAC, 2023b, 15:54), especially “unscrupulous institutions” (16:26) that functioned as “backdoor entries into Canada” (Raj, 2024, 38:48), Punjabi international students were implicitly associated with this “backdoor.” Study permit applications from Indian citizens dropped significantly in 2024 and 2025, with particularly dramatic impacts in Punjab (Kataria & Mohsina, 2024).

## Theoretical Framing

To understand the unique position of Punjabi international students within the broader constellation of Canadian international education, we use Foucauldian notions of governmentality to examine how Punjabi international students are framed—both by news media and how they frame their own experiences—within a shifting Canadian policy context. Governmentality re-

fers to the array of policy instruments, institutional practices, and discourses that manage populations by producing categories of “desirable” and “undesirable” subjects (Foucault, 1991). Through this lens, power is not possessed but rather exercised; it “exists only in action” (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 14), operating through diffused techniques of discipline and normalization. HE and migration systems are two key venues in which this exercise of power is diffused. Our article focuses on the specific forms of governmentality operating at the intersection of these two systems in Canadian edugration.

We employ the metaphor of a doorway to convey how pathways into Canada open and narrow both rhetorically and materially. This builds upon the concept of hierarchically ordered doors of entry (Vosko, 2023), which has been used as a heuristic device to distinguish between different types of migrant workers based on their desirability (Wright & Clibborn, 2017). For example, “front-doors” are said to offer direct migration pathways with long permit durations and settlement services, while “side-doors” and “back-doors” offer progressively less-clear pathways and supports (Brunner & McCartney, 2025). Playing off the official Canadian policy discourse framing Punjabi international students as “backdoor” migrants who are implied to be “misusing” HE, we suggest that this cohort of Punjabi international students instead occupy a liminal “doorway” space. They began their journey with an open door in front of them, yet now, according to the policy and gestures in media coverage, it is closing while they remain in the doorway. The doorway metaphor thus makes governmentality visible as eligibility metrics, institutional practices, and circulating scripts coordinate to classify Punjabi international students and to direct their edugration experiences.

## METHOD

This article is part of a larger mixed-methods study examining Punjabi international students studying at four public teaching-intensive universities and colleges in British Columbia, all with relatively high enrolment of Punjabi inter-

national students. Two institutions are located in Metro Vancouver (Kwantlen Polytechnic University and Langara College); one is in the Fraser Valley (University of the Fraser Valley), which is a region adjacent to Metro Vancouver; and one is in the Kootenays (Selkirk College), which is a largely rural region in British Columbia’s mountainous interior. In this section, we present two components of the larger study: (a) a national media analysis conducted to provide context for the survey, and (b) a survey of Punjabi international students studying at the four institutions listed above.

## Media Analysis

Our media analysis intentionally focused on hegemonic, mainstream, English-language news outlets, excluding Punjabi-language and other culturally specific community media. Within this scope, we sought to capture a range of national, regional, and local coverage, as well as diversity in editorial and ideological perspectives. Using the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream database, we searched for news articles published in English in *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* (national newspapers), *The Toronto Star* and *The Vancouver Sun* (large regional newspapers with broad provincial reach), and *The Brampton Guardian* and *The Abbotsford News* (local newspapers serving communities with notably high concentrations of Punjabi residents). We used the search terms (“foreign students” OR “international students”) AND (“India?” OR “Punjab?” OR “South Asian”) between January 31, 2020 and January 31, 2024. This date range was selected to encompass the start of mainstream discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada and up to the announcement of Canada’s first study permit application cap.

Our initial search yielded 291 articles. After removing duplicate and out-of-scope articles, our final corpus contained 152 articles discussing, or containing a quote from, individuals identified as an Indian, Punjabi, or South Asian international student. Although our focus was on Punjabi international students specifically, we included coverage of Indian and South Asian international students because most media

coverage did not differentiate between these three categories of students. However, after an initial analysis stage, most Indian and South Asian international students in the articles we reviewed were likely Punjabi, as evidenced by the biographic information and common Sikh names of the students interviewed. We analyzed the news coverage of Punjabi international students using framing analysis (Entman, 1993), which provides useful categories for describing “a large number of different media reports with a relatively small set of meaningful categories” (Gruber, 2023, p. 418). After several rounds of group analysis involving all four co-authors, we determined four final frames<sup>1</sup>.

## Survey

Our survey (University of British Columbia ethics approval number H23-03824) sought to better understand Punjabi international students’ demographic characteristics, as well as their experiences transitioning out of their educational institutions. This data fills an important gap in the literature, since the limited literature on both Indian international students and Punjabi international students’ experiences in Canada is typically represented through qualitative methods based on small sample sizes.

Prospective respondents were identified with the support of the internal institutional offices (e.g., research office, international office) at the four participating post-secondary institutions in British Columbia using institutionally held student data. We submitted requests to send the survey to all students who indicated their country of origin as India. Since we anticipated that universities would not be able to specifically identify students from Punjab, a qualifying question at the outset of the survey asks about self-identification as Punjabi. Those efforts were accompanied by poster campaigns at participating institutions. Survey data were collected via a Simon Fraser University–licensed SurveyMonkey between November 2024 and

March 2025, with a \$100 honoraria draw as an incentive. Participation was voluntary, with the option to skip questions or withdraw at any time. Responses were aggregated, with data accessible to the co-investigator and research assistants for study-related purposes.

In total, 224 respondents completed the survey. Data was exported in Excel, reviewed for accuracy and consistency (e.g., checking text and numerical responses, verifying item order, and standardizing formats), and then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0. After restricting the dataset to respondents who self-identified as Punjabi, 212 cases remained for analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, medians, standard deviations) and crosstabulations were conducted.

## MEDIA ANALYSIS FINDINGS

Our media analysis revealed four framings of Punjabi international students in hegemonic Canadian news media: as (a) victims, (b) system abusers, (c) commodities, and (d) strains on infrastructures. These frames reveal that while Punjabi international students were initially seen as commodities and contributing to economic growth, that perception shifted to a clear portrayal of Punjabi international students as victims and a strain on the system. These media narratives, in turn, influenced public discourse and legitimized policy shifts.

Alongside this policy shift, mainstream media coverage during COVID-19 and in its aftermath brought attention to the challenges of Punjabi international students, particularly exploitation and neglect. Following similar patterns previously observed in Australia (Sabzalieva et al., 2022), post-COVID-19 international student enrolment growth in Canada was concentrated in specific subjects, schools, and geographic areas, leading to ripple effects in some specific communities. International students’ labour market outcomes also did not meet optimistic expectations (Trilokekar et al., 2022), challenging prevailing “best and brightest” narratives. This corresponded with increased public awareness of the systemic dysfunctions of Canada’s dependence on international students.

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1 For the full methodology and analysis, see Marom et al. (in press).

In the aftermath of COVID-19, many articles depicted Punjabi international students as victims of an exploitative system, often with a focus on “sensational stories,” such as those involving fraudulent agents or institutions. Even more comprehensive coverage, which pointed to recruitment agencies and HE institutions as being involved in maintaining an exploitative system, failed to connect the dots between policies, economic factors, and the HE landscape.

While articles were often sympathetic, they constructed students as passive and deficient, rendering them as naïve and “easy targets.” This heightened the policy desire to return to the promise of recruiting the “best and brightest.” Stories of student deaths due to accidents or poor living conditions reinforced portrayals of vulnerability and paternalistic assumptions that Punjabi international students lacked competence and resilience. This media attention obscured the structural drivers of vulnerability, such as loopholes in federal policies or institutional overreliance on tuition revenue. In doing so, the coverage displaced accountability from systemic governance and institutional failures onto the supposed naïveté of students.

The most politically charged frames, particularly in the context of the societal unrest after COVID-19, depicted Punjabi international students as straining social services such as housing, health care, and municipal services. Such coverage was often concentrated in local newspapers in communities with high visibility of Punjabi international students (such as Brampton and Abbotsford), in which students were blamed for overcrowded housing, rising rents, and taking local jobs. National coverage followed, increasingly linking international students—implicitly Punjabi international students, as the face of international students—to the housing crisis.

Punjabi international students were increasingly constructed as abusers of Canada’s migration systems. The media invoked imagery of fraud, forged documents, overstayed visas, and links to criminality, presenting Punjabi international students as dishonest actors seeking “back door” entry into Canada. In alignment with

the terminology underlying the policy changes, international students were depicted as exploiting immigration pathways for work or residency rather than study, symbolically used to indicate the threat to the integrity of immigration and education systems, unless policy changes are made.

## SURVEY DATA FINDINGS

### Respondent Demographics Overview

Among respondents who reported age ( $n = 151$ ), over 80% were born in or after 2000, indicating a predominantly young, single ( $n = 158$ , over 80% never married), and childless ( $n = 158$ , over 90% had no children) cohort. Consistent with this profile, most respondents had completed only high school prior to migration, and a large proportion were enrolled in associate degree (25.8%) or diploma/certificate (55.3%) programs in Canada. Nearly 70% ( $n = 109$ ) identified as a woman. Slightly more than half ( $n = 82$ ) reported being raised in rural areas or villages with fewer than 5,000 residents. Of the 158 respondents who disclosed caste, Jatt was the most represented (52.5%). Regarding institutional affiliation, 63 respondents (29.7%) attended Langara College, 28 (13.2%) Selkirk College, 107 (50.5%) Kwantlen Polytechnic University, and 13 (6.1%) University of the Fraser Valley; one student did not respond. More than 70% planned to graduate within six months. This was the first survey of a planned longitudinal study, which will include follow-up surveys and qualitative interviews.

When asked what factors influenced their decision to come to Canada, answered by 212 students, 57.55% ( $n = 122$ ) chose “opportunity to work while studying.” It was the second-most-popular choice behind “quality of education,” which was chosen by 67.92% ( $n = 144$ ) of the respondents. The third-most-popular choice was “opportunity to work after studying,” which was chosen by 51.42% ( $n = 109$ ) of respondents. It is of little surprise then that 88% ( $n = 162$ ) of 184 respondents have been employed in paid work since coming to Canada, with a large majority, 84.1% ( $n = 132$ ) working

less than 20 hours a week, and 8.9% ( $n = 14$ ) working 20–40 hours a week. The hourly wage for a majority of these students (72%, or  $n = 113$ ) ranged between \$16 and \$19.99. We then asked if that pay was enough to pay their daily expenses; 63.1% ( $n = 99$ ) answered “no” and 33.1% ( $n = 52$ ) answered “yes.”

Even if students were able to meet their daily needs, “financial concerns” was still the most-popular choice when asked “What is currently causing you stress?” with 135 of 212 students listing financial stress (63.7% of respondents). “Financial concerns” were followed by “immigration status or procedures” (46.7%, or  $n = 99$ ) and “academic workload” (43.4%, or  $n = 92$ ) as key stressors.

The survey respondents answered questions related to immigration status, their process of gaining status, and their intentions around staying in Canada beyond their university studies. As noted above, immigration status and/or procedures is an area of stress, and the survey respondents did not believe that the path to permanent residency would be an easy one, with 110 of 163 students answering that they think the process would either be “difficult” ( $n = 54$ ) or “very difficult” ( $n = 56$ ). Despite that, 93 out of 163 respondents were either “likely” ( $n = 45$ ) or “very likely” ( $n = 48$ ) to apply for permanent residency. Fifty-four students said that they were “unsure” (33.1%) about whether they would apply for permanent residency.

When asked “What do you plan to do immediately after completing your current educational program?” 74 of 163 respondents (45.4%) said that they wanted to “remain in Canada to work,” while 39 students (23.9%) said they wanted to “remain in Canada to continue studying.” When 169 respondents answered how they currently deal with stress, the top three answers all referred to support networks, including: “Communicating with family” ( $n = 119$ , or 56.1%); “going to a place of worship” ( $n = 109$ , or 51.4%); and “communicating with friends” ( $n = 97$ , or 45.8%). Below are six figures relaying demographic information in the areas of work readiness and permanent residency application.

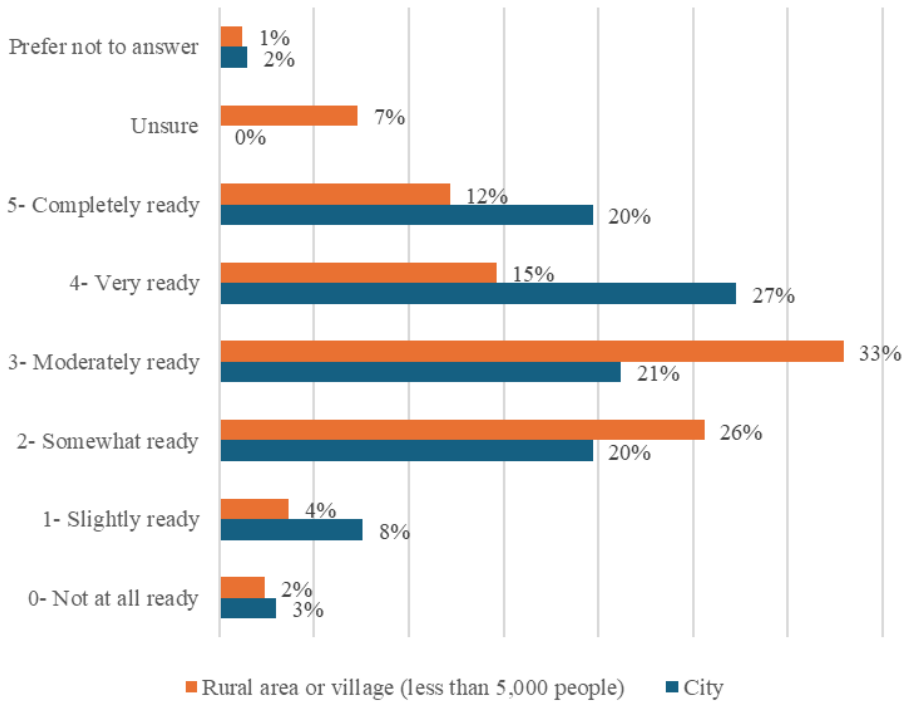
Crosstabs revealed some visible differences between groups based on hometown and gen-

der; however, the independent-sample  $t$ -tests did not identify any statistically significant differences. Independent sample  $t$ -tests were conducted using gender (man/woman) and hometown size (village/city) as independent variables, and likelihood to apply for permanent residency and perceived difficulty in obtaining permanent residency as dependent variables. Despite the descriptive variation shown in the crosstabs, the mean differences between groups were not large or consistent enough to reach statistical significance.

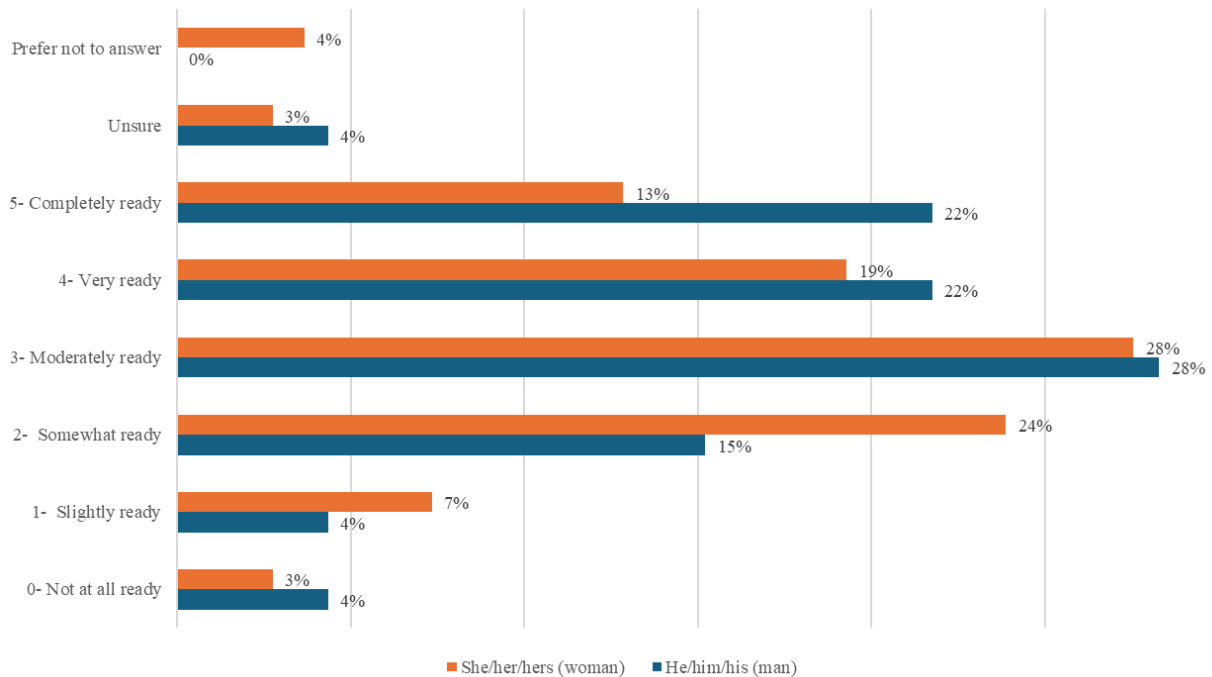
Figure 1 presents participants’ self-assessed readiness for the Canadian labour market, disaggregated by hometown size. Across both groups, responses concentrated in the moderate range, with the largest proportion of rural participants rating themselves as “moderately ready” (33%), while city participants were somewhat more likely to report higher readiness levels, with 27% rating themselves as “very ready,” and 20% as “completely ready.”

Figure 2 presents participants’ self-assessed readiness for the Canadian labour market, disaggregated by gender. Both groups concentrated in the moderate range, with 28% of both women and men rating themselves as “moderately ready.” Notable differences emerged at the higher and lower ends of the scale: Men were more likely to report higher readiness, with 22% rating themselves as “completely ready” compared to 13% of women, while women were more likely to report lower readiness, with 24% rating themselves as “somewhat ready” compared to 15% of men.

**Figure 1**  
 Work Readiness vs. Hometown Size (n = 148)



**Figure 2**  
 Work Readiness vs. Gender (n = 155)



**Figure 3**  
 Likelihood to Apply for Permanent Residency vs. Hometown Size (n = 148)

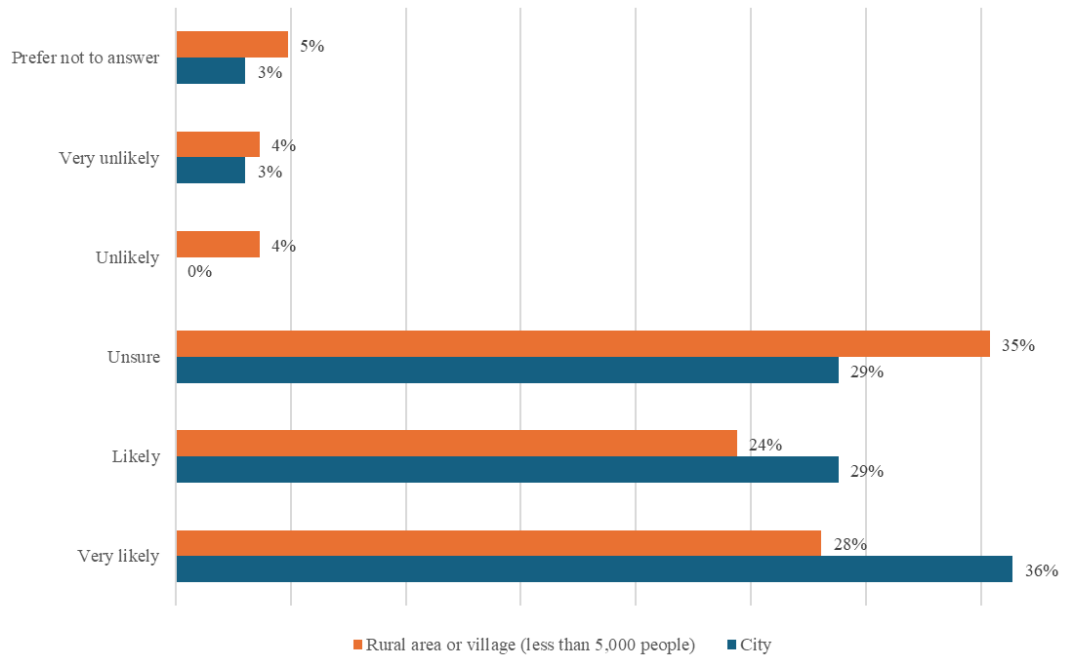


Figure 3 presents participants' likelihood of applying for permanent residency, disaggregated by hometown size. Intention to pursue permanent residency was high across both groups, with city participants somewhat more likely to report their likelihood as "very likely" (36%, compared to 28% of rural participants). Uncertainty was notably higher among rural participants, with 35% reporting being "unsure" compared to 29% of city participants, suggesting that while permanent residency remains a dominant aspiration across both groups, rural participants navigated this pathway with greater ambiguity.

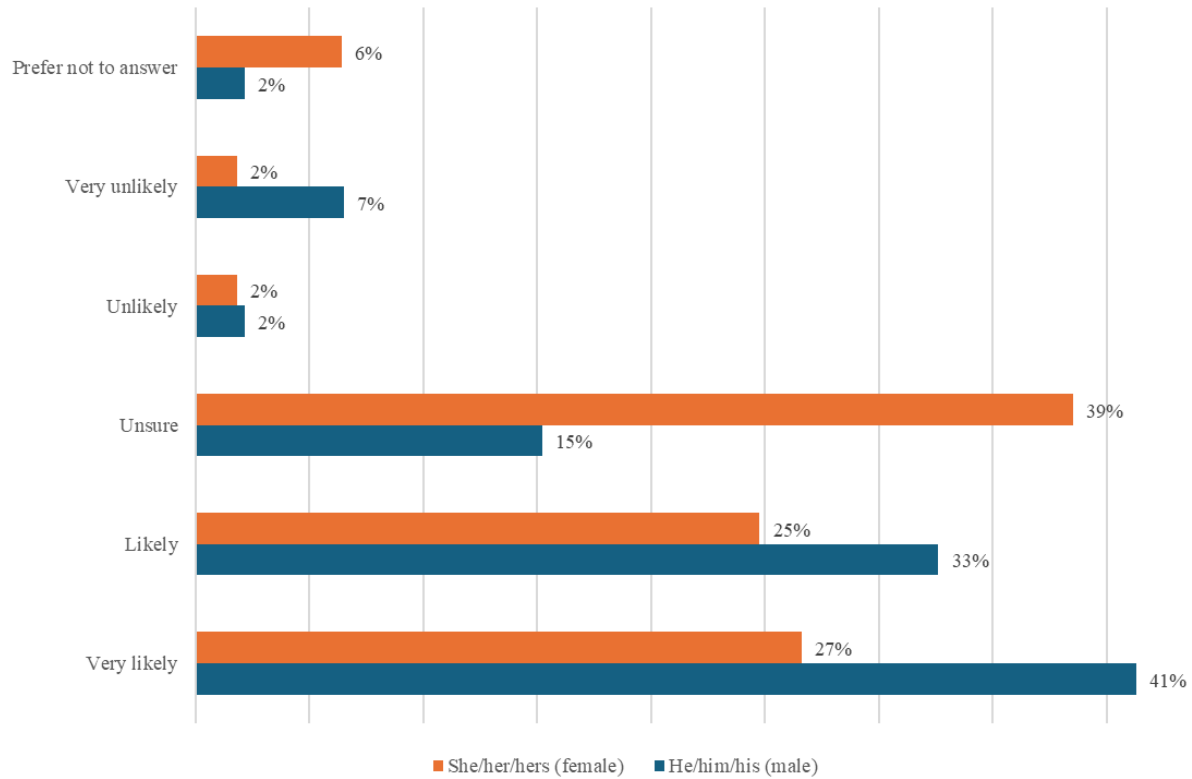
Figure 4 presents participants' likelihood of applying for permanent residency, disaggregated by gender. Men reported stronger and more certain permanent residency intentions, with 41% rating themselves as "very likely" and 33% as "likely," compared to 27% and 25%, respectively, among women. The most striking difference appears in the "unsure" category, where 39% of women reported uncertainty about pursuing permanent residency compared to only 15% of men.

Figure 5 presents participants' perceived difficulty in obtaining permanent residency, disaggregated by hometown size. Across both

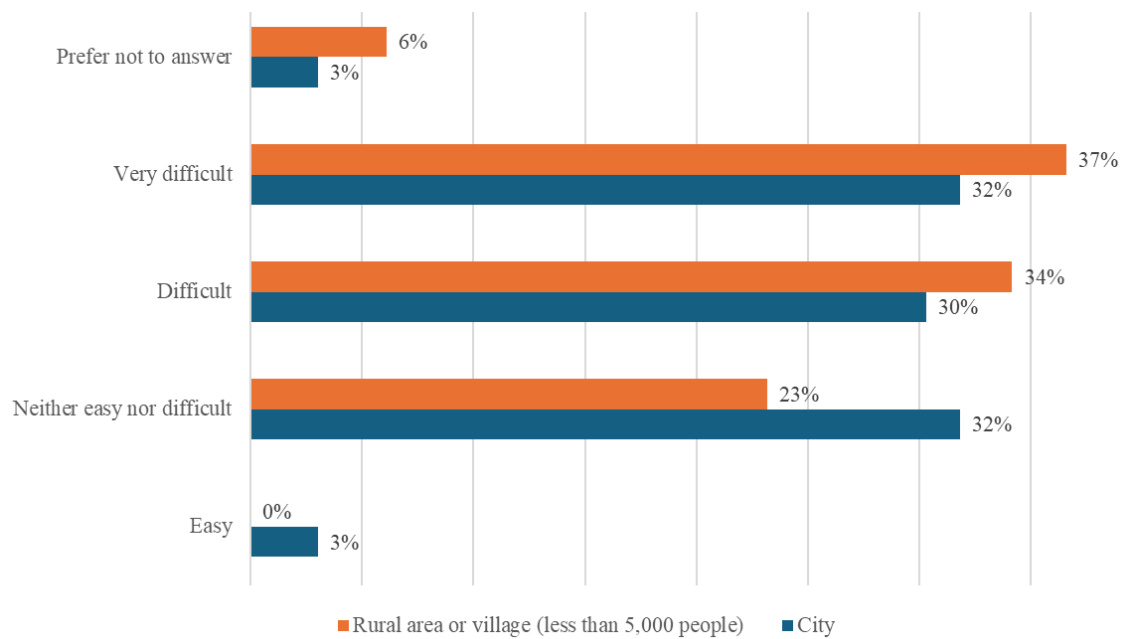
groups, the process was overwhelmingly perceived as difficult, with the majority of rural participants rating it as "very difficult" (37%) or "difficult" (34%). City participants showed a similar pattern, though with slightly lower concentration at the difficult end and a higher proportion rating the process as "neither easy nor difficult" (32%, compared to 23% of rural participants). No rural participants rated the process as "easy."

Figure 6 presents participants' perceived difficulty in obtaining permanent residency, disaggregated by gender. Both groups perceived the process as largely difficult, though with notable differences in distribution. Women concentrated more heavily at the difficult end, with 36% rating the process as "difficult" and 32% as "very difficult." Men were similarly likely to rate the process of obtaining permanent residency as "very difficult" (35%), but a substantially higher proportion rated it as "neither easy nor difficult" (35%, compared to 22% of women), suggesting that while both groups perceived obtaining permanent residency as a challenging threshold, women reported a more consistently negative assessment of the process.

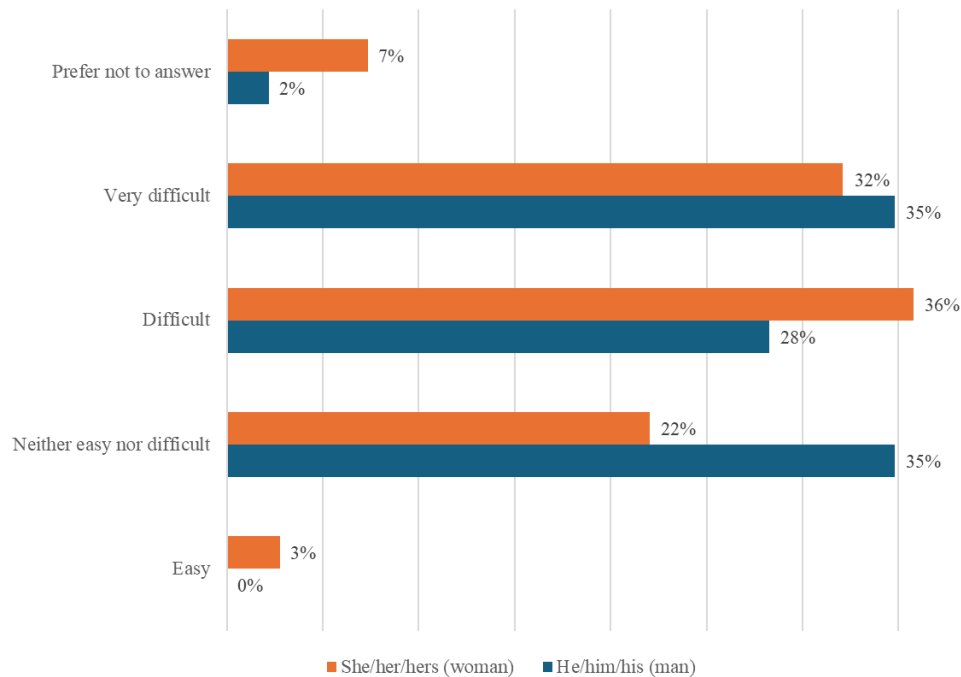
**Figure 4**  
*Likelihood to Apply for Permanent Residency vs. Gender (n = 155)*



**Figure 5**  
*Difficulty in Obtaining Permanent Residency vs. Hometown Size (n = 148)*



**Figure 6**  
*Difficulty in Obtaining Permanent Residency vs. Gender (n = 155)*



## DISCUSSION

The study examines a period of manufactured crisis and post-crisis “recovery” during which the Canadian international education landscape underwent major changes. This is not to suggest that the problems in Canadian migration policies and HE’s overreliance on international students were not real. However, the way the crisis was framed was far from neutral, and neither was the “magic solution” offered in response. The perceptions of Punjabi international students about their aspirational trajectories in Canada—now cut short by shifting policy—underscore their position of “standing in the doorway”: welcomed when profitable, pushed aside when misaligned with state priorities. Before the pandemic, international students were frequently framed as “ideal immigrants” whose contributions warranted welcome. In 2023–2024, this welcome became conditional; in 2025, it has shifted toward a tiered classification of who is welcome, with graduate students being particularly prioritized through a series of new federal recruitment incentives (e.g., Government of Canada, 2025).

This in turn aligns with broader geopolitical changes, growing pushback against migration, and heightened nationalism (Nord et al., 2025) as major international student destinations become more selective in their recruitment (Collett, 2025).

By constructing international students as the core of “the problem,” recent policy changes and media discourses obscure deeper undercurrents: the global exploitative system rooted in Western supremacy (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016) and widening inequities in access to social services (such as health care, housing, and education). In these hegemonic discourses, race and coloniality are hidden. Canada’s study permit cap, framed as a return to an imagined seamless pipeline from student to professional migrant, reproduces desired distinctions based on so-called “skilled talent” and market needs. In practice, however, this prioritizing of selection based on skill rests on the reproduction of geographic, classed, and, ultimately, racial hierarchies.

Punjabi international students have been targeted by shifting framings. They are at times celebrated for their adaptability and contribu-

tion, and at other times, cast as fraudulent, deficient, and exploitative. These shifting constructions illustrate how governmentality operates: power does not admit or exclude but continually redefines categories of subjects (i.e., Punjabi international students) in ways that align with institutional and state priorities.

The students who participated in the survey are attempting to negotiate this shifting environment, an environment in which they are represented as victims of circumstance, as governmental or institutional structures are left uninterrogated. Even in the face of such shifting, the survey hinted at the continued desire to stay in Canada and work or study, despite the stress attached to financial pressures and the process of immigrating.

Governance is not race neutral. Policy and media frame homogenized depictions of Punjabi international students, associating them to systemic fraud or strain on infrastructure. Such framings displace responsibility for structural problems, such as Canada's dependence on international tuition or gaps in housing, onto the racialized students themselves. The appeal of "quality" versus "fraudulent" students exemplifies what Foucault describes as "technologies of power," where categories are used to intentionally obscure the individuality or personal experience of the Punjabi international students and instead focus on the scrutiny of specific populations.

The governance of Punjabi international students focuses on racialized distinctions that produce hierarchies of desirability. By constructing Punjabi international students as suspects, a homogenous group set out to take advantage of the immigration system, the state and media enact racialized governmentality that simultaneously manages migration while reinforcing broader social boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Applying Foucault's concept of governmentality allowed us to highlight the shift from representing Punjabi international students as high-value economic agents to positioning them as devalued or "Othered" subjects. Punjabi internation-

al students are governed as economic subjects when framed as tuition-payers and future skilled immigrants, but problematized when recast as burdens on housing, health care, and social services. Through such discourses, "the Punjabi international student" becomes a category subject to surveillance, normalization, and control. To illustrate how Punjabi international students are seen in the larger public discourse, we use the metaphors of "front doors" and "back doors" to convey how Punjabi international students are themselves legitimized through their stratified hierarchies.

In this framing, Punjabi international students "standing in the doorway" are representative of Canada's contradictions. The country promotes itself as open and welcoming while simultaneously casting suspicion on racialized students and tightening controls. International education, therefore, exemplifies governmentality's dual character: taking in newcomers as students while using them as economic agents and excluding or stigmatizing those who fail to fit norms and ideals of Canada. Furthermore, Canada's international education sector thrives by capitalizing on Global South aspirations for mobility, while controlling the terms of entry and belonging. Punjabi international students' pursuit of education reflects both individual hopes for class mobility and the asymmetry of opportunity through the use of colonial power structures.

The doorway metaphor underscores the ambiguity and disoriented state of Punjabi international students. They are neither fully welcome through the "front door" as ideal immigrants, nor permanently excluded as illegitimate actors through the "back door." Instead, consistent with Foucault's notion of power—that power continually classifies and reclassifies some subjects while problematizing others—Punjabi international students are managed in an intermediate space where they can be redefined as needed depending on shifting state priorities and public opinion.

For Punjabi international students, the survey data support how governmentality is lived at the level of everyday experiences. Punjabi international students are required to perform

the role of “good” economic migrants through working low-paying jobs and paying high tuition, even though they experience financial precarity, uncertainty, and stress surrounding the immigration procedures and their future, as well as racialized stereotyping in the media. Nonetheless, despite these obstacles, their perseverance in aspirations to become permanent residents illustrates both the pull of education pathways and the perseverance to inhabit the “doorway.” Thus, technologies of power shape not only policy discourse, but also the aspirations, stress, and strategies of the governed Punjabi international students.

Our analysis demonstrates how discursive framings function within governmentality representing Punjabi international students as victims, fraudsters, or strains on the system. Such frames individualize systemic failure (e.g., housing shortages, lack of job opportunities) and displace them onto the category of racialized students. This shows how media and policy discourses work in tandem, co-constructing the doorway where the Punjabi international students stand. It is an ambiguous space of opportunity and suspicion, simultaneously opening and closing. Foucault’s governmentality reveals how Punjabi international students are positioned within Canadian migration and educational policies. They are not free agents, but rather subjects embedded within networks of power. They are initiated through broad practices of categorization, control, and racialization. Through our examination of how governmentality operates across institutions, media, and the Punjabi international students’ lived experiences, we show that regulation is concerned with producing hierarchies of desirability within Canadian society. Understanding how Punjabi international students are situated requires attention to the ways in which power operates through policies, metaphors, and discourses. It is through these that power is used to both enable and constrain student mobility and shape Punjabi international student identity. Thus, the “doorway” captures both the hope and the precarity of Punjabi international students in Canada. They are invited in, yet they are always at risk of being left standing in the threshold.

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