

FROM RECRUITMENT TO RESTRICTIONS: A NEW POLICY ERA FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CANADIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This Special Issue, *From recruitment to restrictions: A new policy era for international students in Canadian higher education*, responds to a critical inflection point marked by extensive federal immigration policy changes introduced in January 2024, including caps on international student admissions and changes to post-graduate work eligibility. In this context, a timely, policy-focused scholarly conversation is essential. This Special Issue includes diverse perspectives to examine how these changes are fundamentally reshaping Canadian higher education.

Our path to this work is shaped by the same moment of disruption that frames this Special Issue. As scholars and practitioners engaged in higher education policy, teaching and learning, and internationalization, we have encountered firsthand the lived consequences of recent federal and provincial policy shifts across our institutional and research contexts. We saw the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education (CJHE)* as the right home for this timely conversation, given its longstanding commitment to critical, policy-relevant scholarship in the Canadian context. The call for papers was intentionally designed to reflect this urgency while fostering rigorous, policy-oriented inquiry that bridges research, practice, and governance. In addition to traditional scholarly contributions, we adopted an innovative editorial approach by incorporating a moderated discussion to create space for dialogue across roles and perspectives within the sector.

Submissions were selected to reflect a range of provincial contexts, institutional settings (including colleges and universities), and sectoral viewpoints, and include English and

French scholarship. Guided by a commitment to diversity in geography, institutional type, and viewpoint, we curated contributions that document emerging trends while critically examining broader implications for intergovernmental relations, institutional responsibility, and the future of international education in Canada. Together, the articles in this Special Issue not only capture a period of significant transition but also lay the groundwork for rethinking the role and positioning of international students within Canadian higher education and society more broadly.

OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS

The Special Issue brings together seven contributions that examine the lead up to the 2024 federal policy changes and their consequences at federal, provincial, and institutional levels. Collectively, they reveal the structural vulnerabilities of Canada's approach to international higher education and point to a crisis long in the making, which has had tremendous and unequal consequences across the country as well as beyond its borders.

In terms of organization, the articles largely flow from a focus on the national level to the provincial and then institutional level, yet we also grouped the articles to showcase topical and methodological connections. The Special Issue starts with articles that take a national perspective to demonstrate changing federal discourses and public sentiments regarding international students. They also share a methodological fo-

cus on shifting discourses through close reading of policy documents, discourse analysis of media sources, or sentiment analysis.

First, Harden-Wolfson¹ and Zhang analyze 23 announcements from the federal immigration agency Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) from 2022–2025 to show how the IRCC has become a de facto education policy actor that increasingly shapes who can access Canadian higher education—and potentially longer term immigration—encroaching onto the mandates of provinces and territories. They also argue the inconsistencies in the agency’s responses to geopolitical crises—from Ukraine to Gaza—map onto and reinforce global racial hierarchies.

The next two articles focus on public sentiments towards international students. In their article, Wang and Zha use ChatGPT-assisted thematic analysis of nearly 90,000 Twitter/X posts from 2015 to 2025 to document a post-pandemic surge in nationalist-populist discourse that increasingly frames international students as a “problem,” and as competitors for housing, jobs, and public resources. They argue that this shift in public sentiment contributed to shaping the national mood and helps to explain why restrictive policies gained momentum so quickly. At the same time, they remind readers that these discourses tend to oversimplify causes of complex problems and contribute to scapegoating international students for political purposes.

In their article on Indian international students in British Columbia, Marom, Fontaine, Brunner, and Chhina draw on framing analysis of 152 Canadian news media articles and survey data from 212 Punjabi international students at four teaching-intensive institutions in British Columbia. Using the concept of governmentality and the metaphor of a “doorway,” they

show how Punjabi students, who comprised a disproportionate share of the international student population, were first constructed as economic assets and then rapidly reframed as system abusers, while their own survey responses reveal deep uncertainty about *edugration* pathways and their futures in the wake of the federal policy shifts.

Continuing a focus on the provincial level, the next articles each have a particular provincial focus, namely Québec, Ontario, and Manitoba. Focusing on Québec, Bégin-Caouette,² Hazoume, Paquette, and Lacasse analyze 38 federal and provincial policy documents alongside survey data from 37 CEGEPs (collèges d’enseignement général et professionnel), collected in 2019 and 2024. Combined, they show how, despite restrictive federal and provincial policies, colleges expanded international recruitment and diversified source countries, with a pronounced pivot towards students from francophone Africa that reflects active adaptation to Québec’s French-language requirements.

Turning to Ontario, Gill, Buckner, and Jones trace the rise and fall of public college-private partnerships (PCPPs), a distinctive partnership arrangement in the province, between 2005 to 2024. Drawing on agency theory, they argue that inadequate provincial oversight created moral hazard and opportunistic cross-subsidization that served the short-term financial interests of government and the colleges, until the governance failures embedded in the model attracted public attention and federal scrutiny, ultimately contributing to the federal 2024 cap and leading to the near-elimination of PCPPs.

Combined, the articles speak to the role of provincial policies and contexts in shaping how institutions and provinces experienced and navigated the shifting federal policies. This set of articles from BC, Québec, and Ontario also shares a focus on colleges, which have tended to educate international students from different

1 Co-editors Harden-Wolfson and Buckner were not involved with the peer-review process for the papers they co-authored. Their manuscripts were handled independently by another of the Special Issue co-editors and underwent the same anonymous double peer-review process as all the articles.

2 Bégin-Caouette is Rédacteur francophone of *CJHE* but had no role in editorial decisions associated with this co-authored paper or the Special Issue.

backgrounds than universities. Colleges have also played an important role in the education to permanent residence pathway yet tend to be under-represented in the Canadian higher education literature. Together, they show how college sectors became increasingly dependent on international students over time and the disruptive consequences of shifting policies.

At the institutional level, we conclude with an in-depth case study of the University of Manitoba and a moderated discussion that focuses on the experiences of individuals and institutions that have been most affected. Combined, these institutionally oriented articles highlight the harms as well as the creativity, responsiveness, and leadership exhibited across the sector, as institutions have responded to shifts in federal and provincial policies. Through a qualitative case study of the University of Manitoba drawing on federal policy documents, Senate meeting minutes, Board of Governors reports, and internal communications, Tamtik, Trilokekar, and Liu introduce the concept of *crisis isomorphism* to explain concrete changes made at the University of Manitoba, including admissions practices and program offerings. They argue that these actions were driven not by professional norms or best practices, but urgency, fiscal constraints and considerations of what peer institutions were doing.

In the concluding moderated discussion, Al-Haque, Legusov, Knight-Grofe, Charles, and Davis draw on their experiences as scholar-practitioners working at institutions in Ontario and British Columbia to describe how the 2024 policy shifts affected their roles as international student advisors, faculty, directors of international education, and university presidents—illuminating both the profound human costs of the crisis and the creative responses of those working in the sector. Although these scholar-practitioners all pointed to disruption and difficulties that resulted from the policy shifts, they also pointed to how the current moment had led to rethinking paradigms and new practices for student supports, among others.

CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Stepping back to appreciate the seven contributions as a collective, we note cross-cutting themes that highlight the wide-ranging impacts of the policy shifts and the breadth of scholarly inquiry within the field of higher education in Canada.

First, many of the articles situate the 2024–2025 policy shifts within a longer historical time frame, carefully detailing “how we got here” as well as demonstrating the severe impacts of the policies on institutions’ finances and operations. Together, they demonstrate that underfunding, weak oversight, and institutional reliance on international student tuition created the conditions for a crisis long before federal policy changed.

Second, the Special Issue documents a clear shift in public perceptions, media discourses, and federal policies governing international students, which became increasingly hostile in the run up to 2024 policies. They show how international students became a politically convenient scapegoat for an affordability crisis and were increasingly framed as outsiders and abusers of the system, while downplaying the role that a lack of funding and oversight played as drivers of systemic problems.

Third, the growing tension between federal and provincial governance runs through multiple articles. The articles illuminate how federal policy decisions, which are technically part of the immigration portfolio, have constrained provincial and institutional agency in ways that have had profound and direct impacts on provincial higher education systems and sit uneasily with Canada’s constitutional division of responsibilities in education.

Finally, the articles highlight the diversity of institutional responses amidst the policy shifts. On one hand, the articles point to institutional agency: insights from Québec and Manitoba show that institutions were strategic in how they responded to shifting federal and provincial policies, even as their room to maneuver is structured by provincial policies and their structural position. Meanwhile, the insights from Al-

Haque and colleagues make clear that adapting to the new policy era came at considerable cost to campus communities, labour relations, and the professionals working within them.

CONTENDING WITH THE NEW POLICY ERA AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

More than two years since the introduction of the federal enrolment caps on international students, the new Canadian higher education policy era continues to be characterized by restrictions and reforms. Notwithstanding a change in federal leadership from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to Mark Carney in March 2025 and a government that only secured a majority in April 2026, the enrolment caps have been made permanent and subsequently further reduced for 2026 (House of Commons, 2026). In addition to the continuation of the enrolment caps, new regulations have increased the proof-of-funds requirement for study permit applications, reduced the number of hours international students can work off campus, and made the process of applying for post-graduation work permits more challenging (House of Commons, 2026). The impact of these changes on international students and Canadian higher education has been greater than expected: in 2026, the number of new international students arriving decreased by 61% (Nash, 2026). This outcome is a dramatic reversal from the expansion that had seen international student numbers across the country grow nearly 200% to 572,961 in the decade leading to 2023–2024 (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Yet, the policy problems that the caps set out to solve—increasing challenges to the integrity of the immigration system and overburdened housing and health sectors—have not diminished. A critical report from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada in April 2026 not only found that IRCC was unable to explain why new study permit approval rates were lower than predicted but also identified inefficiencies in fraud detection and inadequate risk management (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2026). The report reaches the pithy conclusion that IRCC “was not effectively implementing

reforms to the International Student Program” (p. 29). In the same month, the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration also published a report on the International Student Program (House of Commons, 2026). This report points out the impact on institutions and students themselves, noting program closures, staff layoffs, and budgetary losses in colleges and universities and the diminishing appeal of Canada as a study destination from a student perspective, findings echoed by others (Brunner & Mehta, 2026). Unpacking the mismatch between stated policy intent and initial outcomes requires further policy-oriented research; new primary data such as interviews with policymakers would usefully complement the secondary data that has formed the basis for many of the articles in this Special Issue.

Provinces and territories have not only felt the impact of these ongoing changes but also continue to shape their own environments for international higher education, in many cases underpinned by fragmented or non-existent quality control mechanisms (Brunner & Mehta, 2026). Diverse political contexts underpin the variety of responses from different jurisdictions. In Ontario, for example, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities has been renamed to add “Research Excellence and Security” (now MCURES), indicative of another emerging policy concern with cross-border ramifications (Sá et al., 2025). The Ministry’s 2025–2026 annual report also points out the “major impact” of federal policy on the admission of international students, noting that Canada’s “brand” has suffered internationally as a result and “will take years to recover” (MCURES, International Students section, 2025). Partly in recognition of the fiscal crisis caused by the huge decline in international students, the Ontario government has reversed policies on tuition freezes in place since 2019 despite earlier claims that these were non-negotiable. Relatedly, the government is infusing more than \$600 billion to fill stopgaps in the higher education system in Ontario and restructuring domestic student loans (through the Ontario Student Assistance Program, OSAP) to fund this allocation. Future research could help elucidate challenges and prospects for policy coordination on international education in this

new policy era; investigation into the interweaving of domestic and foreign policy concerns for international students and researchers is also increasingly relevant.

Meanwhile, in Québec, the current political priority of *Francization* continues to layer onto the federal policy changes and has led to adjustments to study permit regulations, new language proficiency requirements, and the abolition of the Québec Experience Program, which had provided a key pathway to permanent residency (Gouvernement du Québec, 2025). Similar to the federal report issued some months later, a November 2025 provincial audit concluded that there was insufficient assessment and analysis of the effects of the recent measures in Québec (Vérificateur général du Québec, 2025). This report also highlighted the instability and inconsistencies of recent provincial and federal immigration regulations (Paquet, 2025), underlining the urgency and relevance of additional research in this area. However, while attention often falls to the provinces receiving higher numbers of international students, the Auditor General of Canada's (2026) finding that smaller provinces have been disproportionately affected also warrants further investigation by researchers.

What is happening in Canadian policy is having a ripple effect elsewhere, notably in Australia and the UK. Since the Canadian cap, Australia has similarly introduced a ceiling on international student enrolments (Martin, 2024) and the UK has proposed a range of new rules that would make it harder for international students to study and stay in the country (McKinney & Gower, 2026). Although Canada has traditionally looked to these countries to learn from their longer standing approaches to regulating international students (Australia, for example, introduced legislation to protect international students as early as 2000), the gaze appears to have been reversed. On the one hand, this development provides a new twist to an ongoing story of policy borrowing and learning. On the other hand, in an increasingly insular and continually shifting geopolitical environment, this trend towards restricting access to higher education is a worrisome development.

Compounded by the negative shifts in public perceptions and media discourses discussed in contributions to the Special Issue, concerns should be mounting around the treatment of international students around the world. Continuing to monitor and analyze these developments in international and comparative perspective will be an important direction for future research. Equally significant would be research that studies the impact of domestic Canadian and provincial policy changes on higher education policies in other settings. In the competitive neoliberal environment most countries inhabit, other jurisdictions are already seeking to capitalize on what is—despite a shifting policy and geopolitical landscape—an expanding “market,” with predictions that the number of international students will grow into the 2030s (“New analysis,” 2025).

The findings and lessons learned from the Special Issue, coupled with the impact of ongoing federal and provincial political volatility following the major changes in 2024, collectively present plentiful possibilities for future research directions, including those signalled above. Given the current predilection of policymakers to shape the Canadian federal, provincial, and territorial higher education landscape by regulatory amendments (Sabzalieva et al., 2022), the challenge for the higher education research field in the coming years will be to keep on top of these changes using innovative policy-forward theories and methods that centre the very diverse experiences of and attacks on the people at the heart of these shifts: international students.

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