



Study Abroad Pathways: Supply Chain Dynamics in Sending Students from Punjab to Canada

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the growing demand for international education, coupled with economic challenges in Punjab, has driven a significant increase in students seeking higher education in Canada. This paper examines the roles of two critical stakeholders in this process: the Canadian government and overseas education agents. Canada's policies on work permits and pathways to permanent residency make it a highly attractive destination, while education agents in Punjab play a pivotal role in facilitating student migration through financial incentives and targeted marketing strategies. Structured in two sections, this study explores Canadian policy impacts and the strategies employed by education agents to channel students abroad. Findings underscore the importance of these interconnected dynamics in shaping Canada as a premier destination for Punjabi students.

Keywords: Canadian Government, Canadian Institutes, Education Agents, International Students.

INTRODUCTION

Canada, the world's second-largest country by area at 9.98 million square kilometers, has a relatively small population of 38 million and a low population density of four people per square kilometer (Net Migration, 2021). With a median age of 41.1 years (World Demographics, n.d.), Canada faces a demographic challenge

characterized by a low birth rate of 1.47 per thousand and an aging population—68% of whom are over 55 years of age. This aging demographic has led to a notable shortage of skilled and unskilled workers, posing a potential barrier to economic growth (United Nations, 2019). In response, Canada has increasingly turned to skilled migration, particularly through international student recruitment, as a strategy to bolster its workforce and address these demographic issues.

A report from Canada's Advisory Panel on International Education, issued in August 2012, highlights the importance of international education to Canada's future prosperity, positioning the country as a preferred destination for international students (Gopal, 2014a). This approach aligns with Canada's historical initiatives, beginning with the Colombo Plan Fellowship in 1950 (Oakman, 2010), which established strong educational ties with Asia and the Pacific. The Colombo Plan brought a substantial influx of students and health professionals from South and Southeast Asia, making a lasting impact on Canadian educational institutions (Gribble, 2008).

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was established in 1968 (Morrison, 1998). It has formulated various policies for managing a country's international assistance program for the attainment of its development objectives. These measures resulted in the enormous arrival of international students from developing countries in the 1960s (Buchert, 1998). The period of 1964-1976 saw a shift in Canadian development policy that resulted in severe budget cuts, which altered the CIDA's role in higher education, resulting in a decline in the inflow of international students (Conway, 2004).

To encourage international students, the Federal Provincial Consultative Committee on Education formulated a policy document namely "Foreign Students Policy and Programs", in 1984 (Salawu, 2021) which focused on international students in Canada and the policy vacuum surrounding them. In this context, it was proposed that the Canadian government will actively participate and will map out policies allied to simplify Visa processing and relax the fees paying for international students (Gribble, 2008). In 1988, the Federal Provincial Consultative Committee on Education (FPCCE) was modified. This resulted in alignment toward synthesizing information on the institutional capacity of foreign students, as well as the marketing strategy adopted by institutions to attract international students (Gopal, 2014).

The period of the 1990s saw dominance of international students in the age group of less than eighteen years mainly from South-Asian

countries studying in secondary or higher schools in Canada (Shields, 2013). In 1994, the government released a report titled 'The International Dimension of Higher Education in Canada: Collaborative Policy Framework' which noted that Canada ranked fifth among countries receiving foreign students. As per this report, from 1990--1994, Canada admitted 1,58,000 international students which amounted to 31,000 international students every year. The major recommendations of the report focused on marketing strategies for attracting international students. As per its recommendations two conferences i.e., the 'International Symposium on North America' and the 'National Conference on International Marketing of Higher Education' were conducted in the year 1994. Both conferences focused primarily on framing marketing strategies for enrolling students at postsecondary levels of education. As a result, many students were enrolled in business management and public administration in 1994 (Ann, 2019)

The decade of 2000 saw the promulgation of the Canadian Education Centers Network (CECN) to attract international students in Canada. In 2004–2005, there was a conflict between the government and private higher education institutions of Canada which resulted in termination of the funding of CECN and led to its closure (Gribble, 2008). In 2006, the Department of Academic Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Trade jointly formed the 'EdU-Canada' initiative, an official government of Canada online source, which provided information to international students and researchers about the institutes of Canada (Canada, 2022). Additionally, the government budget of 2007 allocated C\$ 1 million for educational initiatives which resulted in boosting the market of international students. The government also launched 'Imagine: Education in/au CANADA' in 2007 to provide high quality education at Canadian institutes to international students. This program aimed at attracting 2,39,000 international students to Canada, who would contribute C\$ 8 billion to the economy of Canada (Gopal, 2014).

In 2008, the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) was formulated with the aim of helping temporary foreign workers and foreign students apply for their Canadian work experience and education (Ann, 2019). This program (CEC) also allowed the students to complete their points to apply to the permanent residency program. In the same year, measures such as the off-Campus work permit combined with easy visa policies made Canada an attractive destination for international students (Beech, 2018). Additionally, the Canadian government and embassies started streamlining its visa and application process, which reduced the waiting

time and increased the number of student visit applications (Canada G.A., 2022). In the year 2011, the Federal Government declared education a major export industry and allocated C\$10 million in its budget for international education strategies (Government of Canada, 2011).

In 2013, the government further relaxed the rules under the CEC for international students. This allowed skilled workers working in the country on a temporary basis and foreign graduates enrolled in the country's postsecondary institutes to apply for permanent residency programs without leaving the country (Baas, 2007). In addition, there was a reduction in work requirements for the permanent residency programme to twelve hours from twenty-four hours. These policy measures resulted in more than 7,21,000 international students being enrolled in Canadian institutes contributing C\$ 21.6 billion to the Canadian GDP (Altbach & Reisberg, 2013).

In 2019, the government introduced various programs allowing students to study both English and French. These measures provided opportunities for international students to start becoming financially independent while providing the opportunity to pursue permanent residency. A new scheme namely the Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) was started to provide online services to international students (Beech, 2015).

The advent of the pandemic in 2020 adversely affected international students both emotionally and financially. The government of Canada to help students launched various initiatives specifically for students working in priority sectors such as education, health, finance, water, and safety. They were permitted to work for more than 20 hours. The Federal Government launched the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to create 11,600 jobs for students and graduates, while also providing financial support of \$500 per week to eligible workers. Additionally, the government introduced the Canada Student Service Grant (CSSG) to provide work opportunities for students in service activities. A postgraduate work permit (PGWP) was also offered to former students to help them gain Canadian work experience (Firang, 2020).

This study aims to explore the economic, social, and institutional factors that influence student migration from Punjab to Canada, focusing on the role of government policies, educational institutions, and overseas education consultants in shaping this process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research on international student migration emphasizes the key roles of education agents, government policies, and economic factors in shaping students' choices for studying abroad. Johnson and Liu (2024) found that education agents wield significant influence over students' destination choices, primarily motivated by financial incentives. Kumar and Chhabra (2024) highlighted the economic drivers of student migration from Punjab to Canada, where agents promote Canada as a pathway to permanent residency. Singh and Arora (2024) observed that Canada's immigration policies, such as work permits and residency pathways, significantly impact Punjabi students' decisions, with agents amplifying these incentives. Additionally, Rodriguez and Patel (2024) revealed that agents use strategic marketing to promote lesser-known institutions, often for higher commissions, while Mahajan and Gill (2024) discussed economic disparities pushing Punjabi students abroad, exposing financial exploitation by agents. Collectively, these studies illustrate the critical role of agents, economic motivations, and favorable immigration policies in the influx of students to Canada.

The internationalization and commercialization of higher education have led to the rise of education agents who facilitate admissions to global institutions. Agents guide students and their families in selecting destinations and institutions, often shaping decisions through recommendations and market reputation (Academic Courses, 2019). Their influence sometimes directs students to less reputable institutions, leading to high international enrollments for such institutions (Hawthorne, 2010). This reliance on agents is driven by market competitiveness, where international students typically pay two to three times the tuition fees of domestic students, directly enhancing institutional profit margins (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Beech, 2018). Canadian educational institutions in suburban or less popular areas rely on agents to meet admission targets (CBIE, 2018; Knight, 2011).

In India, especially in Punjab, economic and social pressures drive many students to pursue Canadian education with the goal of permanent residency. Canadian education consultants meet this demand by connecting students with Canadian institutions, forming a network that benefits students, agents, and institutions alike, generating an estimated CAD 22 billion annually for Canada's economy (M Square Media, 2022).

In response, a new "aggregator recruitment model" has emerged, involving "master agents" who contract with institutions and coordinate

numerous sub-agents to recruit students via online platforms (Blaney, 2022). Prominent master agents for Canadian admissions include Apply Board and Adventus.io. As the number of Canadian institutions grows, with approximately 1,580 public and private colleges and universities (Canada G.A., 2022), the demand for agents has intensified. Public institutions offer advantages like the Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP), while private institutions attract students with lower fees and relaxed admission criteria, often offering higher agent commissions (Trooboo et al., 2008; Apply Insights, 2022).

Additionally, partnerships between public and private institutions, or “symbiotic relationships,” have developed, allowing private institutions in high-demand areas to collaborate with public institutions for expanded market access. For instance, Georgian College partners with ILAC International College, and Cambrian College collaborates with Hanson College, enabling both public and private institutions to maximize their reach in high-student-demand areas like Toronto and Brampton (ILAC, 2022; Cambrian College, 2022).

Scholarship initiatives further support international student enrollment, divided into government, non-government, and institutional categories. Government scholarships, like the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and the Quebec Provincial Government Scholarship, offer substantial financial support for international students (University of Toronto, n.d.; Quebec Scholarships, n.d.). Non-government scholarships, including the Trudeau Scholarships, target specific fields or demographics (University College London, n.d.). Institutional scholarships, ranging from CAD 5,000 to CAD 20,000, are provided by universities such as the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia, contributing to the significant growth in international student enrollment from 32,466 in 1999 to 279,168 in 2019 (Canada G.A., 2022; ApplyInsights, 2022).

The rise in international student enrollment underscores the effectiveness of Canada’s immigration and education policies while highlighting the indispensable role of intermediaries in guiding students through complex application and visa procedures. This study aims to analyze the policies and strategies of the Canadian government and institutions, examine the role of education consultants, and identify the challenges faced by Punjabi students within this educational migration framework.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study uses a case study approach within a mixed-methods framework to examine student migration dynamics from Punjab, India, to Canada. Punjab, historically known as the "Granary of India" due to its agricultural output, faces economic challenges like reduced agricultural returns and limited employment, prompting a trend of youth migration in search of educational and economic opportunities abroad (Kaur, 2016; Gill, 2020). This migration inclination, driven by socioeconomic conditions and cultural factors, positions Punjab as a critical case for understanding international student mobility.

Using a twofold dataset, this study first draws on quantitative data, including UNESCO's 2021 statistic showing India as one of the largest sources of international students, with 215,720 students studying abroad in 2020. Additional data shows Punjab as a leading state in student migration, particularly to Canada (ICEF Monitor, 2019). The qualitative component involves interviews and case reviews to understand the interactions between education agents in Punjab and Canadian institutions. This combined dataset allows for a comprehensive analysis of the structures facilitating student migration and the challenges arising from this agent-institution nexus, offering insights into the unique dynamics of Punjab's student mobility to Canada.

Survey Data: A structured survey was conducted with 50 overseas consultant agencies across the three major districts of Punjab—Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Ludhiana. These districts were strategically selected because they cover the three key regions of Punjab: Majha, Doaba, and Malwa. Amritsar, representing Majha, is a major cultural and religious center with deep historical ties to the Punjabi diaspora (Singh, 2019). Jalandhar, covering the Doaba region, is known for its educational institutions and as a hub for students aspiring to study abroad. Ludhiana, representing Malwa, is the industrial heart of Punjab, with a significant population pursuing international education as a pathway to better economic opportunities (Kaur, 2016). By selecting these districts, the study captures a comprehensive representation of the entire state of Punjab. The survey revealed that 64% of the agencies dealt primarily with Canada, reflecting the country's popularity among Punjabi students (ApplyInsights, 2022).

Interviews: To complement the survey data, in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including agency representatives,

students, and officials from educational institutions. These qualitative insights provided a deeper understanding of the migration process, the decision-making factors for students, and the role of consultants in facilitating their journey.

Secondary Data Analysis: This study also incorporated secondary data from government reports, academic publications, and other relevant sources. These data help contextualize the findings within the broader trends of international student mobility and provide a comparison between different regions in India, with a specific focus on Punjab.

RESULTS

Nearly all Canadian institutions now collaborate with overseas consulting agents, with most institutions following similar criteria for agent appointments, though some variations exist. To gain a detailed understanding of agent recruitment practices across different types of institutions, a representative institution from each category—public college, private college, public university, and private university—was selected at random. These included Loyalist College (public college), Alexander College (private college), the University of Guelph (public university), and Yorkville University (private university). A thorough review of each institution's 'Agent Recruitment Form' provided insights, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Details of the agent recruitment form

Sr. No.	Requirements of Agent Application Form	Loyalist College	Alexander College	University of Guelph	Yorkville University
1.	History of Agency	✓	✓	✓	
2.	Professional Associations & Membership of Agency	✓		✓	✓
3.	Quota of Admissions allocated to the Agent	✓	✓		✓
4.	Marketing and Recruitment Activities of Agents	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	Home Country of Migrating Student		✓	✓	✓
6.	Host Country of Migrating Student	✓	✓	✓	
7.	Subjects chosen by Migrating Student in Host Institution		✓		✓

8.	Fee charged from consulting students by the Agency	✓	✓	✓	✓
9.	References Provided by other institutions in Host country	✓	✓	✓	
10.	Number of students sent abroad per year by the Agency		✓		✓
11.	Services provided to the applicant by Agency	✓			✓

Reviewing Table 1 reveals that all four institution types prioritize understanding the fees charged to students by agencies, along with the marketing and recruitment activities conducted. This emphasis suggests that maximizing admissions through agents is a key objective across institutions. Professional affiliations, such as ICCRC (Immigration Consultants of Canada Regulatory Council) membership, are generally required or preferred, particularly by public institutions, though this criterion may be more flexible for private colleges. Notably, the University of Guelph, a public university, did not inquire about the number of students recruited annually by the agency or specific courses selected by students.

To further examine the role of overseas agents in student migration, a survey was conducted with 50 consulting agencies from Amritsar (20 agencies), Jalandhar (15 agencies), and Ludhiana (15 agencies). The findings provide insights into the characteristics and practices of these agencies.

Table 2: Overview of Consultant Agencies and Their Operations

Variables	Categories	<i>F</i>	(%)
Age of the Agency	0-5 years	26	52
	5-10 years	14	28
	More than 10 years	10	20
Registration Status	Registered	38	76
	Unregistered	12	24

Type of Agency	International	27	54
	National	9	18
	Regional	14	28
Number of Branches	Less than 5	33	66
	5-10	9	18
	More than 10	8	16
Location of Agency	Rural	19	38
	Urban	31	62
Country Dealt with	Canada	32	64
	Others (USA, UK, Australia, Germany)	18	36
Colleges Offered	Public	5	10
	Private	26	52
	Both	19	38
Programs Offered	High School	5	10
	Summer	10	20
	Undergraduate	20	40
	Postgraduate and above	15	30
Visa Support Offered	Yes	46	92
	No	4	8
Time Taken for Visa Processing	0-1 month	10	20
	1-2 months	20	40

	More than 2 months	20	40
Channel of Student Enrollment	Seminars	10	20
	Newspaper	12	24
	Social Networking	24	48
	Pamphlets	4	8
Average Commission Paid to Agent	1-2%	33	66
	2% or more	17	34
Cost Incurred by Agent (INR)	0-10,000	29	58
	10,000 and above	21	42
Average Commission Earned by Agent (INR)	0-50,000	22	44
	50,000 and above	28	56

F = frequency

The survey revealed that 52% of the agencies were established within the last five years, indicating a recent surge in demand for migration services. Among the total agencies surveyed, 76% were registered, whereas 24% operated without registration. This suggests that while most agencies comply with regulatory requirements, a significant portion remains unregistered. The majority of agencies (54%) operated at an international level, whereas 28% were regional players primarily located in suburban or rural areas.

A significant 64% of the agencies dealt exclusively with Canada, reflecting the strong preference among Punjabi students for Canadian education. More than half of the agencies (52%) promoted private colleges because of their lower requirements and higher commission rates. The majority of the students (40%) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, emphasizing the demand among younger students, particularly those aged 18-24, to migrate.

The data show that 92% of the agencies offered visa support services, with most students receiving their visas within one to two months. Approximately 82% of the agencies processed more than 10

visas annually, indicating a high volume of activity. The average commission per student was estimated to be around INR one lakh, meaning that agencies could earn a minimum of INR ten lakhs annually by sending just ten students abroad.

A significant proportion of student enrollments (48%) is generated through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Around 54% of agencies employ fewer than 10 marketing staff, with 58% incurring marketing costs under INR 10,000. However, 56% of agencies report earning commissions of INR 50,000 or more per case, indicating a substantial return on investment.

Despite these agencies' apparent success in facilitating student migration, several critical issues have emerged due to growing reliance on intermediaries:

Exploitation and Misinformation: Many international students from Punjab lack adequate understanding of program selection, institutional options, and visa procedures, making them susceptible to exploitation. Some agents misguide students into enrolling in private institutions without postgraduation work permits (PGWPs), despite promising admission to public institutions (Kunin, 2018; ICEF Monitor, 2019).

Financial Exploitation: Agents often make unfounded promises of guaranteed visas and admissions, misleading students into paying substantial fees. Numerous complaints have been filed against agents in Punjab; however, regulatory protections for students remain limited (Chaba, 2022; Mammen et al., 2022).

Admission to Fraudulent Institutions: Some students are assured admission to reputable institutions but find themselves enrolled in unrecognized universities upon arrival in Canada, leaving them disillusioned and unsupported (Government of Canada, 2020; Saxena & Dhillon, 2020).

Jurisdictional Challenges: Agent-institution collaborations often span national boundaries, complicating the enforcement of ethical and legal standards. Although institutions establish policies to regulate agent practices, they have limited ability to enforce these standards across different jurisdictions (Knight, 2011).

Non-compliance with Conduct Codes: Many institutions have codes of conduct for agents, yet these are frequently disregarded. In a highly

competitive recruitment market, institutions may overlook agent misconduct to meet enrollment goals, potentially damaging their reputations (ICEF Monitor, 2019).

Issues with the Aggregator Recruitment Model: The widespread aggregator model involves subagents who refer students to Canadian institutions via master agents, often without direct oversight from the institutions. This structure complicates monitoring, making it challenging for institutions to control subagent practices even when master agents are regulated (Blaney, 2022; Kunin, 2018).

Recent reports (Chaba, 2022; Mammen et al., 2022) highlight rising issues such as the increase in Canadian institution visa rejections from 15% pre-COVID-19 to 41% in fall 2022, often due to forged documents and backlogs caused by the pandemic. These issues underscore the risks associated with high dependency on educational agents.

CONCLUSION

This analysis underscores that student migration to Canada is shaped by three primary actors in the education supply chain: student-friendly government policies, Canadian educational institutions, and international education consultants. For students from Punjab, socioeconomic and political drivers create a strong impetus to pursue education in Canada, often with the ultimate aim of securing permanent residency. Given the complex and often challenging migration process, overseas agents play a critical role, acting as intermediaries who bridge Canadian demand for international students with the strong supply of applicants from India.

These consultants significantly influence students' decisions by facilitating admissions, navigating visa requirements, and promoting Canadian institutions. However, the growing reliance on agents raises concerns about misinformation, financial exploitation, and regulatory challenges. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure ethical practices, protect student interests, and maintain the integrity of Canada's educational system as a premier destination for international students.

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