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International Student Motivations and Experiences in Small to Mid-Sized Universities in Remote Canada: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT: *Canada is undergoing significant changes in its immigration policies to reduce the number of study permits and educational pathways for immigration; thus, understanding the realities of small- to mid-sized universities in remote regions potentially affected by this shift is imperative. However, international student motivations and experiences in these contexts remain underexplored in the literature. This scoping review investigates 21 English-language studies conducted in Canadian universities with student enrollment under 20,000, which examine international students' push-pull dynamics, lived experiences, and postgraduate retention. Key pull factors include postgraduate immigration pathways, English and cultural immersion, perceptions of safety and affordability, and inclusive school admission; meanwhile, academic pressure, parental expectations, and career-related concerns are major push factors. For lived experiences, recurring themes emerged, encompassing areas such as cultural adjustment, social attachment, language learning, institutional support, and systemic challenges—all of which shape decisions to remain or relocate after graduation. A mismatch between expectations and reality is identified in terms of the cultural responsiveness of school services and access to community resources. Overall, the findings highlight the need for a more proactive and sustainable institutional internationalization strategy to support student services, critical internationalization training for staff/faculty, inclusive curriculum development, incentives for staff commitment, and partnerships with local stakeholders. These calls resonate with Canada's evolving immigration policies for remote*

universities to better attract, support, and retain international students amid global turmoil.

Keywords: International students, remote university, small university, push–pull theory, Canada, lived experience, retention

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International students who study overseas on a study visa without permanent residence in the host country often choose to attend higher education institutions (HEIs) abroad for various reasons. Their motivations are shaped by the unique context of their home country and the outcomes they seek in the destination country (Chen, 2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wang, 2015). Canada is a desirable destination for HEIs because of its potential for immigration, affordability, multiculturalism, language learning, and reputation for safety (Wang, 2015). For such compelling reasons, Canada hosts a comparable number of international students to the United States, despite having a population nine times smaller (ICEF Monitor, 2023). In 2023, the number of international students in Canada reached a peak of 1,040,985 before the study permit caps were introduced in 2024 (CBIE, n.d.). As a result, international students make a significant economic contribution to Canada. In 2022, their total annual expenditures accounted for 1.2% of Canada’s total GDP and 23.1% of total service exports. Additionally, for the same year, 361,230 jobs were supported, and \$7.4 billion in tax revenues were generated solely through international student expenditures (Kunin, 2023).

International students have long occupied ambivalent positions in Canada’s public policy discourse, particularly over the past 50 years. In 1976, the federal government reduced immigration pathways for international students while explicitly labeling them temporary immigrants (McCartney, 2021). The tactical creation of the “international student” category produced discursive fiction whereby their outsider status was reinforced, thus concealing the strategic aims of race-based exclusion. At approximately the same time, Ontario (and later other provinces) HEIs began to introduce differential tuition fees (McCartney, 2021). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, international students continued to serve Canada’s fiscal incentives, as a bulwark to economic downturns, funding cuts, and the federal government’s retreat from education roles (Stein, 2018). This period involved more active institutional recruitment efforts, yet Canadian HEIs were trailing other developed countries in retaining skilled graduates (Senate of Canada, 1997). It was not until 2001 that the federal government revised its immigration policy to enable a postgraduate transition to permanent residency. This was seen as a move to aid HEIs in their global recruitment and for Canada to advance its financial interests (Stein, 2018). In the next few years, study permit processing and immigration pathways became more streamlined. The launch of the *EduCanada* brand in 2008 and the development of the first international

education strategy in 2014 further accelerated the expansion and diversification of international students (McCartney, 2021).

Globalization has made Canadian HEIs more reliant on international student recruitment as an alternative revenue-seeking strategy in the neoliberal economy (Cudmore, 2005; Guo & Chase, 2011). Over the years, Canada has utilized aggressive international recruitment strategies to increase the number of postsecondary international students (Chen, 2017). Despite facing numerous challenges and being systemically vulnerable, international students are recognized neither as equity-seeking groups nor treated equitably alongside domestic students but as tokens for the economy (Tamtik et al., 2021). International students are perceived to be well adjusted, skilled, and privileged because of the social mobility tied to their education, and they are viewed as uninvited guests but ideal immigrants (Scott et al., 2015). As outsiders with “special access” to the country, they are expected to become economic providers rather than burdens to society. However, during social ills (e.g., undesirable economic and social conditions), they are easily scapegoated to strain public welfare resources, although neoliberal policies are the major root causes (Mu & Soong, 2025). Negative perceptions remarkably shape international students' adaptation experiences, retention outcomes, and sense of belonging in Canadian society (Arumuhathas, 2022; Scott et al., 2015). Moreover, post-COVID-19 realities have revealed the pitfalls of neoliberalism, where reduced student mobility has led to declining enrollment and thus fiscal challenges for most HEIs worldwide (Marginson, 2020). This effect is more pronounced among small- to mid-sized HEIs in rural/remote regions, which require more brand recognition, recruitment resources, student revenue, favorable immigration policies, and access to overseas partnerships to maintain global competitiveness (James, 2022). These institutions are especially vulnerable to economic downturns, processing delays, and changes to immigration policies, such as student visas and postgraduation work permits (PGWPs).

Despite its importance, there is a dearth of student narratives studying at less popular HEIs in Canada, especially among peer-reviewed publications (James, 2022). Understanding this allows HEIs to better recognize international students' unique needs to study abroad and to shed insight into best practices and policy changes. By applying the push–pull theory of migration, this review identifies various motivating factors of students studying abroad in small- to mid-sized Canadian HEIs in rural/remote regions and factors related to university and postgraduate retention. Push–pull theory is a classical framework used by Lee (1966) to explain migration flows, providing the rationale for migrants leaving their home country and deciding the location of their new lives (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The “push” is an outbound model that explicates the social, political, and economic drives of student flows overseas, which can include economic conditions and opportunities in the home country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Other factors may consist of job prospects, political unrest, and familial expectations (Császár et al., 2023; Urbański, 2022). After students decide to move abroad, the pull factors prompt them to weigh their options and choose a host country that has the most appeal. Pull factors are commonly categorized as

follows: knowledge of the host country, reputation, personal recommendation, cost issues, geographic proximity, cultural appeal, the language environment, and social links (Glass & Cruz, 2023; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Using the push-pull framework, the results of the synthesis will be used to create a transition model (from prearrival push-pull to adaptation and retention) alongside recommendations for smaller HEIs that cater to international students' needs.

METHOD

Applying Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework for a scoping review, we followed these five stages to ensure transparency and reliability of the review: 1) research question, 2) finding relevant literature, 3) study selection, 4) charting data, and 5) reporting the results. The research questions are defined as follows:

1. What does the literature inform us about international students' push and pull factors for studying small- to mid-sized HEIs in remote regions?
2. What does the literature inform us about the experiences of international students in these HEIs and their postgraduate retention?

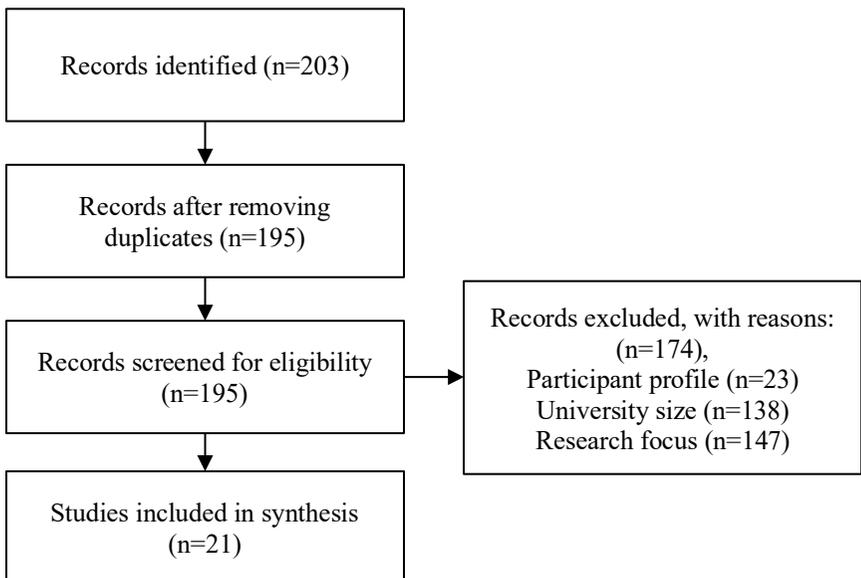
As a result, we seek to identify relevant literature related to studies conducted among only currently enrolled or recently graduated international students at small- to mid-sized Canadian universities (excluding colleges) in rural/remote regions. A mid-sized university typically has between 4,000 and 15,000 students (James, 2022; The College Solution, n.d.). However, given Canada's large international student population, the review includes rural universities with a student population of fewer than 20,000. The literature should focus on the motivations for studying abroad at a specific Canadian university, as well as the lived experiences of international students at these institutions. We excluded studies such as those that do not focus on international student experiences, those without student data, those conducted at universities that fall outside the enrollment range or are located in metropolitan areas, and those published in non-English languages. The review includes all types of publications, including but not limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, university theses, and other gray literature.

Next, we searched the following databases: ERIC, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations with general codes ("international student" AND "experience" AND "Canada") as well as remote HEI descriptors ("small university" OR "medium-sized university" OR "small institution" OR "primarily undergraduate" OR "mid-sized university"). Owing to the scarce number of articles conducted with descriptors related to small- to mid-sized universities, we hand-searched the actual name of the university that fit into the categories of 1) total enrollment less than 20,000 and 2) being located in a small city or remote region. Handsearching is essential for identifying potentially overlooked studies that may not be discovered through traditional database searches due to issues with journal indexing, key terms, and article sources.

For article selection, Figure 1 shows the screening process of this review. We first briefly screened the titles and abstracts of the articles. Articles that did not fit

the inclusion criteria were excluded. Studies claiming to be conducted in mid-sized Canadian universities were scanned to evaluate their total enrollment and locations. All the articles meeting the inclusion criteria were retained. For articles that discovered several themes or were conducted at more than one university, only themes related to students' motivations and experiences studying at the applicable university were analyzed. A total of 195 articles were retained after removing duplicates. After initial title/abstract screening for eligibility, 174 records were removed because the participant profiles, sizes of HEIs, and research focus did not align. The final number of articles meeting the inclusion criteria was 21. The search strategy was updated continuously following the inclusion criteria as we delved deeper into the context of the literature. A combination of systematic and hermeneutic approaches in this review allows more comprehensive and thoughtful coverage of the literature. Hermeneutic review is an iterative process beginning from "literature searching, sorting, selecting sources, and acquiring papers of interest... [to] identification of additional literature for further reading... [until] a well argued literature review, including a research problem or questions is produced" (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p. 263-268). This process supplements a systematic approach that uses formalistic database searches to produce documents simultaneously; together, they foster academic curiosity, critical article engagement, and reliability in scholarship (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Figure 1: Diagram of the Scoping Review



We extracted brief data from the literature into a chart organized into four categories: studies, year of publication, participants, research designs, and sample sizes. The features of the included articles are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Features of the Included Studies

Studies	Participants	Research designs	Sample sizes
Chen (2017)	Students (Chinese; undergraduate)	Case study, semistructured interviews	15
Poteet & Gomez (2015)	Students	Focus groups	23
James-MacEachern & Yun (2017)	Students	Questionnaire	242
Nguyen (2017)	Students	Quantitative analysis of existing database	unspecified
Kwon et al. (2023)	Students	Questionnaire, focus groups	775
Howe et al. (2023)	Students	Questionnaire, interviews	104
Li (2024)	Students (Chinese)	Case study, semistructured interviews	10
Ji (2021)	Students (Chinese)	Case study, semistructured interviews	6
Liu (2016)	Students (Chinese; MEd program)	Questionnaire, semistructured interviews	14
Smith et al. (2022)	Students	Questionnaire	271
Passmore (2024)	Students	Questionnaire, focus groups	16
Shimeng (2015)	Students (Chinese; MEd program)	Semistructured interviews	8
Zhang (2017)	Students (Chinese)	Semistructured interviews	8
Liu (2013)	Students (Chinese)	Questionnaire	95
Francis-Walker (2017)	Students	Questionnaire, focus group	99
Symons et al. (2006)	Students	Focus groups	42
Akinbinu (2024)	Students	Questionnaire	93

Boateng (2023)	Students (from Africa)	Semistructured interviews	10
Yasin & Belanger (2015)	Students	Questionnaire	50
Brunette (2017)	Students	Questionnaire, interviews	47
O'Rourke & Kreber (2023)	Students (Indian)	Questionnaire, interviews	155

All participants were international students at Canadian universities. Questionnaires and interviews are the main methods of data collection. The chart does not include key findings related to international student push–pull dynamics and experiences at universities, as we cover them comprehensively in the results section. For data reporting, this review uses a narrative approach, which explains the results of the studies in text rather than in numbers such as a meta-analysis (Rodgers et al., 2009). The commonalities among these studies were synthesized to depict the main motivational factors and experiences of international students in small- to mid-sized HEIs in remote regions.

RESULTS

Push Factors

Three articles discussed the push factors of international students studying abroad (Chen, 2017; Shimeng, 2015; Zhang, 2017). However, both studies were conducted among Chinese international students only. Push factors were only briefly discussed in this review, as most studies conducted in small- to mid-sized HEIs discussed pull factors (why students choose here).

Academic Pressure

Academic pressure is the primary push factor. In China, the national entrance exam (i.e., the Gaokao) is a major deterrent for those who want to attend prestigious HEIs (Shimeng, 2015). Many students decide to study abroad due to dissatisfaction with their Gaokao scores, whereas others and their families purposefully avoid the Gaokao by attending international secondary schools (Chen, 2017). Academic pressure in China often entices families with sufficient resources to pursue costly English or overseas education (Shimeng, 2015). Such academic pressure stems from inequitably distributed or limited educational resources, which bar HEI access for students with lower Gaokao scores; for this reason, students and their families view migration as a route for better educational opportunities and a more enjoyable learning experience for the next generation (Shimeng, 2015).

Parental Expectations

Academic pressure is directly related to parental expectations. Studying abroad is perceived as a symbol of higher socioeconomic status, quality education, and unique experiences, which bring honor to the family (Shimeng, 2015). Thus, parental expectations can play an essential role in overseas study decisions. Chen (2017) reported that the decisions of eight out of 15 participants were initiated by their parents.

Job Prospects

Job prospects emerge as another core push factor. Both Shimeng (2015) and Chen (2017) reported that the difficulty of advancing domestic careers pushes students to pursue more education overseas. Graduating from a reputable overseas HEI enhances future career prospects in China (Chen, 2017). Shimeng (2015) further reported that studying abroad is associated with returning to school, changing career paths, and working overseas.

Language Learning

Although not applicable to all Chinese students studying abroad, language learning is a strong motivator. As a carrier of culture, learning languages helps students gain international exposure and cross-cultural experiences (Shimeng, 2015). Additionally, an overseas degree taught in a different language (particularly in English) could advance a domestic career in which English plays an essential role (Chen, 2017).

Finally, other less prominent but relevant push factors emerge from the research: air/water pollution (Zhang, 2017), food security, patriarchal values, and discontent with government services (Shimeng, 2015). These push factors could be further studied.

Pull Factors

Postgraduation and Immigration Concerns

Students' decisions to study in a smaller HEI in rural Canada are based on their perceptions of postgraduate opportunities and immigration prospects (Boetang, 2023; Chen, 2017; Francis-Walker, 2017; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Passmore, 2024; Shimeng, 2015; Zhang, 2017). This facilitates students' long-term stability and security. James-MacEachern and Yun (2017), in their quantitative study, reported that, compared with other international students, Chinese students' motivation to study in a smaller HEI is more influenced by postgraduate opportunities such as labor market outcomes and permanent residency. These findings are consistent with those of Shimeng (2015), whose articles suggest that immigration through the Ontario Provincial Nominee Program is the primary reason Chinese students enroll in the Master of Education

at a remote Ontario mid-sized university. This immigration policy allows students to apply for permanent residence in Ontario even without a job offer (Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, 2024). In Nova Scotia, a study by Zhang (2017) also stressed the key role of the Atlantic Immigration Program in attracting and retaining Chinese international students despite the stark cultural and linguistic distances. The program offers a relatively flexible immigration pathway, which requires only a one-year full-time work contract upon graduation (Government of Canada, 2025). Despite the limited awareness of the program at its launch, Francis–Walker (2017) reported that even the potential of immigration motivated students to study in remote Nova Scotia. However, they further noted that many students did not meet expectations and left the province due to the complexity of immigration and a lack of employer engagement with the immigration program. Overall, research suggests that a friendly immigration policy is the core pull factor that reduces the perceived risk of migration (Boetang, 2023).

English and Cultural Immersion

English and cultural immersion are the second most important pull factors for international students (Brunette, 2017; Chen, 2017; Shimeng, 2015; Symons et al., 2006; Zhang, 2017). By choosing to study in an English-speaking remote region with a limited diaspora community, students seek unique life experiences, opportunities for social interaction with native speakers, and a fully immersive English environment (Chen, 2017). Given the high demand for English proficiency among employers locally and in their home countries, students deliberately choose an English immersion environment to avoid relying on speaking their native language while abroad (Shimeng, 2015; Symons et al., 2006; Zhang, 2017). A multicultural environment is perceived by students to maintain their own cultural identities while adapting to a new country but appears to be a less relevant factor for decisions to study in remote regions (Zhang, 2017). Students view remote Canada as an ideal destination to practice English beyond the classroom, especially through outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, skiing, and sports. Recreational facility is an important factor underlying student motivation (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). Engaging in community and outdoor recreational events enables them to develop friendships and participate in Canadian ways of living, as captured in the belief that “you can’t be outside without being part of the culture” (Brunette, 2017, p. 101).

Supportive and Safe Environments

Students also choose a remote study abroad location based on their perception of a supportive and safe environment (Boetang, 2023; Chen, 2017; Francis-Walker, 2017; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Symons et al., 2006). The primary motivator for choosing a remote HEI appears to be the consideration of a low crime rate. Chen (2017) argues that while larger and more prestigious HEIs yield greater career advantages, they are thought of as being located in less safe and crowded areas. This aligns with Boetang (2023), who reported that

students prioritize basic safety needs, including food and shelter free from violence. Similarly, Francis-Walker (2017) reported that students initially believed that smaller regions offered better and more welcoming healthcare and social services. Additionally, the vibe of a small town allows students to have easier access to urban culture without traveling too far (Symons et al., 2006). Research further highlights that students prefer smaller institutions for their personalized instruction. For example, James-MacEachern and Yun (2017) identified key reasons that students choose smaller HEIs: personal interest in the institution, family recommendation or ties/relatives, or existing faculty connections. These factors create a sense of readiness among prospective students. Boetang (2023) emphasized the importance of a lower teacher–student ratio. Small class sizes with more interactions with peers and faculty make students anticipate the safety of asking questions, seeking academic support, and participating in discussions, which leads to the perception of academic success (Symons et al., 2006) and potential mentorship opportunities (Francis-Walker, 2017). Finally, life in a small region may facilitate a more focused and solitary learning environment free from distractions (Zhang, 2017).

School-Specific Concerns

Various studies have identified school-specific pull factors, including costs, ease of application, ease of credit transfer, value in the home country, and academic reputation (Boetang, 2023; Chen, 2017; Francis-Walker, 2017; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Shimeng, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Cost-related concerns encompass perceptions of housing accommodation costs, overall living expenses, tuition fees, and access to scholarships and grants (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). In particular, students purposefully choose Canada because its living costs and tuition are lower compared to those of other developed nations (Zhang, 2017). Within Canada, specific HEIs and regions are chosen because of their lower cost than alternatives (Francis-Walker, 2017; Shimeng, 2015). Despite the initial intention, the cost of food, transportation, and daily living expenses is still higher than students anticipated (Francis-Walker, 2017). In contrast to the popular belief that international students' expenses are sponsored by their families, the literature consistently reports that many individuals need to work part-time to fulfill financial obligations (Zhang, 2017). In addition to cost-related concerns, the choice of HEIs is also affected by the ease of application and transfer of credits. Smaller HEIs may have more lenient admission requirements, which attract students who want to study overseas but are unsure whether they can meet the standards of more prestigious HEIs (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Shimeng, 2015). While reputations and rankings are important for recognition of the degree, these concerns do not appear to be the primary motivators for choosing a remote and smaller HEI (Chen, 2017). In some cases, students' knowledge of credit transfer from HEIs is also a pull factor, which allows them to later switch to a school or a region of their first choice (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017).

International Student Experiences

Cultural adaptation, the need for social attachment, language challenges, institutional support, and systemic issues are the main thematic areas of international student experiences in remote HEIs, which is consistent with the literature.

Cultural Adaptation

Students experience different emotions of cultural adaptation, from excitement and optimism to challenges in negotiating identities, loneliness, and homesickness, and all studies highlight the prevalence of culture shock (Akinbinu, 2024; Liu, 2013; Poteet & Gomez, 2015; Zhang, 2017). First, favorable prearrival expectations of the HEI and local culture appear to ease the process of adaptation (Akinbinu, 2024). In terms of culture shock, Poteet and Gomez (2015) reported that international students viewed Canadian students as polite but distant. Such sentiment is amplified via interactions where they discover a lack of common interests (Zhang, 2017). Students argue that cultural adaptation is “two-way,” requiring efforts from both themselves and domestic communities to create a sense of belonging (Poteet & Gomez, 2015). Akinbinu (2024), Liu (2013), and Zhang (2017) argue that transformative cross-cultural experiences and the development of bicultural identities are central to cultural adjustment. Outdoor recreation is seen as an important way to learn about the Canadian landscape and communities (Brunette, 2017).

A notable shock experienced by students is the “learning shock,” where they experience stark differences in instructional methods between Canada and their home countries (O’Rourke & Kreber, 2023; Li, 2014). Many people navigate this shock through peer support, teamwork, self-directed learning, and the use of technology, all of which facilitate adaptation and a transformative learning experience (Li, 2024; Liu, 2016; Zhang, 2017). O’Rourke and Kreber (2023) emphasized the need for more interactive and comprehensive instructional methods, multimodal assignments, and help with academic writing and integrity. Ji (2024) highlighted the challenges of asynchronous online learning for cultural adjustment, which does not meet student expectations for a truly international learning experience. Zhang (2017) described students’ resilience strategies for navigating learning shock through mostly out-of-class intercultural interactions and informal learning. To make online learning more engaging, Ji (2024) calls for a culture-centered approach where instructors integrate elements of students’ cultures and prior knowledge in curricula to enhance the relatability of materials and cross-cultural understanding.

Needs for Social Attachment

Friends are essential in assisting international students in accessing appropriate resources and navigating cultural adaptation (Brunette, 2017). However, the literature consistently points out that international students in

remote regions often remain somewhat detached from local communities and report low social life (Akinbinu, 2024; Francis-Walker, 2017; Howe et al., 2023; Ji, 2021; Li, 2024; Liu, 2013, 2016; Nguyen, 2017; Poteet & Gomez, 2015; Smith et al., 2024; Symons et al., 2006; Yasin & Belanger, 2015; Zhang, 2017). This detachment is compounded by the dynamic nature of social inclusion and exclusion, as students often form transient cross-cultural friendships while seeking meaningful relationships with their domestic peers (Poteet & Gomez, 2015). In small HEIs, the lack of same-culture peers tends to reinforce stronger bonds with international students and multicultural circles, as they share similar adjustment experiences (O'Rourke & Kreber, 2023; Yasin & Belanger, 2015). For international students in particular, the need for belonging, campus engagement, and social networks is more acute (Smith et al., 2022). However, many factors intensify feelings of social isolation, including the lack of cultural diversity in rural communities, experiences of racism and microaggressions, and sometimes being the only international student in the program (Howe et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2017). As a result, many students describe life as monotonous and uninspiring, which is associated with limited economic prospects and a desire to move out (Francis-Walker, 2017; Symons et al., 2006). Social isolation also stems from the "international student" label, perpetuating identity-based marginalization that arises from the perception of "multicultural others" (Howe et al., 2023). To cope with isolation, students increasingly use social media, such as by creating online group chats to foster a virtual sense of belonging (Ji, 2021). Avoidant coping strategies are also commonly reported, including playing video games, calling family and friends back home, or using alcohol (Liu, 2013). However, overreliance on same-culture social circles and avoidant coping can further impede socialization with domestic students, reinforcing a negative loop of social isolation (Li, 2024). Liu (2016) reported that online interaction and social events are international students' main coping strategies for loneliness, which emphasizes the need for HEIs to focus on welcoming pedagogies (Liu, 2016).

Language Challenges

Linguistic challenges limit social interaction, cultural adaptation, the expression of ideas, and personal well-being. The literature highlights that these challenges are closely associated with language proficiency and apprehension (Akinbinu, 2024; Brunette, 2017; Howe et al., 2023; Ji, 2021; Li, 2024; Liu, 2016; O'Rourke & Kreber, 2023; Symons et al., 2006). While international students' learning preferences are inclined toward being interactive, they tend to apply a more siloed/independent approach to learning in reality (Smith et al., 2022). Proficiency in speaking, in particular, is most important in forming friendships and casual conversations (Akinbinu, 2024; Symons et al., 2006). According to Howe et al. (2023) and Symons et al. (2006), students face challenges in understanding spoken English from domestic students, including speaking too fast, as well as in reading and writing, which are directly tied to academic

achievement. However, students with sufficient English proficiency, as indicated by the IELTS test scores, also noted struggles with the rules of academic writing and interaction in general (Liu, 2016; O'Rourke & Kreber, 2023). Liu (2016) reported that more than half of the participants in a master of education (English-intensive) program reported difficulties communicating with native English speakers, preferring to reach out to peers rather than instructors for academic problems and preferring digital rather than in-person discussions. This preference is connected to reluctance to communicate due to anxiety and perceived readiness and accents (Ji, 2021). Brunette (2017) noted that elements of nonverbal communication, such as concerns over mannerisms, facial expressions, and preferences for active listening, hinder cross-cultural understanding. Online platforms, such as group chats, may help reduce in-person anxiety and the fear of nonverbal mannerisms for students experiencing language apprehension (Ji, 2021). Despite these challenges, the literature also briefly discusses improvements in students' second language skills in the context of small HEIs and rural regions, in which informal learning, such as recreational activities, immersive English learning, and intimate faculty/staff support, benefits students (Brunette, 2017; Howe et al., 2023; Symons et al., 2006).

Institutional Support

International students reported mixed experiences of institutional support in small and remote HEIs based on the literature (Akinbinu, 2024; Francis-Walker, 2017; Howe et al., 2023; Liu, 2016; Passmore, 2024; Poteet & Gomez, 2015; Symons et al., 2006; Yasin & Belanger, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Student success in HEIs is primarily associated with student-centered learning and the informal culture of small-sized HEIs, where faculty and staff often provide support outside classrooms and their formal duties to help students achieve full potential (Symons et al., 2006; Zhang, 2017). Small class sizes enable students to effectively utilize support, which, however, is often detached from the local community (Poteet & Gomez, 2015). Howe et al. (2023) noted that students benefit from various services, including international student advising, academic support, recreational activities, volunteer opportunities, and cooperative education, as well as learning strategies such as teamwork and experiential learning.

Students' sense of community often depends on the richness and diversity of supportive networks (Akinbinu, 2024; Brunette, 2017), as well as faculty perceptions and interactions with international students, shaped by their prior knowledge of international students, their cultural background, and their workload (Francis-Walker, 2017). However, the literature has consistently reported gaps in institutional support, especially with respect to cultural responsiveness. The lack of cultural sensitivity among staff and faculty sometimes results in culturally insensitive services that leave students experiencing ongoing culture shock (Francis-Walker, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to create a first-year learning community in HEIs, English language workshops, and specific programs tailored to academic advising (Passmore, 2024). Finally, while students are generally satisfied with campus facilities and staff professionalism, a lack of

empathy toward international students among staff remains a significant concern (Yasin & Belanger, 2015), resulting in limited proactive support for students (Passmore, 2024). As mentioned by Liu (2016) and O'Rourke & Kreber (2023), student services and instructions should be more culturally safe, informed, and welcoming, incorporating various cultural examples, encouraging student contributions to curricular development, and making conscious efforts to understand each student.

Systemic Issues

The systemic challenges reported by international students in remote regions in the literature include limited employment prospects, housing shortages, high rent, food safety, a lack of work experience, and limited access to rural community services—pressing issues that occur across Canada (Akinbinu, 2024; Francis-Walker, 2017; Howe et al., 2023; O'Rourke & Kreber, 2023; Passmore, 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Yasin & Belanger, 2015; Zhang, 2017). These challenges are compounded by financial stress, a common barrier experienced by students paying differential tuition fees, with limited availability of scholarships, awards, bursaries, and grants for international students (Howe et al., 2023; O'Rourke & Kreber, 2023). Many international students report greater concerns about meeting basic living needs than about the quality of course offerings (Passmore, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). A lack of culturally appropriate food options, both on campus and in the wider remote community with a less diverse population, is also mentioned. This is a leading determinant of students skipping dishes, having inadequate nutrition, and choosing to live off campus (Passmore, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). Moreover, jobs available to international students in remote areas tend to be low wage, and employers have limited incentives to hire international students over Canadian citizens or permanent residents (Francis-Walker, 2017). Yasin and Belanger (2015) reported that international students' satisfaction with schooling is positively correlated with their work experience, which provides students with more experiential learning and local networking. Thus, it is essential for the university career center not only to assist with resume preparation and interview coaching, but also to facilitate job opportunities (Symons et al., 2006).

Retention or Relocation

Using quantitative analysis, Nguyen (2017) reported that a longer duration of study and studying in major metropolitan areas are predictors of long-term retention. In contrast, high educational levels and Canadian work experience are related to relocating from places where international students study. Students holding trade certificates are more likely to retain than university degree holders are. This study highlights the reality of declining labor forces and brain drain in smaller regions. A study by Kwon et al. (2023) elucidating Chinese students' motivation to stay revealed that they were more likely to prefer metropolitan areas if they chose to remain in Canada upon graduation or return to China. Similarly, Zhang (2017) reported that employment, internship opportunities, existing

networks, friendships, supportive communities, local community cultures, enjoyable workplace cultures, and immigration policies are the main reasons Chinese students stay in remote Nova Scotia. Identity-related motivations include a desire for independence (instead of relying on family) and bicultural/bilingual skills as assets for local employers. Another study in Nova Scotia argues that students' decision to relocate to a larger city is often associated with facets outside of postsecondary education, such as opportunities, cultural diversity, and social acceptance in the community (Francis-Walker, 2017). While research on retention and relocation factors is scarce in remote areas, the literature underscores the importance of opportunities, a sense of belonging, and immigration policies that are evenly distributed across students' educational levels.

DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents a transition model from predeparture push factors to decision-making pull factors, followed by postarrival HEI experiences, and finally, postgraduate retention factors. The results, however, are not intended to suggest a linear pathway of student migration, as critiqued by Chen (2017). The student migration phase of Mazzarol and Soutar (2001) suggests that students first decide to study abroad and then choose a country, HEI, and finally the region. In fact, this review reveals that the motivational factors of studying abroad in Canadian remote HEIs are more nuanced. For example, a student may choose a region before choosing an HEI for reasons beyond furthering education. As described below, the traditional linear student migration model needs to be updated to reflect the context of remote HEIs.

This review reveals that the differences in international student push-pull factors and experiences from remote regions generally align with research findings conducted in the broader Canadian context (Arumuhathas, 2022; Gao, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017; Jing et al., 2021; Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). The similarities in push factors across the literature can be explained by the fact that they reflect universal motivations underlying study abroad decisions, such as academic pressure, competition, limited local opportunities, family capital, parental expectations, cross-cultural exposure, and dissatisfaction with politics/government, or services. Among the pull factors, several unique features attract students to migrate to remote regions. First, an attractive immigration policy could take precedence over a strong desire to leave the home country and school-specific concerns. Similarly, the academic reputation of an HEI may not be the primary determinant of choosing a region of study, particularly for smaller HEIs that heavily rely on favorable immigration policies (James, 2022). However, this notion should be interpreted with caution, as Passmore (2024) argues that while some students seek permanent residency, this does not imply that they are uninterested in receiving a high-quality education.

Compared with international students in large HEIs and/or regions, remote HEI students tend to be more motivated by seeking unique and more independent living and opportunities to interact with domestic students in immersive language learning environments. Some also initially perceived the remote region to be safer,

quieter, more affordable, and welcoming, with more proximity to accessing community resources. The presence of family members or an existing social network in these areas is also a pull factor. These unique features of the remote region emphasize the nuanced push–pull dynamics beyond school-specific concerns. With respect to HEI choices, remote HEIs tend to have low teacher–student ratios with small class sizes, which may translate into greater access to academic resources, support, and mentorship. Lower tuition fees and more generous admission requirements also make remote HEIs ideal, both as cost-effective educational options and as ideal transfer credit granters as a stepping stone to more prestigious HEIs—the latter contributes to brain drain in remote regions (Hillier et al., 2023). Overall, the pull factor of small HEIs implies an interesting tendency to purposefully avoid elite HEIs, thereby challenging the assumption that international students always choose school based on prestige.

Table 2: International Student Transition Model in Remote Regions

Push Factors	Pull Factors	Schooling Experiences	Post-Graduate Retention Factors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Academic Pressure 2. Parental Expectations 3. Job Prospects Overseas 4. Career Advancement with Foreign Credential 5. Language and Cultural Learning 6. Dissatisfaction with Local Politics 7. Social Inequality 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Post-Graduate Opportunities 2. Immigration Potential 3. English Immersion Opportunities 4. Learning Cultures 5. Perceived Supportive Environment 6. Safety Concerns 7. Recommendation 8. Existing Social Networks 9. Expenses (Living/Tuition/Grant) 10. Ease of School Application 11. Ease of School Transfer 12. Values of School in Home Country 13. Academic Reputation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Culture Shock 2. Learning Shock 3. Needs for Social Attachment 4. Low Social Life 5. Racism and Microaggression 6. Preference for Online Interaction 7. Language Anxiety 8. Language Enhancement 9. Strong Faculty/Staff Support 10. Needs for More Cultural Sensitivity Among Staff 11. Limited Access to Opportunities 12. Needs for Meeting Basic Needs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Duration of Study 2. Region of Study 3. Educational Levels 4. Length of Canadian Work Experiences 5. Type of Degree/Diploma 6. Existing Social Network 7. Favorable Immigration Policy 8. Acculturation to Local Culture 9. Desire for Independence 10. Personal Assets in Small Community 11. Perceived Sense of Belonging

The findings also revealed the unique lived experiences of international students in remote regions. Identity, culture, learning, and linguistic shocks alongside perceived sociocultural distance from domestic students and local community members are commonly reported, regardless of language proficiency. Experiences of social isolation, often compounded by microaggressions and a lack of empathy, contribute to international students’ low social life and feelings of being “multicultural others.” Nevertheless, students exhibit various resilience strategies. For learning shocks, peer and faculty support, teamwork, self-directed learning, and the use of technology help mitigate academic burdens. To negotiate culture and linguistic shocks, informal learning opportunities such as outdoor recreation and social events allow students to be exposed to local cultural norms and nonverbal mannerisms, which enables more effortless and casual cross-

cultural interactions. However, in regard to social attachment, avoidant coping strategies and overreliance on same-/similar-culture social circles were common rather than actively seeking new socialization experiences.

The alignment between international students' expectations and their actual experiences is important for their postgraduate retention in remote regions. While students anticipate certain challenges, their sense of optimism and satisfaction fosters resilience in cultural adaptation. However, the students reported mixed experiences in the realm of institutional support and access to community opportunities. On the one hand, they appreciated the informal and intimate faculty and staff culture in smaller HEIs and the abundance of academic support resources. On the other hand, many lament with the apathy, lack of diversity and limited cultural responsiveness exhibited by student services and faculty, which could be a result of limited commitment to internationalization and international experiences among employees in remote HEIs (Friesen, 2011). These feelings are intensified in the face of challenges such as acculturation stress, housing shortages, high rent, food insecurity, lack of access to services, and limited employment availability for international students (Pilli & Slater, 2021; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Thus, the anticipated benefits of living in a remote region—cultural immersion, affordability, easier networking, and proximity to resources—are often overshadowed by the greater need to meet basic necessities. It is commonly reported that students underestimate the challenges of living in a remote region when initially deciding to study abroad. Addressing this expectation mismatch is key to long-term retention. While immigration pathways associated with small HEIs drive short-term retention, a sense of belonging, perceived support, a welcoming culture, and access to opportunities are more pivotal in retaining international students in the same region after graduation.

Amid the rising trend of global fragmentation, the reality of international students in Canada is expected to become increasingly controversial and complex. Views of international student policy have become increasingly polarized over the years, particularly around the issues of ethics, crime rates, poverty, housing, job markets, and houselessness (McCartney, 2021). For example, recent polls suggest that 60% of Canadians believe that “too many immigrants are entering the country... and that too many immigrants are visible minorities” (McCartney et al., 2024, p. 3). In 2024, an international student cap was introduced at the federal level; however, it was insufficient to quell public outcry regarding internationalization (McCartney et al., 2024). It is anticipated that HEIs in Ontario alone will experience a loss of approximately \$1 billion in student revenue over the next two years (Bains, 2024). For smaller HEIs in remote regions, these losses threaten not only their operations and reputations but also the local economies where HEIs are often the major economic providers. Further research on international student experiences could expand on this important topic.

This paper's limitation is primarily concerned with the participant profiles in the reviewed literature. There is a slight overrepresentation of students from China in the available literature, even though the literature search is conducted systematically. In most of the literature, there was no explicit discourse on the context of a remote or smaller-sized HEI. Furthermore, since this article discusses

international students in general, there is no disaggregation of data on the basis of students' unique cultures, which could have myriad ramifications for different communities. Additionally, none of the reviewed studies discussed the impact of international student caps on student motivation to immigrate and stay in Canada. With respect to article selection, the large proportion of gray literature included in this review may inadvertently introduce publication bias. Moreover, the length of this paper may not permit a formalized comparative analysis of international student experiences and motivations in relation to institutional sizes to validate the uniqueness of our findings. Overall, we hope that further research can address these limitations by diversifying participant profiles representative of their ethnicities, incorporating more culturally specific and time-sensitive analyses, and providing more comparative insights.

Recommendations

This review offers various recommendations for remote HEIs to respond to international students' needs in terms of integration, academic success, and retention. First, HEIs must develop long-term, sustainable, and integration-centered strategies and programs that extend beyond initial transition periods, supporting students at all stages of their studies. By leveraging the strengths of personalized services in smaller HEIs, support structures should become more proactive and effectively utilize campus resources, partnering with the student union, international student office, and Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). The effort needs to be responsive to systemic gaps in terms of housing, career, and cultural infrastructure through investing in culturally appropriate services such as multicultural staffing, academic mentorship, culturally inclusive resources, and training on cultural information. However, it is equally important that students voice their needs and be more proactive in letting remote HEIs know how best to support them. A priority should be set to promote cross-cultural engagement among students, faculty, and the community, for example, by weaving international practicums and the idea of critical interculturalism into academic credit courses in all teacher education programs (Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2016). HEIs may incentivize such priority to strengthen staff/faculty commitment to intercultural learning via strategic promotion policies, target setting, new internal funding, and administrative structures centered on internationalization (Friesen, 2011). In terms of institutional marketing, emphasis can be placed not only on academic programming but also on broader community experiences (El Masri & Khan, 2023), which are available in remote regions.

In the classroom, pedagogical approaches could be adjusted to recognize cultural and linguistic differences in student classroom participation. A more multimodal evaluation for participation may be used—in-class assignments, cross-cultural group work, recreational activities, and outdoor learning—to support students experiencing learning shock. The course materials and examples used could be more relatable to student cultures without stereotypically targeting each culture. Moreover, understanding that inclusion does not equal assimilation matters (Yang & Du, 2025), requiring critical and decolonized pedagogy that

weaves difficult dialogues and global citizenship in university curricula (Yuan, 2025). A culturally responsive curriculum emphasizes balance—between exam-oriented and process-oriented assessment, structured and participatory instruction, and teacher- and student-centered pedagogy. The best practices include the use of clarified rubrics, adjusted assessments for cultural differences, preposted class materials, scaffolded and phased assignments, appropriate pacing of lectures, detailed lecture notes, multimodal content delivery, and the use of humor and likeable teaching styles (Smith et al., 2019). Furthermore, instead of completely banning the use of technology such as ChatGPT, HEIs should offer guided instruction on their ethical uses aligned with academic integrity, which helps mitigate students' learning shocks and facilitates self-directed learning and digital literacy.

Given the importance of career preparedness in postgraduate retention, remote HEIs should strengthen partnerships (e.g., cooperative education) with local employers, such as those approved under immigration programs with expert knowledge in international hiring and immigration, and support students through permanent residency applications. Partnerships with government funding bodies such as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation enable more community-based internship opportunities for international students, with the aim of attracting and retaining talent in rural communities. Partnerships with local service providers could also focus on improving access to safe and affordable housing, robust career services, welcoming orientations, and various community events to foster social belonging and future planning. By doing so, all institutions, including remote HEIs, could better prepare all stakeholders to commit to supporting international students and align their EDI frameworks with internationalization. In the face of ongoing global turmoil, identifying best practices for internationalization is essential for Canada's socioeconomic and educational future.

Note: In preparing this manuscript, we did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.

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