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Impact of Recent Canadian Immigration Policy Changes on the Educational and Professional Opportunities of International Postsecondary Students

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyzes the impacts of recent Canadian immigration policy changes on the educational and professional opportunities of international postsecondary students, with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups, including mature students, students with disabilities, and students with family responsibilities. Using a qualitative, multimethod policy analysis, this study draws on a systematic examination of federal and provincial immigration policy documents, institutional communications, and reflexive practitioner insight derived from the authors' experience in advising international students in the Canadian college sector. Guided by the theoretical lenses of neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach, the analysis demonstrates how recent policy shifts—including study-permit caps, restrictions on postgraduation work eligibility, limits on spousal work authorization, and constraints on student mobility—have intensified precarity and constrained students' capabilities. The findings also highlight disproportionate impacts on students from the Global South and those facing intersecting social and economic vulnerabilities and conclude with evidence-based policy considerations.*

Keywords: Canadian immigration policy, capability approach, educational equity, international students, neoliberalism in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, Canada has emerged as one of the world's top destinations for international students, attracting learners from across the globe with promises of high-quality education, multicultural inclusion, and potential pathways to permanent residency. "In 2022, international students spent approximately CAN \$37.3 billion in Canada, contributing CAN \$30.9 billion to GDP, supporting 361,230 jobs, and generating CAN \$7.4 billion in tax revenue." Their spending also accounted for 23% of Canada's service exports and 4.8% of its merchandise exports, outpacing exports such as wood products, fertilizers, and electrical machinery (Global Affairs Canada, 2023, para. 1).

With public funding becoming stagnant, the tuition fees paid by international students are critical to the survival of many Canadian colleges and universities. However, international students increasingly find themselves in a paradoxical situation, despite their growing presence and economic value. They are welcomed as contributors to Canada's knowledge economy but are subject to immigration and education policies that tend to regard them as economic actors rather than as learners or long-term residents. Recent shifts in immigration policy, including caps on study permits, stricter eligibility for postgraduate work permits, and reduced pathways to permanent residency, have significantly affected many international students in Canada. Although often justified by arguments based on housing shortages, labor-market pressures, and institutional quality control, as well as broader economic rationales, these policy changes have led to additional regulatory uncertainty and compliance requirements for such students and have restricted their access to opportunities.

Moreover, the effects of these changes are uneven. Students from underrepresented backgrounds, such as mature learners, students at risk of

academic failure, and students from the Global South, experience the cumulative effects of the policy changes disproportionately. For such students, the implications extend beyond academic outcomes. Policy changes can disrupt family plans, curtail career aspirations, increase financial strain, and ultimately derail efforts to build a future in Canada.

This article addresses the need for a critical, equity-focused examination of recent Canadian immigration policy changes as they relate to international postsecondary students. Drawing on two theories, neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach, this study situates current reforms within a broader conversation about the purpose of education, the commodification of learners, and the structural barriers that restrict students' real freedoms. The neoliberal framework reveals how policy design increasingly ranks market logic above student well-being, whereas the capability approach illuminates how changes limit students' ability to pursue the lives they value.

By focusing on the experiences and perspectives of the most affected student populations, this study seeks to examine the inequities embedded in Canada's education-immigration nexus and to propose policy considerations aligned with principles of equity, agency, and well-being. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing academic and policy dialogs aimed at ensuring that international education serves not only national economic interests but also the aspirations, rights, and well-being of a diverse student population.

Purpose of the Study

This study casts a critical light on the impact of recent changes in Canadian immigration policy on the educational and career opportunities of international postsecondary students. Using the lens of social justice and two theories—neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach—the study examines how these policy shifts affect students' lived experiences, restrict their life choices, and limit their career trajectories.

The research is based on the following questions:

1. How do the new policies constrain the freedom and capabilities of international students as they strive to achieve their academic, professional, and personal goals?
2. How do international students respond to new restrictions on their mobility, work rights, and pathways to permanent residency?
3. What are the policy or institutional strategies that could help mitigate the adverse effects of these changes, particularly for the most vulnerable international student populations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Canada's international education sector has expanded significantly over the past 25 years, positioning the country as a top destination for international students. This literature review synthesizes scholarships on the experiences of international students in Canada. Research consistently shows that international students

contribute substantially to Canada's economy and cultural diversity (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). However, their lived experiences often reveal systemic barriers to social integration, academic support, and long-term settlement. Scholars argue that international students, particularly those from the Global South, encounter a complex policy environment whose exclusionary practices believe that it is welcoming rhetoric (Hu et al., 2024; Mukwambo et al., 2024). The contradiction becomes more apparent in light of the global neoliberal restructuring of higher education.

Neoliberalism in higher education converts colleges and universities into market-oriented institutions where efficiency, profit, and competitiveness frequently supersede academic and ethical considerations (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023). In this context, international students are often viewed as "ideal customers" or revenue generators (Stein & Andreotti, 2016), a logic that influences recruitment strategies, tuition fee structures, and support services. In the Canadian context, Trilokekar and El Masri (2019) demonstrated how internationalization policies prioritized economic imperatives, aligning closely with immigration and labor-market objectives. This commodification of students deemphasizes their educational and social needs and often gives rise to isolation, burnout, or dropout, especially for those without sufficient financial or institutional support (Naidoo, 2010).

The literature also highlights how immigration policies especially affect vulnerable student populations. For example, students with disabilities may face exclusion through medical inadmissibility rules or a lack of appropriate institutional accommodations (El-Lahib & Wehbi, 2012). Mature students and student parents suffer financial and emotional stress when support for spousal work permits or childcare is reduced (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024; CIC News, 2025). Those from the least-developed economies face an elevated risk of exploitation, financial strain, and mental health challenges owing to limited social capital and stringent compliance demands (WENR, 2024). These intersecting vulnerabilities underscore the importance of disaggregating the category of "international student" and adopting intersectional research frameworks.

Empirical research further underscores the gap between institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) commitments and international students' lived experiences. Legusov et al. (2022) demonstrated that even though most Canadian community colleges have formalized EDI policies, international students frequently perceive that their specific needs and concerns are insufficiently addressed. In their study, only 62.8% of participants indicated that their institution treated all individuals equitably. Complementary findings suggest that international students are also less likely to access mental health support, even when such services are provided free of charge, pointing to persistent structural and cultural barriers within postsecondary support systems (Legusov & Antonenko, 2024).

A further dimension of inequity concerns international students' mobility within Canada. Recent immigration policies that are intended to promote regional retention often tie postgraduation work and permanent residency to the province

where the student studied (Picot et al., 2023). Even though these measures aim to support smaller provinces and address labor shortages, they also create a “mobility hierarchy” that stratifies access to immigration benefits by geography (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023). Students in larger provinces may enjoy broader career options and more established settlement support, whereas those in smaller provinces may face limited opportunities yet risk losing immigration pathways if they relocate. This uneven geography of opportunity reinforces spatial inequalities—systematic disparities in access to resources and outcomes on the basis of location—and disproportionately burdens students who lack the financial means or familial networks to navigate these constraints (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023).

Despite the growing body of work addressing international student experiences, deficiencies persist. There is also limited research that explicitly addresses the interplay between neoliberal university structures and restrictive immigration policies, particularly in the Canadian context. Moreover, scholars have called for greater inclusion of student voices in research, particularly those marginalized by factors such as race, gender, age, disability, or nationality (Stein et al., 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the effects of recent Canadian immigration policy changes on international students, this study uses two complementary yet contrasting theoretical perspectives: neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach.

The neoliberal perspective situates postsecondary education within a global, market-driven paradigm whereby institutions are expected to produce graduates with skills that align with labor market demands (Skolnik, 2020). Within this framework, education is viewed as a private investment aimed at individual economic advancement. Success is measured by employability, income potential, and contribution to economic growth (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). International students, in particular, are increasingly commodified as sources of revenue and skilled labor rather than being seen as learners with diverse needs, rights, and aspirations. Neoliberal policies thus prioritize economic returns while often disregarding equity, well-being, and access to broader life opportunities.

In contrast, the capability approach, grounded in the work of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), frames education as a fundamental enabler of human flourishing. It emphasizes the importance of expanding individuals’ real freedoms (or “capabilities”) to live lives they have reason to value. From this perspective, international students are not just economic actors but also human beings whose well-being depends on their ability to access education, make meaningful choices, and participate fully in society. The capability approach also critiques neoliberalism’s legacy of colonialism, systemic inequality, and the narrowing of education to skills training, which fails to support equitable work or genuine social mobility (McGrath & Powell, 2015).

This framework is particularly useful for understanding how immigration policies constrain international students' educational and career pathways by limiting their mobility, work rights, and postgraduate prospects. It highlights how these restrictions affect students' ability to pursue paths they value, highlighting the intersection of structural inequality and individual agency.

Although the two theories have divergent philosophical underpinnings, they work in productive tension. Neoliberalism explains the policy rationale and institutional behaviors driving current immigration reforms, whereas the capability approach exposes the human cost of changes. Together, they offer a robust analytical lens for an examination of how recent immigration policy shifts affect international students' educational experiences, life chances, and long-term trajectories in Canada.

Positionality Statement

The study was conducted by four researchers, all of whom were immigrants. The research team has extensive experience in advising international students at Canadian institutions of higher education on academic, personal, and immigration-related challenges. A central aspect of their role is to help students interpret and navigate immigration policy changes that affect their ability to secure meaningful employment and transition from temporary to permanent residency in Canada.

Three members of the team identify as visible minorities and, like many newcomers, have encountered various systemic and social barriers while adapting to life in Canada. The team members' shared commitment to equity and social justice informs their research practice, whereas their lived experiences, professional expertise, and personal values serve as a critical interpretive lens.

METHOD

The study uses a multimethod qualitative design to investigate how recent changes in Canadian immigration policy have affected international postsecondary students, particularly those who experience intersecting forms of marginalization. The approach centers on document analysis, with researchers' experiential knowledge and insights from informal engagement with students and institutional actors used as reflexive and interpretive support to contextualize policy enactment.

Data Sources and Collection

Two primary sources of data were employed: publicly available documents and the professional experiences of the researchers, all of whom advise international students at Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs).

Document Analysis

Document analysis was central to the study and followed a systematic and transparent selection process. The corpus consisted of publicly available federal and provincial immigration policy documents and institutional communications

that directly address international student regulation and poststudy pathways in Canada.

Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) documents issued by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), provincial governments, or publicly funded Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs); (b) documents explicitly related to international students' study permits, work authorization, postgraduate work permits (PGWPs), spousal open work permits, institutional mobility, or compliance requirements; and (c) materials intended for public dissemination to students or institutional stakeholders (e.g., policy announcements, ministerial statements, press releases, official guidance pages, and institutional immigration webpages).

Exclusion criteria

The documents not used in this study were (a) internal or confidential institutional documents not publicly accessible; (b) media commentary or opinion pieces lacking formal policy status; and (c) documents unrelated to immigration pathways or student regulatory conditions (e.g., general marketing materials without policy content).

Time Frame and Document Selection

Document selection spanned from January 2023 to July 2025, when the project was completed. The period was marked by significant federal and provincial policy changes affecting international students, including the introduction of study permit caps, Provincial Attestation Letters (PALs), revised PGWP eligibility criteria, and changes to spousal work authorization. Earlier documents were consulted selectively as necessary to contextualize policy shifts or clarify regulatory continuity.

Documents were selected on the basis of their relevance to students' educational and professional trajectories, with emphasis on policy language and how it framed mobility, work rights, compliance obligations, and eligibility for poststudy pathways. Institutional websites were analyzed to assess how colleges interpreted and communicated the policy changes to students, especially during transition points, such as graduation or program changes.

Document Analysis

The analysis followed O'Leary's (2014) eight-step framework for document research, including planning, assessing document credibility, identifying explicit (witting) and implicit (unwitting) content, and systematic thematic interpretation. The documents were treated analytically as informants, with guiding questions such as the following: *How are risks, limitations, and eligibility criteria communicated to international students? To what extent do institutional messages align with official government policy?*

This technique was particularly appropriate because the nature of the information sought, such as the clarity of messaging, policy shifts, and

institutional alignment, was known in advance. In some cases, college career pages, FAQs, and advisor content were cross-referenced with official government policy announcements to identify potential discrepancies or gaps in information.

Analytic procedures

The document analysis proceeded through a staged and iterative process moving from descriptive review to theory-informed interpretation. First, all the documents were read in full to establish familiarity with the policy scope, terminology, and stated objectives. During this phase, the documents were grouped by source (federal, provincial, or institutional) and by policy domain (e.g., study permits, postgraduation work, spousal work authorization, or institutional mobility).

Second, the research team conducted focused rereading to extract policy-relevant content aligned with the study's research questions. Attention was given to both explicit (witting) content, such as formal eligibility criteria, compliance requirements, and stated policy rationales, and implicit (unwitting) content, including assumptions about student responsibility, mobility, employability, and institutional risk management. Relevant excerpts were identified and organized according to recurring policy mechanisms and areas of constraint.

Third, the extracted content was organized into preliminary thematic categories capturing patterns across documents, such as restrictions on mobility, conditional access to work rights, differential eligibility pathways, and regulatory uncertainty. These themes were refined through constant comparison across document types to identify alignment, tension, or divergence between government policy texts and institutional communications.

Finally, the authors interpreted the themes using neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach as a theoretical framework. The neoliberal lens was applied to examine how policy language emphasized efficiency, labor-market alignment, and risk mitigation, whereas the capability approach informed the analysis of how policy mechanisms shaped students' substantive freedoms, choices, and life trajectories. Analytic interpretations were discussed collaboratively and retained only if supported by documentary evidence.

This process enables a systematic examination of how immigration policies are structured, communicated, and enacted and how these processes differentially shape international students' educational and professional opportunities.

Researchers' Experience and Reflexivity

In addition to document analysis, the research draws on the experiential knowledge of the research team, whose members all have extensive backgrounds in assisting international CAAT students with academic, personal, and immigration-related challenges. This insider perspective, although not a substitute for participant interviews, offered valuable contextual insight into how institutional policies are enacted and experienced on the ground. The team's positionality was critically engaged throughout the research process. The researchers, three of whom identify as visible minorities, brought both empathy and critical distance to the study as immigrants and professional advocates.

Ongoing reflexive practices, such as memo writing, dialogic exchange, and peer debriefing, helped mitigate potential bias and informed their interpretation of the findings.

Analytic Integration of Data Sources

The researchers employed an integrative analytic approach in which document analysis served as the primary data source, whereas their experiential knowledge and insights derived from routine interaction with students and institutional actors functioned as contextual and interpretive lenses rather than independent datasets.

They first analyzed public policy and institutional documents to identify formal policy intentions, regulatory requirements, and institutional messaging related to international students' mobility, work authorization, and postgraduation pathways. The researchers' experience in advising international students informed their selection of analytic focal points (e.g., institutional mobility, spousal work rights, processing delays) and supported their interpretation of how policy language translated into operational practices within colleges.

Experiential knowledge and routine interaction with students and staff were not treated as empirical evidence but instead were used to determine recurring patterns, points of confusion, and implementation gaps that warranted closer examination within the document corpus. For example, frequently observed student concerns or advising challenges prompted a targeted review of institutional communications and policy guidance to assess clarity, consistency, and alignment with official regulations.

Throughout the analytic process, insights derived from practitioner experience were systematically cross-checked against documentary evidence to avoid anecdotal inference. Interpretations were retained only if corroborated by policy texts or institutional materials. Reflexive memo writing and team-based discussion were used to interrogate assumptions, develop alternative interpretations, and maintain analytic distance between lived experience and documented policy effects. This integrative strategy allowed the authors to examine not only policy design but also policy enactment as experienced through institutional communication environments while maintaining transparency, rigor, and methodological coherence.

Use of Researchers' Experiential Knowledge and Bias Mitigation

The researchers' experiential knowledge, derived from extensive advice from international students attending Canadian colleges, played a supportive and reflexive role in the analytic process rather than functioning as an independent empirical dataset. Experiential insight enables researchers to identify analytic focal points, interpret how policy provisions are enacted in institutional settings, and contextualize documentary findings within real-world advising environments.

Experiential knowledge was used primarily as a sensitizing resource to direct attention to recurring implementation issues, points of policy ambiguity, and student-facing challenges that warranted closer examination in the document corpus. For example, commonly encountered advising concerns—such as

confusion about institutional mobility, spousal work eligibility, or postgraduation pathways—prompted targeted analysis of policy texts and institutional communications addressing these issues. Even so, experiential observations were not treated as evidence in themselves; analytic claims were retained only if corroborated by documentary sources.

The researchers used several strategies to address potential bias associated with their positionality and proximity to the field. First, document analysis preceded interpretive synthesis, ensuring that conclusions were grounded in textual evidence rather than prior assumptions. Second, interpretations were developed collaboratively by the team members, allowing critical interrogation of individual perspectives and alternative readings of the data. Third, reflexive memo writing was used throughout the analytic process to identify assumptions and monitor how the researchers' professional background influenced their interpretive choices. These strategies enabled the research team to leverage practitioner insight as an analytic strength—enhancing contextual understanding and policy relevance—while maintaining methodological rigor, transparency, and analytic distance.

Linking data sources to analytic claims

To enhance analytic transparency, the major claims presented in the Findings section were derived from explicit linkages between documentary evidence and interpretive analysis. Policy-related statements were grounded primarily in federal and provincial immigration policy documents, including legislation, official guidance, and ministerial communications, which provided evidence of regulatory intent, eligibility criteria, and compliance requirements. Statements concerning institutional enactment and student-facing implications were informed by institutional communications (e.g., college immigration webpages, advisories, and guidance materials), which were analyzed to assess how policies were interpreted and communicated to students.

The researchers' knowledge and insight from routine engagement with students and institutional actors were used to contextualize and interpret documentary findings, particularly to identify areas where policy language generated uncertainty, constraints, or differential impacts. Experiential insight did not serve as standalone evidence; however, insights were retained only if they could be substantiated through documentary sources.

In the Findings section, the researchers' analytic conclusions are organized thematically, with each theme corresponding to a set of policy mechanisms identified across documents (e.g., study permit caps, institutional mobility restrictions, and PGWP eligibility criteria). This structure enables readers to trace findings back to the types of documents informing each claim, thereby strengthening transparency and analytic coherence.

Representation of Student Experiences

Because this study is grounded in qualitative document analysis and reflexive practitioner insight rather than formal interviews, it does not include direct quotations from individual students. Instead, student experiences are represented

analytically through policy texts and institutional communications that directly structure students' educational choices, mobility, work authorization, and poststudy pathways.

This approach is consistent with qualitative policy analysis, which prioritizes the examination of regulatory frameworks and institutional enactment over elicited personal narratives. Policy documents and institutional guidance function as student-facing texts that materially shape students' options, obligations, and risks. Researchers' experiential knowledge was used to contextualize documents and identify areas of constraint or uncertainty, but analytic claims were retained only if substantiated by documentary evidence.

RESULTS

The data analysis draws on the narrative of neoliberalism in education and the capability approach theory to uncover how recent Canadian immigration policy changes have affected international postsecondary students and to highlight those groups that have been affected disproportionately.

In addition to documentary evidence, the analysis incorporates aggregated experiential insights to illuminate how international students encounter and navigate policy mechanisms. The findings reveal systemic constraints imposed by policy shifts and disproportionate burdens on underrepresented student populations. The findings are presented in two parts. The first part describes the impact of the new policies, and the second discusses students' response to them.

Part One: Impact of New Immigration Policies on International Postsecondary Students

Recent changes in Canadian immigration policy have further complicated the reality of international students, limiting their autonomy, mobility, and long-term prospects. These policies have tightened financial proof requirements, restricted the work rights of students' spouses, and constrained students' postgraduation pathways. These developments signal a growing alignment of immigration policy with short-term economic and administrative efficiency goals, characteristics of a dominant neoliberal policy paradigm that emphasizes institutional interests over student well-being.

The International Student Cap and PAL Requirement

In January 2025, the Government of Canada placed a national cap on international student entries, limiting the number of study permits to 437,000 for 2025, a 10% reduction from the previous year (Reuters, 2025). Under this system, a Provincial (or Territorial) Attestation Letter (PAL/TAL) is required for most applicants; provinces and territories allocate these limited slots to colleges and universities (IRCC, 2025; University of Waterloo, 2025; Brock University, 2025).

As a result of these changes, securing a study permit has become more challenging, especially for students from countries with low approval rates. Given the limited number of PALs, institutions are incentivized to prioritize applicants from countries with higher visa-approval rates to minimize the risk that PALs will

be “wasted” because of refusals. This predominantly market-driven logic emphasizes admissions efficiency and visa success statistics over meritocracy and diversity. As a result of this heightened competition, some students are reassessing the feasibility of pursuing or continuing their studies in Canada.

Although these measures aim to improve system integrity and manage service pressures, they inadvertently compromise the inclusive and globally representative ethos of Canadian higher education. The result is a policy environment that penalizes applicants from underrepresented or high-refusal-rate countries, which tend to be in the Global South, by curtailing their access to educational opportunities in Canada.

Restrictions on Institutional Mobility

Under section 220 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, international students must remain enrolled at the Designated Learning Institution (DLI) specified in their study permit (Government of Canada, 2025a). This rule curtails students’ academic freedom and limits their ability to transfer to programs or institutions that better suit their evolving interests, financial realities, or support needs. This constraint is particularly problematic in British Columbia, where a range of public and private institutions offers diverse, flexible programming. For many students, especially those navigating financial hardship or mental health challenges, restrictions on transfers impede their ability to adapt, grow, and make meaningful choices, which represent core elements of the capability approach framework.

Misalignment between PGWP Eligibility and Student Pathways

The Postgraduate Work Permit, which allows international students to stay and work in Canada for up to three years after graduation, is increasingly tied to program type and labor-market alignment (Government of Canada, 2025b), privileging students in fields deemed in demand (e.g., health care, skilled trades, and technology). Updated IRCC guidance specifies that PGWP eligibility is linked to programs aligned with labor market demand (Government of Canada, 2025b), a message echoed in institutional communications advising students to “select programs carefully on the basis of current eligibility criteria.” Such guidance directly influences students’ program selection. Students faced with these requirements frequently approach program selection strategically, prioritizing PGWP eligibility over academic and career interests; thus, they are subject to constrained agency that precludes preference-driven choice.

Even though this policy is based on a pragmatic, outcome-based orientation, it restricts students’ educational freedom and discourages enrollment in programs that align more closely with their personal interests or long-term goals. The policy fails to recognize the diverse motivations of international students, especially mature students, many of whom arrive in Canada with significant work experience. Such students often pursue business, digital, or professional upgrading programs to increase their adaptability in the Canadian labor market. The exclusion of such programs from PGWP eligibility restricts their poststudy

opportunities, weakening the value of Canadian credentials and diminishing the return on their educational investment.

Longer application processing times

Although no formal IRCC policy dictates extended timelines, in practice, the processing times for initial and extension study permits have increased significantly, especially for students applying from Canada. For example, extension applications, which were processed in approximately 58 days as of July 2024, now take up to 180 days (CIC News, 2025). Similarly, approval times for initial study permit applications submitted in Canada have gone from 10–12 weeks (CIC News, 2025).

Such delays often result in status gaps, forcing students into temporary legal limits. This uncertainty interferes with students' enrollment planning, hinders their access to on-campus work (e.g., via permits tied to student status), and can threaten their academic progress and financial stability. Extensions can be particularly problematic when program start dates or tuition deadlines come before a permit decision. In essence, extended processing times unintentionally act as a de facto barrier to international student mobility and success, subverting the postsecondary sector's commitment to accessibility (CIC News, 2025).

Ineligibility for Spousal Open Work Permits

The new rules governing the Spousal Open Work Permit (SOWP) restrict eligibility for the spouses of students with doctoral degrees and select master's and certain professional bachelor's programs. Students in college-level programs, who constitute a large proportion of international enrollments, are excluded. In practice, the restriction on spousal work authorization is commonly experienced as a significant source of financial and emotional strain, particularly for students with dependents or those from lower-income contexts. This exclusion places a significant financial burden on families, especially those who are from low- and middle-income countries, and need two incomes to cover living and tuition costs. This policy not only aggravates financial precarity but also hinders social integration and gender equity. Spouses, many of whom are women, are denied the opportunity to work, participate in community life, and gain Canadian experience—factors that would otherwise contribute to the long-term success and retention of international families.

Part Two: International Students' Response to the New Rules

Faced with reduced mobility, limited spousal work rights, fewer paths to permanent residency, and other restrictions, international students often must revise their educational, career, and migration plans. Their responses include adjusting their academic and financial strategies, delaying family reunification, applying for refugee status, or even choosing to leave (or not to come to) Canada. Such adaptations illustrate the tension between structural constraints and student agency.

Strategic Shifts in Program Selection

Many students alter their academic trajectories to maximize their chances of qualifying for a PGWP. Rather than pursuing programs aligned with their personal interests or career strengths, they opt for fields deemed to be in demand by the IRCC, such as health care, trades, or technology. Although the IRCC's response is rational, it limits students' educational agency and may result in academic disengagement, undue stress, and poor academic performance. The lens of the capability approach restricts students' freedom to pursue meaningful educational pathways.

Deferred Family Reunification

The patterns observed across advising contexts suggest that because the spouses of some international students are no longer eligible for spousal open work permits (SOWPs), students in college or undergraduate university programs frequently delay reuniting with their families. Owing to spouses' inability to work, the costs of bringing family members to Canada are often prohibitive. Prolonged separation from loved ones places emotional and psychological stress on students and their families, particularly those from collectivist cultures where family cohesion is vital for well-being.

Applying for Refugee Status

In a small but significant number of cases, international students confronted with sharply reduced mobility, limited work authorization, and foreclosed pathways to permanent residency apply for refugee protection. This response does not reflect a uniform or widespread strategy; rather, it tends to emerge under conditions of heightened precarity. For some students, the loss of lawful work opportunities, prolonged family separation, or the prospect of forced return after years of residence in Canada can make asylum claims a perceived last resort rather than a planned migration pathway (UNHCR, 2023).

As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) observe, increasingly restrictive migration regimes can blur the boundaries between student migration, labor migration, and forced displacement, pushing some individuals into protection systems not because of sudden changes in country conditions but because policy shifts erode lawful alternatives for remaining in a host country. In this sense, refugee claims among international students or recent graduates can be interpreted as an adaptive response to structural constraints rather than an attempt to circumvent immigration controls (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

Abandoning Plans to Study in Canada

Rising uncertainty surrounding visa processing, poststudy work rights, and permanent residency has prompted many potential students, especially those from the Global South, to reconsider their plans to study in Canada. Some abandon their Canadian applications in favor of countries with clearer or more supportive immigration policies. This trend threatens Canada's competitiveness as a global education destination and undermines diversity within the international student population.

Enrolling in Consecutive Programs to Extend Legal Status in Canada

To remain in Canada and preserve their immigration eligibility, some students enroll in one or more additional academic programs. Such students often assume more debt, delay their entry into the workforce, and continue their education not out of genuine interest or passion but purely as a means of staying in Canada in the hope that immigration policy will change, allowing them to qualify for a PGWP and, consequently, for permanent residence. Although such tactics are legitimate, they demonstrate how unpredictable immigration policies have distorted the original purpose of international education.

Increasing Reliance on Immigration Consultants and Legal Advisors

As policies become more complex, international students increasingly turn to immigration consultants for help in navigating the system. Even though immigration consultants not associated with educational institutions may provide useful services, they often charge high fees and expose students to varying levels of risk and, in some cases, fraud.

Redefining Long-Term Goals and Migration Strategies

Finally, some students who are already in the system are rethinking their long-term goals. Many came to Canada with the hope of transitioning from temporary to permanent residency but are revising their plans. Some intend to return to their home countries, whereas others see Canadian credentials as a stepping stone enabling them to migrate elsewhere. This shift reflects an adaptation to perceived systemic barriers, as well as a recalibration of what is realistically achievable within the current immigration landscape.

DISCUSSION

In this section, the study findings are interpreted through the lenses of neoliberalism in higher education and the capability approach, which explicitly links documented policy mechanisms to their implications for student agency, equity, and lived experience. This study has examined the significant and often inequitable impacts of recent Canadian immigration policy changes on international postsecondary students, with a focus on vulnerable subgroups. The findings underscore a deepening tension between Canada's position as a global education destination and the restrictive immigration frameworks shaping students' lived realities.

The findings related to the study permit cap, PAL requirements, and risk-averse recruitment practices illustrate how neoliberal policy rationales prioritize efficiency and labor-market alignment over equitable access. From the neoliberal perspective, policy shifts tend to prioritize market efficiency and labor-market alignment over the holistic well-being and equitable treatment of students. The introduction of a national cap and the Provincial Attestation Letter incentivizes risk-averse recruitment practices, causing institutions to prioritize students from countries with high visa-approval rates. This dynamic adversely affects the meritocracy and diversity of the student body and reinforces global inequities in

educational access. Similarly, restricting PGWP eligibility to programs tied to in-demand occupations reflects an outcome-based, market-driven logic that treats students as future labor units rather than as autonomous learners pursuing personally meaningful pathways.

Viewed through the lens of the capability approach, the same policy shifts constrain students' substantive freedoms to pursue lives they value. As shown in the findings, restrictions on institutional mobility, spousal work authorization, and PGWP eligibility directly constrain students' ability to make adaptive educational and family decisions, thereby limiting their substantive freedoms. For students with disabilities, mature learners, students with dependents, and individuals from the Global South, the cumulative effect of the constraints can be profound, limiting not only career outcomes but also social participation, family unity, and mental well-being.

The findings also show that students are not passive recipients of policy but rather active agents who adapt in strategic, albeit constrained, ways. The patterns identified in the findings, such as strategic program switching, enrollment in consecutive credentials, and delayed family reunification, demonstrate how students exercise agency within structurally constrained conditions. That being said, their strategies often involve trade-offs that reinforce precarity. For example, students may take on additional debt, sacrifice their true academic interests, or risk exploitation in unregulated advising markets. These coping mechanisms highlight the paradox at the heart of Canada's international education-immigration nexus: its policy frameworks emphasize economic contribution and adaptability but also erode the very capabilities that enable students to thrive and contribute meaningfully.

Importantly, the study contributes to the limited body of scholarship examining how intersectional vulnerabilities, such as age, disability, family status, and country of origin, interact with immigration policy to place uneven burdens on international students. The findings suggest that policy analysis and institutional practice must move beyond generalized "international student" categories and adopt a disaggregated, equity-driven lens. This approach is essential not only to ensure fairness but also to sustain Canada's competitiveness as a destination of choice in a highly competitive global education market.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that recent Canadian immigration policy changes, particularly restrictions on institutional mobility, spousal work authorization, and PGWP eligibility, have reshaped international students' educational decision making in ways that reduce flexibility and increase uncertainty. As demonstrated in the findings section, these policy shifts were experienced not only as administrative adjustments but also as disruptions to students' academic planning, family strategies, and perceived agency, often requiring difficult trade-offs with long-term consequences.

This article contributes to the literature by illustrating how macrolevel immigration policy shifts are translated into microlevel advising encounters

within Canadian community colleges. By foregrounding student support perspectives, it extends existing policy analyses beyond enrollment and labor-market outcomes to examine how policy constraints shape students' substantive freedoms and adaptive capacities. In doing so, it highlights advising spaces as key sites where immigration policy is interpreted, operationalized, and experienced by students.

The analysis further suggests that recent policy changes are reshaping the educational, economic, and social conditions of international postsecondary study in ways that disproportionately affect some student groups. Owing primarily to neoliberal rationalities emphasizing institutional efficiency, labor-market alignment, and migration control, these changes may limit attention to the broader educational and human development goals emphasized by the capability approach. Even though many students continue to adapt creatively—through program changes, prolonged studies, or revised migration plans—such strategies also signal heightened precarity and constrained choice rather than enhanced opportunity.

This study has several limitations. It draws on policy documents, institutional communications, and reflexive practitioner insight rather than direct student interviews, and its analysis is situated within the Canadian community college context. Accordingly, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable but analytically transferable to comparable institutional settings where immigration policy intersects closely with student support practices.

For policymakers and postsecondary institutions, the findings raise vital considerations regarding how immigration policy design and implementation interact with student advice and support infrastructures. Areas that warrant further examination include the implications of spousal work restrictions; the scope of PGWP eligibility criteria; and the rigidity of institutional mobility rules, particularly for students facing financial, health, or family-related challenges. More broadly, the study underscores the value of assessing how policy changes affect students' capacity to make meaningful educational and life choices. Attending these dynamics would contribute to the development of international education policies that balance economic objectives with commitments to equity, inclusion, and student well-being.

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