

International Students' Struggles and Barriers Arising from Policy Changes in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract: Over recent years, the Canadian government has frequently revised policies affecting international students, creating challenges in navigating study permits, work permits, permanent residency, and citizenship pathways. This thematic review, based on 26 empirical studies, examines struggles faced by international students aged 18 to 35, who occupy a key position in Canada's global education market and experience financial pressure, mental health concerns, and academic stress. Additional barriers include navigating academic honesty across cultures, cultural adaptation, culture shock, and instances of discrimination or exploitation, all of which affect their well-being, financial stability, and long-term settlement prospects. Using Noddings' Ethics of Care and Ball's Critical Policy Analysis, three recommendations emerge: (1) embed an ethic of care in policy decisions, (2) increase transparency and accountability through critical review, and (3) develop inclusive supports grounded in care and justice. Meaningful reform requires structural change that challenges institutional norms and systemic biases shaping international student experiences.

Keywords: International Students; Caring; Challenges; Policy; Canada

Introduction

I come from a religious family in Nigeria that values culture, respect, morals, and principles that shape my educational beliefs and align with Ball's (1993) Critical Policy Analysis (CPA). CPA examines how educational policies reflect and reproduce power relations, ideologies, and inequities affecting international students, showing that inequality persists not only through formal structures but also through language as a social practice (Ball, 1993; Taylor, 1997). The Ethics of Care (Noddings 2013a; Tronto, 1993) emphasizes attentiveness, responsibility, compassion, moral reasoning, and ethical reflection. Together, these perspectives frame education as both an emotional and intellectual journey that fosters critical thinking, creativity, and purpose.

My educational experiences in Nigeria, the United States, and Canada have shaped my understanding of teaching and learning. Nigeria emphasized discipline and memorization, the United States encouraged debate and independent thought, and Canada promoted inclusive, student-centered, and reflective learning. These experiences strengthened my ability to evaluate educational philosophies, valuing both structure and flexibility.

As an educator, I use experiential and constructivist approaches to create student-centered environments that support collaboration, adaptability, and growth. Influenced by Ball's critique of policy inequities and Noddings' Ethics of Care, my research explores how international students navigate policy changes in Canadian higher education. This positionality integrates CPA and Ethics of Care throughout my study.

Research Problem, Context, and Target Population

The significance of this research lies in showing how policy changes affect international students. Changes in work permits, study permits, and permanent residency pathways often create uncertainty, and understanding these impacts helps students navigate them while showing how political decisions shape their lives. The study also highlights the need for social policies and programs that support students in interpreting policy changes, understanding cultural differences, and maintaining their values and perspectives. Ultimately, it examines the barriers students face in Canadian higher education and how inclusive pedagogy can help them respond to these changes, amplify their voices, and develop strategies to pursue careers and opportunities effectively.

Theoretical Framework

To guide this study, I adopt a theoretical paradigm that integrates Ball's CPA framework and Noddings' Ethics of Care. Together, they provide a lens to understand how international students experience and navigate barriers arising from policy changes in the Canadian higher education system.

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) framework

The Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) framework, developed by Ball (1993), examines how educational policies reproduce power relations, ideologies, and inequities in higher education (Ball, 1993; Taylor, 1997). In Canada, CPA highlights how international student policies are shaped by neoliberal and immigration priorities, often positioning students as economic assets rather than individuals with diverse needs. Policy development has accelerated faster than analytical tools, leaving traditional frameworks insufficient for addressing modern complexities (Ball, 1993; Taylor, 1997).

CPA is therefore vital for understanding barriers such as unequal access to support services, financial pressures, and the commodification of education. It also encourages critical reflection on how institutional and governmental decisions perpetuate inequities through policy adoption, implementation, and outcomes. These dynamics significantly affect international students' well-being, agency, and academic success, shaping how they adapt and pursue future opportunities (Levin, 2001).

Ethics of Care Framework

The Ethics of Care, grounded in Noddings (2013a) and Tronto (1993), emphasizes nurturance, human relationships, and moral reasoning as essential to ethical action. It highlights responding to others' needs through emotions, memories, and capacities. Applied to international student policies, it evaluates whether institutions genuinely address mental health challenges, financial stress, and social isolation while promoting inclusive and supportive environments. It also informs how students respond to policy changes through attentiveness, responsibility, compassion, and responsiveness values traditionally associated with women (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993). For example, international students navigating visa processes with limited support would benefit from an Ethics of Care approach in which visa offices demonstrate compassion, inclusivity, and practical assistance, making applications more accessible and supportive for future students in Canada. Together, both CPA and the Ethics of Care are rooted in evaluating policies and policymakers to reassess the decisions and behaviors they enact. CPA critiques how policies create unequal power structures and perpetuate inequities, while the Ethics of Care emphasizes empathy, moral responsibility, and compassion to uphold a duty of care in policy decisions.

Literature Search Process

Literature from ChatGPT, the TRU Library (ERIC), Google Scholar, and a doctoral dissertation using keywords (barriers, international students, struggles) yielded 50 studies. These 26 empirical studies that fit my research were analyzed using the thematic analysis grid by Anderson et al. (2015), adapted by Hoare et al. (2024) by tabulating studies and sorting by name, date, and themes. In recent decades, international students have faced significant policy shifts driven by government decisions shaping their status in Canadian higher education.

These shifts influence academics, immigration pathways, labour market access, and institutional support, leading to challenges such as academic honesty across cultures, cultural adaptation, culture shock, discrimination, and exploitation, all affecting financial stability, mental health, and settlement prospects. This reveals tensions between Canada's recruitment strategies and its responsibility to ensure equitable treatment rather than viewing students as financial assets. As Shokirova et al. (2022) note, racialized and non-native speakers struggled with housing and credit, and early orientations failed to meet immediate needs, with limited housing for families and graduate students. These dynamics shape how international students experience, integrate, and adapt to policy changes globally.

Review of Related Literature

The themes explored in this paper include international student transitions and experiences across multiple host countries (Canada, Cambridge, and the United States), integration into Canadian higher education, decision-making processes, changes in status related to laws, policies, regulations, and rules, and the dynamic nature of international students' needs during periods of change.

International Student Transitions and Experiences in Multiple Host Countries like Canada, Cambridge, and USA

International students have experienced persistent changes within Canadian higher education, where they are often viewed as commodities used to bolster economic growth rather than as individuals pursuing meaningful educational and life opportunities. Howe et al. (2023) note, "In response to calls for a national strategy to compete for international students with Australia and other nations, Canada (2019) announced an International Education Strategy in 2014 aimed at doubling the number of international students by 2022" (p. 116). This reflects their positioning as financial and labor resources rather than valued academic contributors. International education has functioned as a recruitment pipeline retaining students as "ideal immigrants," a trend mirrored by significant growth in international mobility over the past 20 years (Brunner, 2022). While Canada projects supportiveness, literature highlights reliance on international students for economic priorities, often leading to exploitation. Multi-scalar analyses, examining processes across levels, reveal the limitations of broad strategies explaining these systems (Brunner, 2022).

As cited in Sitton (2025) states that international student recruitment and retention remain crucial to the growth of Canada's socioeconomic and cultural development; for instance, in 2018, international students contributed \$21.6 billion to Canada's GDP (Government of Canada, 2019), rising to \$37.3 billion by 2022 and accounting for 23.1% of service exports (Kunin, 2023). Between 2009 and 2019, their numbers grew 162.7%, making Canada the third most popular global destination with 642,000 students in 2019 (CBIE, 2020; IRCC, 2022). Federal and provincial policies further strengthened this growth, driving a 400% increase in postsecondary enrollment from 2000 to 2021 (Government of Canada, 2014, 2019; IRCC, 2022; Sitton, 2025).

These internationalization policies require international students to adapt to new academic and cultural environments. A 2014 survey reported that 95% of Canadian universities included internationalization in their strategic plans, with 82% ranking it among their top five priorities, reflecting a focus on growth and increasing international student enrollment in Canadian universities (Guo & Guo, 2017). "Canada has long positioned itself as a major player in the recruitment of international students, deploying federal and provincial policies on immigration and education to attract and retain increasing numbers of IS" (As cited by Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025, p. 115). Consequently, international students face opportunities and challenges aligned with the CPA framework of unequal access to support, including exploitation, policy uncertainties, financial pressures, and emotional stress, affecting academic and social integration, career pathways, mental health, and overall well-being. The next section examines evidence on international student integration into Canadian higher education.

International Students Integration into Canadian Higher Education

International students integrate into host countries through education, employment, and pathways to permanent residency, particularly in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but they still face policy-related discrimination. Post-Study Work Rights (PSWR) in countries like Australia, Germany, and Canada attract students, address labour shortages, retain skilled migrants, and improve graduate outcomes, yet can also reinforce discriminatory practices (Joshi & Ziguas, 2024). According to Joshi and Ziguas (2024) PSWR policies increase a country's appeal to international students (Geddie, 2015; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018), but experiences often fall short of expectations; for example, in Australia, international graduates on PSWR visas frequently struggle to secure graduate-level positions, with many employed in non-graduate roles due to low labour market demand (Blackmore et al., 2017; Blackmore & Rahimi, 2019; Chew, 2019; Karram, 2013; Moskal, 2017; Tran et al., 2020, 2021). This highlights a persistent gap between PSWR policy goals and students lived experiences (Joshi & Ziguas, 2024; Moskal, 2017). As Kirby (2023) notes, international students continue to face challenges under internationalization, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global enrollments and exposed inequities in institutional support for domestic versus

international students. Trilokekar (2010) argues that Canadian higher education internationalization is rooted in “a traditional Canadian ethos and soft power policy of anti-imperialism and a need for a just and equitable world order” (p. 144). It is often framed around academic-humanist goals, such as promoting cultural exchange, enhancing campus and community diversity, and fostering cross-cultural collaboration (Cowan, 2021; Cudmore, 2005; Kirby, 2007; Knight, 2011). Research highlights the potential benefits of intercultural exchanges between international students and host institutions (Kirby, 2023). Khorsandi (2014) notes that although internationalization is widely emphasized in Canadian university policy, particularly in Ontario, the values guiding these policies remain unclear. By framing policy as “the practice of values,” Khorsandi (2014) highlights how internationalization is not simply a rhetorical trend but a process that shapes how international students integrate, often revealing inequities in the ways they are expected to adapt within the system.

While Canadian pathways allow international students to pursue permanent residency and citizenship, these opportunities also encourage recruitment through assimilation models. Unfair educational structures can hinder integration, despite efforts to enable graduates to address postcolonial social and material challenges (Lehr, 2008). Although Li (2023) suggests that internationalization has yielded positive outcomes, such as long-term immigration contributions and largely positive educational experiences, inequities continue to challenge new immigrants like international students (Anderson, 2020). Barriers in educational, social, cultural, and linguistic affect international student outcomes, with employment opportunities emerging as a top priority (Esaki-Smith, 2022). Scott et al. (2015) highlights a disconnect between policymakers’ assumptions and students lived experiences, as labour market integration is hindered by language barriers, limited community connections, and perceived employer discrimination (Li, 2023; Scott et al., 2015). Despite these challenges, international students continue pursuing education abroad for stability, academic advancement, and security. The next section explores their decision-making processes.

International Students’ Decision Making

Education plays a pivotal role for international students seeking better access to learning, employment, and security abroad. However, many struggle to navigate academic honesty across cultures while maintaining their status in host countries. McCartney (2021) notes that this is not a story of progress or decline, but one rooted in the complex motivations and deep structures shaping international students’ explanation for the seismic changes in the way international students are thought about and treated in Canada, which influence how students make academic decisions across cultural contexts. As Netierman et al. (2022) show, although international students are considered guests in Canada, their decisions about academic honesty are influenced by cultural pressures and the desire to graduate, highlighting how their lived experiences shape choices to remain in the host country. With growing global interest in recruiting international students, understanding how they decide to return home, or stay is crucial. Such insights can inform human resources and immigration policies and help develop support for international students planning to remain permanent (Netierman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, while education and employment opportunities are primary motivations for studying abroad, some international students withdraw or return home due to challenges related to academic dishonesty shaped by their lived experiences. Despite the contributions international students bring to Canada’s society and economy, they often face significant difficulties in securing employment after completing their studies (Nguyen & Sharma, 2024). Sabazalieva et al. (2022) argue that “while education and immigration policy have become more intertwined, they continue to be analyzed as separate spheres of influence” (p. 178). This suggests that international students frequently base their decisions on educational opportunities rather than policy, even though the two are closely connected. Consequently, both students and academic staff experience increased pressure, making access to inclusive institutional supports such as mental health and counseling services, which is essential for international student well-being and success. Such support is crucial to help them navigate cultural differences and reduce the likelihood of engaging in academic dishonesty, as international students may face challenges related to their cultural identity, beliefs, and values (Sakiz & Jencius, 2024).

To fully realize education’s transformative potential, broader institutional and societal reforms are needed to address cultural struggles and barriers, particularly around academic honesty, aligning with Nodding’s Ethics of Care framework in responding to others’ needs. Only through systemic change can

education genuinely empower international students to enhance academic performance, employment prospects, and long-term immigration outcomes. The next section examines how policy changes affect international students' status in Canada.

Changes in Status like in Law, Policy, Regulations and Rules

One major struggle for international students is culture shock as they navigate unfamiliar social norms, schedules, and communication styles, often leading to misunderstandings and social isolation. Schinnerl (2023) notes that Canada's pathways aim to settle international students as highly skilled, Canadian-trained workers if they conform to the "ideal immigrant" expectation; when realities differ, culture shock intensifies. Ellermann and Schinnerl (2023) explain that host countries annually shape admissions, influencing graduates, employers, and higher education communities, and that promoting an idealized image of Canada can widen the gap between expectation and experience. Scott et al. (2015) add that students are viewed as strong permanent residency candidates whose Canadian credentials and experience are expected to support labour market integration, further complicating adaptation.

Shek et al. (2024) emphasize that cultural values influence perceptions, behaviour, and responses to stress, showing how identity negotiation is shaped by culture. Despite their contributions to Canada's academic and economic vitality, culture shock can affect retention. Ontario colleges provide academic integrity policies and training to support students (Steacy & Eamer, 2022), yet institutional and societal barriers often remain. Addressing these challenges helps students navigate culture shock, succeed, and support future cohorts. The next section examines how students respond to government policy changes.

The Dynamic Nature of International Student's Needs in Times of Change

International students face rapid and ongoing policy changes, even as they progress in employment, Education and security shifts continue to limit international students' immigration success and cultural adaptation. Stein et al. (2019) note that internationalization remains a central priority for Canadian universities, shaping policy decisions and institutional practices. It is therefore essential to consider the struggles students face when adapting to new cultural contexts shaped by different values and assumptions. Sitton (2025) shows how COVID-19 immigration policies disrupted recruitment and retention, as pandemic-related changes and political priorities forced students to adapt while maintaining their cultural identities

Changes in educational status, including program transfers, have also become more common. Tiessen and Kumar (2013) emphasize preparation and reflection as students navigate cross-cultural experiences, especially language, cultural, and relational challenges abroad. While reliance on fee-paying international students aligns with government policy, many connect these measures to personal and national security concerns. Trilokekar and El Masri (2019) note ongoing challenges in integrating students' cultural backgrounds into Canadian higher education. Despite academic and emotional pressures, institutions provide support, and students recommend improving services, particularly for language barriers and cultural struggles (Worae & Edgerton, 2023).

Gaps in Literature

This paper explores the struggles and barriers that international students face in maintaining their status within the Canadian higher education system amidst frequent policy changes, while simultaneously managing challenges related to mental health, academic performance, and employment. Although the arguments presented are generally cohesive, several key gaps have been identified in the literature review.

Lack of Focus on Academic Pressures

While the literature review examines how international students experience, integrate, make decisions, respond to, and adapt to policy changes globally, it provides limited insight into why some leave or drop out due to pressures of maintaining full- or part-time student status and achieving required grades amid constant policy shifts. These pressures, compounded by the significant financial investment required, can negatively affect student well-being. As Worae and Edgerton (2023) note, personal and social challenges experienced

by international students often include stress related to these academic and financial pressures. International students should be made aware of, and strongly encouraged to utilize, the counseling and mental health services available both on- and off-campus might help students manage these challenges more effectively.

Lack of Focus on Leaders Decision Process on Policy Changes

The literature review focuses on how international students stay, integrate, make decisions, respond to, and adapt to policy changes in host countries within a global context. According to Trilokekar and El Masri (2019), international student policy is managed as part of a broader strategy, but it is not merely about skill development; it also reflects key social relations and power struggles in each host country. However, the literature lacks details on why policymakers make these decisions, the processes they follow, whether guided by ethos or authority, and whether these decisions are made collaboratively with other government officials. It is also unclear whether policymakers intentionally include international students' perspectives in their decision-making processes, or if any representatives of international students participate in government deliberations. This gap is crucial for understanding how policy decisions are made, as these decisions directly impact the future of international students in their host countries.

Lack of Focus on Immigration and Employment Status Uncertainty

International students face significant uncertainty in immigration and employment due to frequent policy changes. Even with strong resources and motivation, success is not guaranteed, especially in securing work and navigating immigration pathways. Sitton (2025) highlights the need to monitor the long-term effects of Canada's shifting international student policies. Although government measures aim to protect program integrity and align education with labour market needs, they may also deter prospective students, reduce institutional capacity, reshape postsecondary strategies, and influence migration patterns.

Future research should explore how these restrictions affect Canada's global education reputation, student mobility, institutional enrollment, and long-term economic contributions. Addressing these gaps requires examining discrepancies between student expectations and actual policies. Understanding these issues is vital to supporting international students' status, career development, and equitable pathways to settlement.

Letter of Recommendation for Policy and Practice

To the Customs and Immigration Office:

I am pleased to submit this letter of recommendation addressing the barriers and struggles international students face due to frequent policy changes in Canadian higher education present three recommendations grounded in Nodding's Ethics of Care and Ball's Critical Policy Analysis (CPA): (1) follow an ethic of care in policy decision-making, (2) increase policy transparency and accountability through critical review, and (3) develop inclusive support rooted in care and justice.

First, institutions and policymakers should integrate an ethic of care into decisions affecting international students. For instance, guided by Nodding's (2013a) and Nodding's (2005b), this means prioritizing students' emotional well-being, dignity, and lived experiences rather than treating them mainly as economic resources. Policies concerning tuition, work authorization, and settlement pathways should be shaped through direct consultation with international students, so their voices inform institutional decisions. Centering care and empathy affirm leaders' ethical responsibility to respond meaningfully to student needs.

Second, institutions should adopt transparent mechanisms for critical policy review consistent with Ball's (1993) CPA framework. Policies related to post-graduation work permits, employment restrictions, and academic support must be regularly evaluated for unintended inequities. A policy review board composed of students, faculty, and policy experts would strengthen accountability and expose how power structures and neoliberal priorities shape students' daily experiences. This ensures policies are judged not only by their intentions, but by their actual impact.

Finally, universities and government agencies should develop integrated, culturally responsive support systems addressing both relational care and structural inequity. This includes expanding mental health services, immigration and legal advising, financial literacy programs, and culturally informed mentorship networks. Such supports operationalize Nodding (2013a) and Tronto's (1993) call for relational and responsive care, while addressing systemic barriers identified through Ball's (1993) critique of market-driven policy practices. By pairing emotional support with structural reform, institutions can move from simply recruiting international students to enabling them to thrive.

Educators and institutional leaders play a central role in addressing the ethical and emotional challenges international students encounter while navigating shifting educational and immigration policies. Drawing on Noddings (2013a) and Noddings (2005b) Ethics of Care, educators can cultivate supportive classroom relationships through attentiveness, active listening, and cultural respect. Flexibility in office hours, recognition of linguistic diversity, and proactive check-ins reduce isolation and affirm that students are valued as individuals. At the institutional level, Ball's (1993) framework highlights how unclear or inconsistently communicated policies reproduce inequities. International students frequently report confusion regarding work authorization, academic expectations, and residency pathways.

Institutions should therefore prioritize clear, accessible policy communication across multiple formats and, when possible, in students' home languages to reduce stress and support academic focus. Potential barriers to implementing these recommendations include limited institutional funding, cultural differences in help-seeking behaviours, inconsistent policy messaging across departments, and staff workload pressures that reduce time for relational engagement.

However, future research demonstrates that international students benefit from holistic, culturally responsive support systems, including academic advising, mental health services, and peer mentorship (Howe et al., 2023). Embedding advisors within academic departments encourage help-seeking and integrate support where learning occurs, shifting institutions from merely accommodating international students to actively supporting their well-being and success. Incorporating these recommendations into the Canadian immigration and higher education systems is essential for supporting international students' ability to navigate policy changes and succeed within Canadian higher education. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Christine Eligwe

Conclusion

The review of the paper illustrates how international students' struggles, including navigating academic honesty across cultures, cultural adaptation, culture shock, and experiences of discrimination or exploitation, affect their financial stability, mental health, and settlement prospects amid policy changes in Canadian higher education. While the literature shows progress in improving opportunities for international students, significant limitations remain regarding their legal status. Therefore, meaningful policy reform must be supported by broader structural changes that confront institutional norms and systemic biases that continue to reinforce inequalities experienced by international students in Canada.

Statement of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, were used to support the writing and editing of this paper review by improving sentence structure, clarity, conciseness, and grammar. The ideas, analysis, and synthesis presented in this review are entirely the author's original work, and all cited sources were independently selected and verified.

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