

## Othering international students: Exploring the conflict between student visa policy and Canada's commitment to multiculturalism.

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**Abstract:** In 2024, the federal government announced a radical transformation in its policy regarding international student visas, including a drastic reduction in the number of such visas over a two-year period. The government's public argument was that the increasing number of international students was putting pressure on the country's housing and social service infrastructure. The truth is that students are the victims, not the cause of these problems. Facing squalid, cramped conditions - when they can find accommodations at all - many of them live the realities of food insecurity, absent, insufficient, or culturally inappropriate mental health support, and myriad other challenges that go largely unnoticed in the mainstream (or online) media and by the general public. There is, arguably, an undercurrent of racism and xenophobia that is motivating these policy changes. This paper examines the history of multiculturalism and its intersection with the experiences of international students in Canada.

### Introduction

In 1971, then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced multiculturalism as an official policy of the Canadian government. According to the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, the purpose of this new policy was "to preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society" (*Canadian Multiculturalism Policy, 1971* | *Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21*, n.d.). As his son and eventual successor, Justin Trudeau said during his own term of office, multiculturalism has been not just a policy but a deeply-held Canadian value for several generations (CTV News, 2019). This paper contends that the current framework for awarding student visas is at odds with both Canada's decades-old policy of multiculturalism and its long-term economic, social, and educational interests.

### History of international students in Canada

The international students who choose to study in Canada come from literally all over the world. Table 1 shows their countries of origin and the total number of visas issued.

**Table 1**  
*Number of Study Permit Applications Issued*

Country of Residence	2024 (until January 31)			Grand Total
	Authorized	Confirmed	Total	
India	13,509	8,771	22,280	433,477
People's Republic of China	1,024	2,135	3,159	55,301
Philippines	934	997	1,931	50,879
Nigeria	1,190	1,448	2,638	46,604
Nepal	718	806	1,524	23,366
France	123	540	663	21,761
Iran	426	456	882	17,401
Japan	354	391	745	17,032
Colombia	177	572	749	16,861
Brazil	240	457	697	16,013
Other Countries	6,675	11,096	17,771	305,538
Grand Total	25,370	27,669	53,039	1,004,233

(Immigration, 2024d)

Over the last 20-30 years, Canadian colleges and universities have attracted many international students. Not surprisingly, this increase has occurred at precisely the same time that provincial governments have reduced their

funding for these institutions. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of international students admitted nationally between 2017 and 2023.

**Figure 1**  
*International students in Canada, 2017-2023*



(Basiri, 2024)

## Federal policy changes and their impact

In 2022, the government estimated that international education accounted for approximately \$22 billion in economic activity and supported 200,000 jobs across Canada (Immigration, 2023). As of January 2024, the government of Canada issued slightly more than 1 million international student visas. That same month, however, the government announced the first of two rounds of cuts to the number of visas to be awarded. Each province and territory was allocated a number of international students to be admitted to its public colleges and universities, in line with its population. Private institutions received no allocation. Later the same year, the government announced a second round of reductions with a wider sweep, this time including graduate students. The net result could be at least 30-50% fewer international students in Canada by 2026 (Global News, 2024; CTV News, 2024).

Some institutions say they cannot fulfill their quotas. Initially, the list of programs eligible for Post-Graduate Work Permits (PWGPs) was restricted to just a handful of disciplines linked to certain occupations in long-term shortage. At the end of 2024, these restrictions were loosened somewhat, partially in response to pressure from colleges (*Statement on List of Preferred Programs*, 2024) to include certain programs related to early childhood education and developmental service workers (Immigration, 2024c). These program choices, whatever their economic value, do not always fully align with student interests (Government of Canada, 2024b).

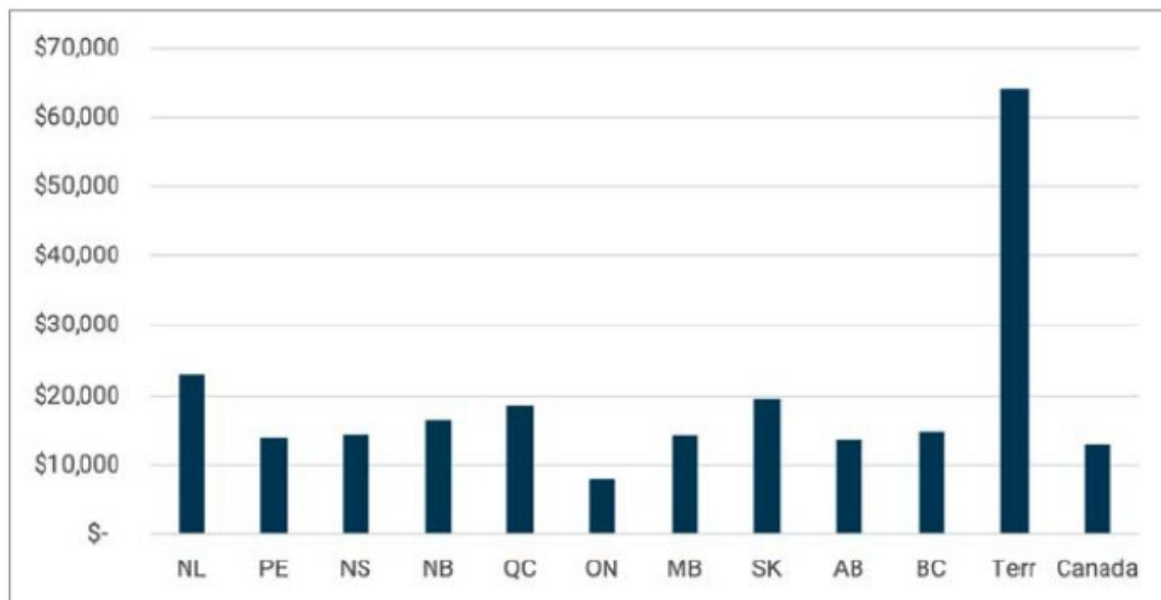
Subsequently, several Ontario post-secondary institutions have announced drastic cuts. For example, in addition to shutting down one of its three campuses and relocating the associated programs and students, Algonquin College is currently considering how to address a shortfall of approximately one-third of its total international student population and an associated \$32 million revenue decline (Technology, n.d.). On February 19, 2025 York became the first Ontario university to announce its own cuts (Raveendran, 2025). Algonquin and York's announcements followed an almost dizzying news cycle, in which one Ontario college after another slashed programs, staff and entire areas of

operation as they all dealt with the triple whammy – reductions in international student enrollment; a decade-long freeze in domestic tuition fees; and no meaningful, long-term increase in provincial funding in almost seven years (*Program Suspensions - Sheridan College*, n.d.; *St. Lawrence College Announces Program Suspensions Beginning Spring 2025*, n.d.; *Centennial College - Program Suspensions*, n.d.; Fanshawe College, 2025)

Today, Ontario provides the lowest per-capita support to post-secondary institutions of any province or territory in the country. The national average expenditure is slightly more than \$10,000 per student. These numbers are highest in the three northernmost jurisdictions – Yukon, Northwest and Nunavut. Figure 2 shows per capita support for post-secondary education in all provinces and territories.

**Figure 2**

*Provincial figures per FTE Student, 2022-23*



(Usher & Balfour, 2024)

The multi-generational effect of the elder Trudeau's move to multiculturalism has been a steady, regular growth in the number of immigrants arriving in Canada. Today, 25% of the people in this country are immigrants, the highest proportion since shortly after Confederation (Government Of Canada, 2022). In 2019, the government changed its approach to encourage more Canadians to develop international competencies through studying and working abroad and emphasizing the diversification of countries, fields, levels, and locations within Canada that international students would choose (Immigration, 2024a).

## What international students face

International students pay up to five times as much in tuition as domestic students, leading to allegations that they are “cash cows” for the institutions they attend. This revenue has been increasingly important to Canadian colleges and universities as federal, provincial, and territorial governments have reduced their operating support in recent years. Table 2 shows comparative Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study.

**Table 2**

*Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (constant dollars)*

Geography	Level of study	2020 / 2021	2021 / 2022	2022 / 2023	2023 / 2024	2024 / 2025
Canada <a href="#">(map)</a>		Constant dollars				
	Canadian undergraduate	6,801	6,660	6,435	6,446	6,510
	Canadian graduate	7,608	7,315	6,939	6,798	6,777
	International undergraduate	33,115	33,446	33,561	34,477	35,479
	International graduate	20,081	20,246	19,812	19,932	20,548

(Government of Canada, 2022)

There are a great many challenges that international students encounter, beyond affordability and being able to study where they would like. Predatory individuals and market conditions subject them to conditions that many Canadians would find intolerable. For example, if they can find housing at all, it can often be exorbitantly expensive and sometimes require them to live in highly crowded or otherwise unfavourable conditions. According to a 2024 study, the rates of living in unsuitable housing ranged from 25% to 63% for international students, about 13 to 45 percentage points higher than that for Canadian-born students aged 18 to 24 (Government of Canada, 2024a). To help meet their tuition and living costs, they often must work one or more part-time jobs in addition to a full-time program of studies. Those jobs are often in the service sector, with low pay, few if any benefits, and little to no job security. Their student visas allow them to work off-campus for no more than 24 hours per week (Immigration, 2007). There has also been anecdotal evidence of some students taking on work that threatens their safety, including sex trafficking (Pashang, 2019).

International students face myriad obstacles to success, including price gouging, invasions of privacy, sexual harassment, assault, exploitation, and illegally low living standards (Marom et al., 2023). Of all the challenges international students face, perhaps the two most fundamental are the lack of adequate housing and food insecurity. International students – especially those outside of major metropolitan areas – face extraordinary challenges in finding food they recognize (Morris, 2024). While this might seem like a slightly innocuous concern, it is worth noting that this aspect of their lived experience is coupled with adjustments to a new country and culture, and for many of them, the first time away from home, often at a very young age.

The path to permanent residency or Canadian citizenship is also quite complex (Government of Canada; Immigration, 2012). For example, without a valid work permit, international students must leave Canada within 90 days of receiving their final transcripts (Immigration, 2024b). Even in the initial application process, prospective students must demonstrate that they have strong links to their home countries (Government of Canada; Immigration, 2012) and typically, plan to leave Canada after their studies are complete, thus ending their presence in and potential contributions to Canadian multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

It is too soon to know what the long-term effects of these policy changes will be. Despite its own long-term commitment to multiculturalism and the huge financial boon that international students represent, the government shows few, if any, signs of further relaxing the new, more stringent requirements. In fact, if anything, the evidence strongly suggests that these changes mark the beginning of a vicious circle, in which struggling institutions have even less revenue to meet international students' needs. Beyond its public statements, the government's true policy motivations are unclear. What is clear is that this new policy direction seems to be at odds with Canada's – and Canadians' – stated commitments to multiculturalism.

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