

Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students

by

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B.A. (Honours), Gettysburg College, 2021

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Amid concerns about the unsustainable growth of international students in Canada and the subsequent pressures on housing, the federal government introduced several changes to immigration policies to address these issues. Some of these changes include a cap on study permits, restrictions on the eligibility for work permits, and decreased permanent residency targets. This study uses a case study approach based on the University of Victoria to explore how these changes have impacted the lived experiences of international students. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis based on semi-structured interviews with 14 undergraduate and graduate international students, findings show that while these policy reforms aimed to improve the integrity of the international student program and alleviate housing pressures, they have also produced various challenges for international students who arrived under earlier policies with the intention to settle in Canada. These immigration reforms reflect a complex wicked issue involving competing priorities among multiple groups, including various levels of government that are responding to economic pressures, post-secondary institutions that are reliant on international student revenue, and international students navigating uncertainty about their futures in Canada. The findings highlight the complex and multifaceted impacts of immigration policies on international students, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive support services and timely, transparent, and accessible communication about policy changes to support them in making informed decisions about their futures.

Keywords: International students; case study; immigration policy; lived experiences; support services

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List of Abbreviations

B.C.	British Columbia
B.C. PNP	British Columbia Provincial Nominee Program
CACUSS	Canadian Association of College and University Student Services
CBIE	Canadian Bureau for International Education
CEC	Canadian Experience Class
CEN	Comparative Ethnographic Narrative
CICan	Colleges and Institutes Canada
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmark
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
CUSC	Canadian University Survey Consortium
DLI	Designated Learning Institution
EAP	Equity Action Plan
EQHR	Equity and Human Rights
GSS	Graduate Students' Society
HREB	Human Research Ethics Board
ICS	International Centre for Students
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IESP	International Education Strategic Plan
IG	International Graduate
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IPG	International Post-Graduate
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
ISM	International Student Mobility and Migration
ITA	Invitation to Apply
LOA	Letter of Acceptance
LICO	Low-Income Cut-Off
NOC	National Occupational Classification
PGWP	Post-Graduation Work Permit
RA	Research Assistant
SIN	Social Insurance Number
TA	Teaching Assistant
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UAE	United Arab Emirates
U.K.	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States
UVic	University of Victoria
UVSS	University of Victoria Students' Society
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

Emerging Concerns About the International Student Program in Canada

A report released by four Senators in September 2023 raised mounting concerns about Canada's international student program, highlighting broader systemic issues within the international education sector. This report, *Strengthening the Integrity of Canada's International Student Program*, pointed out that post-secondary institutions have become increasingly reliant on international student tuition due to years of stagnant government funding. The report also raised specific concerns about public-private partnerships between academic institutions, noting that these arrangements lack proper oversight and consequently exceed enrollment limits (Marwah et al., 2023). This growing dependence on international student tuition raises important questions about the need for increased public funding for higher education and a diversified funding model that does not heavily rely on international student tuition to offset budget deficits.

According to the said report, education agents, who play a central role in recruiting international students to Canada, are another area of concern. This report notes that many agents operate on a commission-based model and direct students toward Designated Learning Institutions (DLIs) that offer higher commissions. The report describes instances where students received inaccurate information, such as being advised to apply to programs that were not eligible for post-graduation work permits (PGWPs) and were given unrealistic expectations about life in Canada. It also references cases in which these agents altered documents, including Letters of Acceptance (LOAs); in such cases, students risked facing serious consequences under immigration regulations, including a potential five-year bar on submitting immigration applications due to misrepresentation (Marwah et al., 2023). These unethical recruitment practices highlight the need for greater regulation of third-party education agents as they operate with little oversight and leave international students vulnerable to exploitation.

In addition, this report sheds light on how international students in Canada face significant housing challenges, with 40 percent living in unsuitable accommodations, compared to 9 percent of the general population. These students face various issues, including discrimination, sexual harassment by landlords, overcrowding, unsafe living conditions, and illegal evictions; these problems are worsened by the broader shortage of affordable housing. This report notes that while reducing international student numbers may slightly ease housing demand, it could financially harm post-secondary institutions and does little to address the root causes of the housing crisis. According to this report, a meaningful solution requires coordinated action from all levels of government to expand the supply of affordable housing (Marwah et al., 2023). This reflects the complexity of the housing crisis in Canada; while international students tend to bear the majority of the blame for the housing shortage, a sustainable solution to alleviate housing pressures calls for a more balanced approach that supports housing development and greater investment in affordable housing options.

Another issue outlined in this report is around employment; according to this report, many international students work beyond the set work-hour limits. This report notes that the

federal government's decision to lift the off-campus work limit rules in October 2022, in response to labour shortages, carries the risk that international students will prioritize employment over their academics. Moreover, this report highlights instances of employer abuse, with reports of international students being underpaid, exploited, and denied basic rights (Marwah et al, 2023). These findings highlight the need to hold employers accountable for upholding labour standards to ensure the fair treatment of international students. At the same time, expanding access to scholarships, bursaries, and other forms of financial support could help reduce these students' reliance on precarious work, enabling them to prioritize their education while meeting their financial needs.

The report also notes that most international students in Canada are motivated by the goal of gaining permanent residence, citing a 2021 survey which found that 73 percent planned to apply for a PGWP, and 59 percent intended to seek permanent residency. The report states that as the number of study permits issued far exceeds the available permanent residency spots, this consequently leads to unrealistic expectations. This issue is worsened by government messaging, recruitment agents, and institutions that often overemphasize the ease of Canadian immigration to attract students from overseas (Marwah et al., 2023). This highlights the need for branding campaigns and recruitment strategies to maintain ethical standards in messaging through increased transparency about life in Canada, including the cost of living, the job market, and realistic expectations about immigration pathways and outcomes, enabling prospective international students to make informed decisions about studying abroad.

Recent Changes in Immigration Policies and the International Student Program

Beginning in December 2023, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced several changes to immigration policies, including revisions to the international student program. These changes were prompted by growing concerns about the unsustainable growth in the number of international students, with reports of some academic institutions significantly increasing enrollment without providing adequate support services. According to the federal government, this sharp rise in international student numbers created added pressure on housing, healthcare, and other public services. To better protect international students from exploitation and promote sustainable population growth, the federal government announced changes to existing policies (IRCC, 2024a). These changes are discussed in the following section.

Cost-of-Living Financial Requirement

The cost-of-living financial requirement refers to the minimum amount of money that international students must demonstrate they have when applying for a study permit as proof that they can financially support themselves while studying in Canada. In December 2023, the federal government announced that it is raising this financial requirement from \$10,000 to \$20,635 in addition to the cost of travel and the first year of tuition. This change aimed to ensure that prospective international students are better financially prepared for life in Canada. This change took effect starting on January 1, 2024, and applies to new study permit applications received on or after this date. This figure represents 75% of the low-income cut-off (LICO) estimate, which

is the minimum amount that an individual needs to avoid spending an excessive portion of their income on basic necessities (IRCC, 2023b).

Cap on Study Permits

Over the past decade, Canada has seen a significant rise in the number of approved study permits, growing from 301,545 in 2013 to 1,040,985 by the end of 2023, an increase of about 245% (Statista, 2025a; CBIE, 2023a). To stabilize the number of international students, the federal government announced a two-year cap on the number of study permits in January 2024. Initially, this cap only applied to undergraduate students; however, it was announced in September 2024 that master's and doctoral students will also be included in this cap for 2025–2026, while 12% of the allocation would still be reserved for them (IRCC, 2024a; IRCC, 2024d). This move reduced the number of international students in Canada by about 40% in 2024. Building on these changes, the federal government announced in January 2025 that the IRCC plans to issue a total of 437,000 study permits for 2025, representing a 10% decrease from the 2024 cap (IRCC, 2025).

New Requirement: Attestation Letters

In January 2024, IRCC announced that most study permit applications will now require an attestation letter, which must be obtained by students before submitting their study permit application. This letter is issued by the province or territory where the student plans to study and verifies that the individual has received a legitimate offer of admission and is accounted for under the provincial or territorial allocation within the national cap. According to the IRCC, this verification process is intended to protect prospective international students from being vulnerable to fraud, ensuring that study permits are issued based on genuine admission letters. Provinces and territories were required to establish a process for issuing these letters by March 31, 2024 (IRCC, 2024a).

Restrictions on Work Hours

Since 2014, international students have been permitted to work off campus for up to 20 hours per week during the academic session and full-time during scheduled breaks without needing a separate work permit (Crossman et al., 2021). However, beginning in November 2022, this work limit was temporarily lifted to address the post-pandemic labour market shortages (Government of Canada, 2024c). On April 30, 2024, the standard regulations were reinstated, limiting eligible students to 20 hours of off-campus work per week. Then, starting on November 8, 2024, a new update to this policy increased the allowable work hours to 24 per week for eligible international students (IRCC, 2024c; University of British Columbia, n.d.-a). According to the IRCC, these new work-hour limits intend to promote a balance between employment and coursework so that students' academic outcomes are not compromised (IRCC, 2024c). Meanwhile, the policy allowing international students to work unlimited hours on campus has not seen any changes. This means that international students can work as many hours as they would like on campus, in addition to working up to 24 hours off campus, as long as they continue to meet certain eligibility requirements (Government of Canada, 2024b).

Removing PGWP Eligibility for International Students in Public-Private Partnerships

Before 2024, international students enrolled in programs under public-private curriculum licensing arrangements were eligible for PGWPs. In these arrangements, private colleges are licensed to deliver the curriculum of a partnering public institution. However, in January 2024, the federal government announced that graduates from these programs would no longer be eligible for a PGWP (IRCC, 2024a). Originally set to take effect on September 1, 2024, the implementation of this policy was moved up to May 15, 2024. This meant that students who started this type of program on or after May 15, 2024, were subject to the revised policy (IRCC, 2024b). According to the IRCC, these programs attracted significant numbers of international students while operating with less oversight than public colleges and acting as a loophole with regard to eligibility for the PGWP (IRCC, 2024a). Therefore, the decision to restrict eligibility for PGWPs was made to reduce the number of international students from enrolling in these programs.

New Language Proficiency Requirement for the PGWP

Additionally, in September 2024, new restrictions were introduced that require applicants for a PGWP to provide proof of language proficiency through a standardized test in either French or English. Applicants are now required to demonstrate a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) score of 7 for university graduates and a CLB score of 5 for college graduates. According to the IRCC, this language requirement is intended to increase international students' ability to "transition to permanent residence and adapt to changing economic conditions" (IRCC, 2024d). Based on this statement, this move aims to ensure that international graduates possess the necessary language skills to better integrate into the Canadian workforce and society.

Restricting PGWP Eligibility for International Students in Public Colleges

Furthermore, in September 2024, it was announced that graduates of public colleges and university vocational programs would qualify for a PGWP of up to three years if their program aligns with areas of high labour market demand (IRCC, 2024d). However, this policy was reversed in March 2025, allowing college degree graduates to qualify for a PGWP if they met new language requirements. This was in response to concerns raised by Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) and other public colleges, who criticized the new reforms for unfairly targeting them and imposing an excessive burden on them to align their programs with national labour market demands. According to CICan, "the reforms single out public colleges to prove their programs align with national labour market needs..." (ICEF Monitor, 2025; Northern Connections Canada Immigration, 2025).

Restricting Eligibility for Spousal Work Permits

In January 2024, it was announced that open work permits would be restricted to spouses of international students enrolled in master's or doctoral programs, while excluding spouses of international students in undergraduate or college programs (IRCC, 2024a). In September 2024, additional restrictions were introduced, excluding spouses of master's students from work permits if the student's program is shorter than 16 months. Furthermore, eligibility for work

permits has been narrowed to spouses of foreign workers employed in management or professional roles or sectors experiencing labour shortages. Overall, this change is designed to reduce the number of temporary residents in Canada and promote sustainable population growth (IRCC, 2024d).

Changes to the Permanent Residency Program in B.C.

The B.C. Provincial Nominee Program (B.C. PNP) is a key immigration program offering a pathway to permanent residency for international workers who contribute to B.C.'s economy. On March 19, 2024, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs announced that the existing International Graduate (IG) and International Post-Graduate (IPG) streams under this program will be replaced by three new ones: the Bachelor's Stream for recent graduates with a bachelor's degree from eligible post-secondary institutions, who require an indeterminate full-time job offer; the Master's Stream for graduates with a master's degree from eligible institutions, who require a minimum one-year full-time job offer in a skilled occupation; and the Doctorate Stream for doctoral graduates or candidates from eligible institutions, who can apply directly without needing a job offer. Among these changes is the increase in the minimum language proficiency requirement, which is now set at CLB 8 for all three streams (WelcomeBC, 2025). This language requirement is higher than the required CLB score for the PGWP, as mentioned in the section above.

According to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, these changes are intended to create clearer pathways to permanent residency and better outcomes for international workers. The Ministry stated that newcomers with higher education and strong English or French skills are more likely to succeed in the workforce, earn higher incomes and remain in high-demand jobs, strengthening B.C.'s economy. However, in response to the federal government's decision to reduce B.C.'s provincial nomination allocations to 4,000 spots for 2025 (a 50% reduction from 2024) and due to the high number of applications compared to available nominations, the Ministry announced on April 14, 2025, that the rollout of the three new student immigration streams has been put on hold. These streams will only move forward if the number of available provincial nominations increases (WelcomeBC, 2025).

Reductions in Permanent Resident Targets

Canada has seen an increase in the number of immigrants over the past decade, with 260,282 permanent residents arriving in 2014. By the end of 2024, the permanent resident target was set to reach 485,000, reflecting an 86% increase (Statista, 2025b; IRCC, 2023a). However, in October 2024, Minister Marc Miller announced the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan, which lowered the permanent resident targets from 500,000 to 395,000 in 2025, from 500,000 to 380,000 in 2026, and set a target of 365,000 for 2027. The Levels Plan also aimed to reduce the volume of temporary residents from 6.5% of Canada's total population to 5% by the end of 2026. According to the IRCC, these changes are intended to strengthen the integrity and quality of temporary resident programs in Canada, as well as help alleviate housing pressures (IRCC, 2024d; IRCC, 2024e).

Defining the Issue

The issue of recent immigration reforms in Canada reflects a wicked problem, as defined by Lönngren and van Poeck (2020), who outline ten defining characteristics of such challenges. One characteristic is the absence of a definitive problem formulation. In the case of these immigration policy reforms, they cannot be attributed to a single determining factor. Instead, these reforms were in response to several different issues, including national economic pressures, the unsustainable growth in international student numbers, and reports of unethical recruitment practices, to name a few. However, attempts to address these concerns through subsequent policy reforms have created additional challenges for current international students who came to Canada under different immigration policies and are now facing greater uncertainty about their futures. These overlapping issues highlight the inherent difficulty in clearly defining the problem.

Another characteristic is that solutions to wicked problems are judged subjectively based on competing priorities. For example, policymakers may propose immigration policy reforms to address national economic pressures. However, this can negatively affect post-secondary institutions as they face financial constraints from declining international student enrollment. In addition, current international students who came to Canada under earlier immigration policies may find their future plans increasingly uncertain due to recent policy shifts. Although this problem can be examined from different perspectives, including through the lens of policymakers, post-secondary institutions, and international students, this study focuses specifically on the experiences of current international students using a case study approach, based on one mid-sized public research university in Canada.

In addition, a wicked problem can be a symptom of another underlying issue; in this case, concerns about the high growth in the number of international students reflect deeper structural problems, such as the state of the housing market and the higher education sector. Although immigration policy reforms have attempted to address housing pressures, however, they are unlikely to bring about a meaningful solution to the housing shortage without increased investments in the development of affordable housing options. Meanwhile, these policy reforms further expose the overdependence of the higher education sector on international student revenue. Due to the declining international student enrollment following the immigration reforms, several post-secondary institutions have reduced spending, laid off staff, and implemented program cuts (Ronson, 2025); this will likely affect the educational experience of both domestic and international students.

Who is Affected by this Problem?

Although the recent changes in immigration policies impact different groups, this study focuses specifically on their impact on current international students. The introduction of these policies, while intending to address mounting concerns about the integrity of the international student program and alleviate housing pressures, has created significant challenges for current international students and their future plans in Canada. While prospective international students are also impacted, current students are experiencing the immediate impact of these changes. In 2024, there were countrywide protests in Canada by international students who felt that they

were being unfairly targeted by the new immigration policies. These protests reflected students' demands for clearer pathways to permanent residency, as the new policies have created greater obstacles for settling in Canada (Pandher & Dhimi, 2024). For many students, these changes heighten existing challenges that they already face, such as financial pressures, uncertainty about future job prospects, and negative public sentiments towards certain immigrant groups.

Compounding this issue is the negative rhetoric in the media and public discourse, which often unfairly links international students to broader issues, such as the housing crisis. However, according to a Canadian economist, Mike P. Moffatt, the root cause of the housing crisis can be attributed to government policies that have failed to ensure housing supply keeps pace with rising demand (Ellis, 2023). The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) also warns that placing blame on international students for causing pressure on public services could increase xenophobia and racism (CUPE, 2024). Racialized students, especially South Asians, are feeling the effects of anti-immigrant sentiment more intensely. Even before the recent immigration reforms, this group has been subject to increased discrimination and hate-based violence, with Statistics Canada (2024) reporting a staggering 143% rise in hate crimes against them in 2019–2022.

With the recent changes in immigration policies, South Asians have come under greater public backlash. In October 2024, a South Asian man in Waterloo, Ontario, was subjected to a racist encounter in which a woman gave him the middle finger and ranted that too many people from India were coming to Canada and should return to their country of origin (Mapp, 2024). Similarly, a media report by CBC News reported that a group of South Asian international students from the University of Regina were subjected to verbal racial abuse, threats of violence, and physical assault when four men in a car yelled racist slurs, threatened to shoot them, and threw coffee at them. This incident took place in December 2024. One of the students in this incident, who is from Bangladesh, believed that he was targeted because he was perceived to be Indian (Dudha, 2025). An associate professor at Queen's University, Reena Kukreja, whose research focuses on the normalization of hateful rhetoric, with a particular emphasis on South Asian men, noted that this is not an isolated incident and that there has been a rise in hate against racialized immigrants in Canada (Dudha, 2025). This incident exemplifies the growing climate of hostility that international students, particularly those from racialized communities, are increasingly facing.

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok play a role in spreading hateful xenophobic rhetoric, further exacerbating the marginalization experienced by this group. In one disturbing example, TikTok users mocked the suicide of Charandeep Singh, a former Niagara College student, with some even encouraging more South Asians to follow suit. Another example is the popular Toronto Instagram account '6ixbuzz', which has faced criticism for posting content that fuels racist commentary and reinforces xenophobic stereotypes about Sikh Punjabis, Indian international students, and the broader South Asian community (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024). These platforms provide a dangerous space for the spread of racist ideologies, which can deepen the sense of hostility and exclusion felt by international students, especially those from non-white racial backgrounds.

Main Issues and Causes

Beginning in December 2023, recent changes in Canada’s immigration policies (IRCC, 2023a–b; 2024a–e; 2025) have created challenges and uncertainties for international students who arrived under earlier regulations, disrupting various aspects of their lives. These immigration reforms are also occurring alongside growing anti-immigrant sentiment and rising public concerns about the impact of immigration on the economy. A 2024 survey found that 58% of Canadians felt that there were too many immigrants in the country, marking a 14-percentage-point increase from 2023 and a 17-point increase compared to 2022. According to this survey, public opinion on immigration was largely shaped by concerns over housing, the economy, overpopulation, and, more recently, the management of the immigration system (Neuman, 2024). These growing concerns over the role of immigrants in exacerbating economic pressures are contributing to a polarized political and public climate in Canada.

These rising negative public sentiments are also leading to the stigmatization of international students; according to one study conducted by Waterloo researchers, these students are unfairly blamed for Canada’s housing crisis (Vallis, 2024). Although large increases in international student enrollment have contributed to increased demand for housing, it is only one part of a much larger issue driven by factors like decades of underinvestment in non-market housing, restrictive zoning policies, and the growing financialization of real estate (Flynn, 2025). In some areas, such as Waterloo, Ontario, this hostile climate has contributed to a rise in hate crimes against South Asians, coinciding with an increase in the international student population (Danso, 2023). The combination of uncertainty in immigration policy and public hostility has created an increasingly unwelcoming environment for these students. As they navigate the complexities of adjusting to life in a new country, they must also contend with restrictive immigration policies, negative public perceptions, and, in some cases, hate crimes.

In addition, the recent changes in Canada’s immigration policies coincide with similar restrictive shifts in other historically popular study abroad destinations, including the United States (U.S.), the United Kingdom (U.K.), and Australia. For instance, in 2024, the U.K. imposed restrictions on international students from bringing their dependents with them (ICEF Monitor, 2023). In 2024, Australia introduced a bill to limit international student enrollment; although this bill did not pass the Senate, the government has indicated that it intends to regulate international student numbers in the future (ICEF Monitor, 2024a). Moreover, international students in the U.S. have been subject to increased scrutiny, including social media screening when applying for their student visas (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This global trend places additional pressure on international students, as it limits their options for pursuing higher education opportunities in other countries.

What Might Happen if the Problem Goes Unaddressed?

Although recent changes in immigration policies are intended to strengthen the integrity of the international student program so that future students are better informed about the reality of life in Canada, these shifts are also creating unintended challenges for those already studying in the country. Many current international students who came to study in Canada under different immigration policies now find themselves navigating a more complex and evolving regulatory

environment. This added uncertainty can have implications for these students' overall mental health and well-being, particularly as they struggle to plan their futures in Canada and pay off large amounts of student debt after graduation.

Under Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, all individuals are entitled to equality and protection from discrimination based on characteristics such as race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or any physical or mental disability (Government of Canada, 2024a). These rights extend to international students, ensuring that they can study and live freely from discrimination. Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students involves grounding public discourse in accurate information and developing policies that address structural challenges without attributing the entire responsibility for national economic pressures to temporary residents.

Amid the ongoing immigration reforms, the recent increase in the number of asylum claims has also placed greater scrutiny on international students. In 2024, international students filed 20,245 asylum claims, compared to 1,810 in 2018 (Nair, 2024; Izri and Cossette, 2025). These statistics have been heavily covered in the media, with former Immigration Minister Marc Miller even referring to this trend as alarming (Previl, 2024). While some international students may be turning to the asylum system as a last resort to remain in Canada, however, others may be filing claims because they are trying to flee geopolitical conflicts in their home countries. Broadly assuming that international students are exploiting the asylum system can reinforce harmful stereotypes surrounding this group in an already volatile political climate. To address the issue of potential false claims, post-secondary institutions and policymakers should collectively work together to ensure students understand the asylum system and the serious consequences of submitting false claims, including the possibility of being barred from returning to Canada.

The issue of restrictive immigration policies also carries long-term consequences for Canada as a preferred destination for international students. Given the current trajectory of international student policies, prospective students may increasingly turn to other study abroad destinations. Although traditionally popular study abroad destinations such as the U.S., U.K., and Australia have implemented strict immigration policies, however, several countries in East and Southeast Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia, are introducing ambitious goals to increase international student enrollment (ICEF Monitor, 2024b). Singapore has also recently made it easier for international students to obtain permanent residency (AACRAO, 2025). In addition, more students across Asia are choosing to study within the region, leading to greater inter-regional flows (Nash, 2024). This changing pattern of international student mobility may impact countries like Canada, which has long relied on international students to offset budget deficits in higher education and as a source of skilled labour. If Canada continues to enforce restrictive policies, it risks losing a significant share of international students to countries in Asia that offer better opportunities for them.

It is also important to consider the impact of decreasing international student revenue on post-secondary institutions. International students contribute immensely to Canada's economy by paying significant tuition fees and supporting key labour sectors. In 2022 alone, they were estimated to have contributed over \$37.3 billion in spending on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary items (Government of Canada, 2024d). Given this considerable economic impact,

their role in sustaining post-secondary institutions has become increasingly important. This growing reliance on international student revenue raises questions about the financial vulnerability of post-secondary institutions and highlights the need for governments to ensure adequate funding for the higher education sector. In some cases, declining international student enrollment is already leading to cuts in programs and services, hiring freezes, layoffs, and broader effects on the educational experience for both domestic and international students (Baxter, 2025). This highlights the need for a diversified funding model for post-secondary institutions, one that does not solely rely on charging higher tuition to international students.

Purpose, Scope, and Research Question

The purpose of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by international students under recent immigration reforms, using the University of Victoria (UVic) as a case study. Specifically, this study examines how changes in immigration policies, which started in December 2023 and are still ongoing, have affected these students' academic journeys. Additionally, this study aims to raise awareness amongst UVic's student support service providers and administration about the various challenges that international students face and how these affect their lived experiences. This study also aims to identify potential gaps in accessing relevant support services at UVic, which could inform the development of more targeted programs to better support international students.

This case study is guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research methodology that explores how international students make sense of their lived experiences. This study uses semi-structured interviews to collect data. The scope of this research is specifically limited to the experiences of international students at UVic and does not extend to those studying at other public or private post-secondary institutions in Canada. The experiences of international students can vary significantly across institutions due to differences in academic environments, campus cultures, policies, and the availability and quality of support services. As a result, the findings discussed here are not representative of the broader international student population in Canada. Instead, this study offers recommendations specifically for the UVic campus community, including faculty, staff, and university leadership, to help them better understand how the recent changes in immigration policies are affecting international students. By building greater awareness of these challenges, the UVic campus community can help foster ongoing dialogue and contribute to meaningful advocacy efforts to improve international student experiences.

The specific research objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the impact of recent changes in immigration policy on international students' lived experiences, using UVic as a case study.
2. To identify gaps in accessing relevant support services at UVic that are intended to assist international students.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways have the recent changes in immigration policy affected the lived experiences of international students during their academic journey at UVic?

2. What are the gaps in accessing relevant support services for international students studying at UVic?

Positionality Statement

I am an international graduate student of South Asian descent, residing as an uninvited guest on the traditional territories of the Lekungen peoples. I was born and raised in Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country, where community values of family ties, faith, and traditional practices shaped my early worldview. While I had less exposure to other religions and cultures, this later fueled my interest in learning about diverse global perspectives and worldviews. Reflecting on my positionality, I recognize that my perspective is shaped by my particular cultural context, and there are areas where my understanding of other cultures may be less developed. To broaden my exposure to global learning environments, I studied abroad in the U.S. for my undergraduate studies and decided to pursue graduate studies in Canada. At UVic, I have actively built relationships with international students through the Global Community, an initiative that fosters cross-cultural exchange by hosting intercultural events and providing volunteer opportunities.

I have also engaged in self-reflection by keeping a journal throughout this research, recognizing that practicing ongoing reflexivity is important for conducting ethical research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity allowed me to critically examine my assumptions and biases, helping me recognize how these factors might influence the research process. Reflecting on my experiences, I recognize that my journey as an international student in the U.S. and Canada will inevitably influence my understanding of participants' experiences. With this awareness, I remain mindful of how my background may guide my interpretations, without letting it dominate the participants' voices. By reflecting on my experiences, I aim to balance my interpretative role with respect for the participants' lived experiences, ensuring their voices remain central to this study.

Importance of the Study for UVic

UVic is one of Canada's leading research universities, with a student body of over 22,000 across undergraduate and graduate programs (University of Victoria, n.d.-b). International students comprise 17% of the total student population and represent 20% of graduate students. These students come from 110 countries, creating a diverse and globally enriched academic environment at UVic (University of Victoria, n.d.-a). Through its exclusive partnership with Kaplan, UVic is seeking to diversify its recruitment efforts by visiting countries such as China, India, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (University of Victoria, 2024b). Given UVic's sizeable international student population and its ongoing recruitment initiatives, this research contributes to a better understanding of the varied experiences of international students. It examines how their diverse cultural backgrounds, personal circumstances, and different aspects of their identity intersect with the changing immigration landscape to shape their time at the university. These insights aim to support the development of a campus culture where ongoing dialogue about international student experiences is integrated into the broader community.

International students contribute significantly to UVic’s internationalization goals by enriching the diversity of both academic and experiential learning environments. However, the growing number of international students at UVic does not necessarily reflect their meaningful involvement in the campus community. Promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion, whether academically, socially, or in the workplace, requires active and sustained efforts from the UVic campus community to support their engagement. This study supports these efforts by helping students, staff, and faculty become more aware of the often invisible challenges these students face. The findings, made publicly available through the UVicSpace portal, offer valuable insights for various offices at UVic seeking to enhance their intercultural competency initiatives and improve international students’ meaningful involvement in the campus community.

International students make substantial contributions to the university and local economy through tuition and related spending. During the 2019–20 fiscal year, UVic enrolled 3,867 international students, with an estimated 48% remaining in the region after graduation. Altogether, international student spending in that year contributed \$34.2 million in additional income to the region (University of Victoria, 2021). However, since 2022/23, UVic has experienced a drop in international enrolment, which has had significant financial consequences for the university (University of Victoria, 2025). Given the financial contributions international students make to both UVic and the local economy, this research can help shape responsive programs and services which can support the university’s efforts to attract future international students. This research can also identify practical ways to support these students’ entry into the workforce so that they can continue to contribute to the regional economy.

Several research studies have examined the experiences of international students in Canada (Scott et al., 2015; Calder et al., 2016; Sullivan, 2021; Hanbazaza et al., 2021; Howe et al., 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2024). However, these studies were conducted before the recent changes in immigration policies. As a result, the challenges faced by international students in the current political climate, characterized by immigration reforms and economic pressures, have not been fully explored. Although this case study solely focuses on the experiences of students at UVic, it still provides valuable insights into international student experiences during a time of significant change and upheaval. These findings can contribute to a better understanding of international students’ current realities, especially amidst the intersection of prior and evolving immigration policies. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of research on international students at mid-sized, research-intensive universities in Western Canada.

Overview of the Thesis Structure

Following the introduction, this study is organized into five additional chapters. Chapter Two outlines the literature review, summarizing previous research on the lived experiences of international students; this chapter includes research on the impact of changing immigration reforms, primarily in the U.S. context, due to limited studies that explore recent policy changes in Canada. Chapter Three outlines the research design, which includes a case study approach and IPA based on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Chapter Four presents the findings derived from the data, organized around key themes. Chapter Five discusses the findings in depth, interpreting their significance in relation to the research

questions, drawing connections from the existing literature, and offering recommendations for UVic to improve international student experiences at the university. Lastly, Chapter Six summarizes the research findings and provides reflections on the broader implications of this study.

Important Terms

International Students. International students are individuals who have relocated from their home country to Canada for the purpose of studying. In Canada, the term “international students” includes non-permanent residents who hold a study permit (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Internationalization. This is defined as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (De Wit and Hunter, 2015, p. 3).

Changes in Immigration Policy. Changes in immigration policy refer to shifts in IRCC’s strategic goals and priorities affecting international students in Canada, specifically those that were introduced starting in December 2023. These shifts have driven the development or revisions of specific regulations, including but not limited to those governing study permits, work hours, eligibility for PGWPs, and immigration pathways.

Lived Experiences. According to Casey (2023), lived experiences encompass our internal, subjective states and our interactions with others, the environment, and external events. Lived experiences are not only shaped by the present but are inherently temporal, spanning across time, as our past experiences structure our present understanding. This creates a sense of continuity in our experiences, making them personal, unique, and interconnected. These experiences include everyday events as well as profound moments that impact our worldview. Reflection gives meaning to these experiences and allows others to understand them.

The lived experiences of international students reflect their understanding of life events, shaped by their cultural backgrounds, individual circumstances, and the unique challenges of studying abroad. These experiences encompass both their internal emotions and perceptions, as well as how they are impacted by external factors such as academic pressures, financial struggles, discrimination, mental health concerns, and immigration policies. For these students, lived experiences are not merely personal and subjective; they are also shaped by the broader academic, social, and political environments that these students navigate in their daily lives.

Well-Being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021, p. 10), well-being is a positive state that is experienced by individuals and societies. Like health, it serves as a vital resource in everyday life and is shaped by social, economic, and environmental factors. It includes quality of life and reflects the ability of people and societies to make meaningful contributions to the world. An individual’s well-being can be measured by their resilience, ability to build capacity for action, and preparedness to overcome challenges.

Chapter 2: History and Background

This chapter explores the history of immigration policies in Canada from the 1950s to the present day. This historical overview provides important context for understanding how the international student program has evolved over the past 70 years. It also sheds light on the key factors that have influenced this program's expansion and led to the growth in the international student population in Canada; some of these factors include the need for skilled immigrants to fill labour market shortages and the shortfalls in public funding for post-secondary institutions.

Introducing a Points-Based Immigration System

Between 1952 and 1967, immigration policy in Canada prioritized individuals who were culturally similar and could integrate easily into Canadian society. These preferred immigrants came primarily from countries such as the U.S., the U.K., France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavian nations, and Iceland. During this period, international students were generally viewed as recipients of foreign aid rather than as potential immigrants, as they typically did not come from these preferred countries. However, economic pressures in the 1960s prompted a significant shift in immigration policy. The focus moved away from cultural assimilation toward economic contribution (McCartney, 2016).

In 1967, Canada introduced a points-based immigration system, enabling the country to select immigrants based on their skills, education, and work experience, favouring those who could make significant contributions to the national economy (Mahboubi, 2024). For international students, this meant that they were allowed to apply for immigrant status while still studying in Canada, with their education being viewed as a factor that made them strong candidates for immigration (Canadian Service for Overseas Students and Trainees, 1967, as cited in McCartney, 2021). Therefore, the end of the 1960s reflects an opening up of immigration policy to encourage greater labour flows that could help meet national economic needs in Canada.

Classifying International Students as Visitors

Against the backdrop of events mentioned above, a backlash against international students emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, partly triggered by the events of the Sir George Williams University Affair (McCartney, 2016; McCartney, 2021). This event involved a student protest that was heavily covered by the media, emphasizing the involvement of foreign students (Irwin, 2020). Although this event alone did not cause a shift in attitudes towards international students, which can be attributed to more complex factors, subsequent opinions towards international students became increasingly negative. This changing public discourse towards international students was followed by immigration policy reforms in 1976, effectively closing the immigration pathways for them (McCartney, 2016; McCartney, 2021). The Immigration Act of 1976 officially classified international students as visitors, which meant that they were considered to be in Canada "for a temporary purpose." Several restrictions came with this designation, including prohibitions on students from working in Canada, changing institutions or programs after arrival, and applying for immigration while in the country

(Immigration Act, 1976, p. 4, as cited in McCartney, 2021). According to McCartney (2021), this marked a significant policy shift and laid the groundwork for the introduction of differential tuition fees, which is considered one of the most enduring changes to international student policy.

Introduction of Differential Tuition Fees

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) conducted the first major scholarly studies on international student policy in Canada in the 1970s. For instance, in 1977, CBIE conducted a national study on international students and related policies and published a series of reports, including a survey (Neice & Braun, 1977, as cited in McCartney, 2021), research papers (Hettich, 1977; Roberts & Adam-Moodley, 1977; Sabourin & Moore, 1977; von Zur-Muehlen, 1977, as cited in McCartney, 2021), and policy recommendations titled *A Question of Self-Interest* (CBIE, 1977, as cited in McCartney, 2021). These studies helped shift public perceptions of international students by reframing their presence as being in Canada's strategic and economic self-interest. This shifting discourse laid the foundation for the introduction of differential tuition fees that exist in Canada today (McCartney, 2021).

The introduction of differential tuition fees encouraged universities to recruit international students, with these practices becoming more common by the 1980s and 1990s. Institutions in British Columbia (B.C.), for example, focused on the financial benefits of differential fees, using them to offset budget deficits. Other provinces soon followed course, motivated by the funding cutbacks of the 1990s, consequently increasing recruitment efforts to attract international students. Therefore, the period spanning from the mid-1980s to the passage of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in 2001 is regarded as the time when internationalization pertaining to international student policy first became a priority for post-secondary institutions (Jordan, 1982, as cited in McCartney, 2021).

Promoting Internationalization in Higher Education

The term “internationalization” emerged during this period to describe and explain the changes in post-secondary education brought about by globalization (Beck, 2012, as cited in McCartney, 2021). Scholars such as Jane Knight situated internationalization as the inevitable outcome of globalization (Stein, 2017, as cited in McCartney, 2021). These discussions centred on the academic benefits to education from internationalization (Beck, 2008, as cited in McCartney, 2021) while placing less focus on the financial benefits to institutions (Knight, 1994, 1997, 2004, 2015, as cited in McCartney, 2021). In 2001, the federal government introduced revisions to the immigration policy. These policy changes made studying in Canada the first step toward gaining citizenship. Before these changes, neither the provincial nor the federal government had directly supported international student recruitment. This change was primarily economically motivated to help academic institutions attract international students (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2001; Brunner, 2017, as cited in McCartney, 2021).

In the long term, the federal government increasingly believed that international students would make important contributions to Canada's economy and viewed them as ideal immigrants

(McCartney, 2021). In 2002, the federal government introduced Canada’s first national innovation strategy, known as *Knowledge Matters*. This strategy identified “high skill” as a national priority, recognizing international graduates as a valuable source of labour and a significant economic asset. When the Conservative Party came to power in 2006, it adopted the narrative of a “broken immigration system” and reshaped immigration policies to prioritize the recruitment of skilled immigrants with Canadian experience, further intensifying the focus on international students (Chatterjee, 2023).

To position Canada as an attractive destination for higher education, a series of agreements between the federal and provincial governments were signed, paving the way for the creation of the federal Skills Research Initiative. This initiative played a key role in shaping the Canadian Experience Class (CEC), a two-tier permanent residency program introduced in 2008. Under the CEC, international students were encouraged to apply for permanent residency after gaining work experience in Canada through the PGWP program. Before this, international students were required to leave the country after graduation and reapply for permanent residency, a process often regarded as a missed opportunity (Chatterjee, 2023).

Release of Canada’s International Education Strategies

In 2008, the federal government launched a national branding initiative to further support recruitment efforts and increase the number of international students in Canada (Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013, as cited in McCartney, 2021). This initiative, known as EduCanada, used advertising to promote immigration opportunities for international students after graduation, distinguishing Canada from other popular study abroad destinations (Stein, 2017, p. 10, as cited in McCartney, 2021). In 2014, Canada introduced its first International Education Strategy (2014–2019), outlining the federal government’s goal of increasing the number of international students from 250,000 to over 450,000 by 2022. By the end of 2022, CBIE reported that a total of 807,750 study permits had been issued across all levels of education, with the majority of permits granted at the postsecondary level (Chatterjee, 2023). In 2018, international students contributed \$21.6 billion to Canada’s GDP and supported nearly 170,000 middle-class jobs, making a widespread economic impact (Global Affairs Canada, 2019).

In 2019, Global Affairs Canada released the *Building on Success: Canada’s International Education Strategy (2019–2024)*, committing \$148 million over five years, with an additional \$8 million in ongoing annual funding. This strategy aimed to broaden the diversity of international students in Canada and increase support for Canadian educational institutions, helping them expand their international outreach (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). With this strategy set to expire in 2024, consultations were held in the summer of 2023 to inform the development of a new strategy (CBIE, 2023b); however, a release date has yet to be announced. This history of evolving international student policy is important for understanding the current landscape of international students in Canada, particularly in relation to broader national initiatives and economic goals supported by the federal and provincial governments, as well as educational institutions. The next section will discuss some recent changes in immigration policies affecting international students in Canada.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Mapping the Literature Search and Selection Process

This literature review was conducted through a systematic search using Summon, the advanced search feature of the UVic Library website, while applying Boolean logic. The initial search aimed to uncover studies examining the lived experiences of international students, particularly their challenges studying abroad and adapting to a new country. A broad range of keywords was employed, including “international students,” “foreign students,” “lived experiences,” “cultural adjustment,” “social integration,” and “Canada.” As the diversity of international students has grown in Canada, these students need access to tailored support services that address their unique needs and experiences. Therefore, exploring students’ experiences with these services and understanding the barriers they face can highlight the challenges that shape their lived experiences. This led to a secondary search using terms such as “support services,” “academic support,” “counselling,” “career services,” “access,” “gaps,” “barriers,” and “challenges.”

A third search was conducted to refine the focus further and examine the intersection of immigration policy and international students’ experiences. This search included additional keywords such as “immigration policy,” “visa policy,” “student visa regulations,” and “well-being.” Due to limited literature focusing on the experiences of international students in Canada amidst recent immigration reforms, this literature review draws on studies conducted in the U.S. to provide an understanding of how international students’ experiences are shaped by immigration reforms in different national contexts. While these studies provide useful insights, the different political and immigration policy landscapes between the two countries should be considered when applying these findings to the Canadian context.

To incorporate the most recent studies and meet established academic standards, filters were applied to retrieve only peer-reviewed articles published after 2014. This timeframe corresponds with the introduction of key Canadian federal initiatives aimed at boosting international student enrollment, including the International Education Strategy (2014–2019) and Building on Success: Canada’s International Education Strategy (2019–2024) (Chatterjee, 2023; Global Affairs Canada, 2019). These strategies strengthened support for post-secondary institutions’ global outreach efforts, which contributed to a substantial increase in the number of international students. As a result, this filter helped identify studies that captured the most recent experiences of these students. In addition to using the UVic Library’s extensive database, the search was expanded to include Google Scholar, thus broadening access to a wider range of academic sources.

Dixon-Woods et al. (2004) argue that a method for assessing the quality of a study is important, as decisions based on low-quality studies may lead to flawed policy and practice. They propose several prompts for appraising qualitative research, including: Are the research questions clear? Are the sampling, data collection, and analysis methods clearly described? Are the claims supported by sufficient evidence? Does the paper make a meaningful contribution to the field? Drawing on these prompts, this literature review only includes research papers that

meet the following criteria: a clear research purpose, well-described data collection and analysis methods, evidence-based conclusions, and a valuable contribution to the field. By outlining the search and selection process in this way, a structured approach was used to identify available literature on international students' lived experiences.

Review of the Literature

The studies identified through this search were analyzed thematically to uncover key findings. A thematic literature review seeks to uncover patterns and themes across studies, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement in their methodologies, findings, and underlying concepts. This review recognizes that not every source contributes to each theme, and as such, the themes are organized under distinct subheadings (University of Vermont, n.d.). With this understanding of a thematic approach, this literature review includes eight themes, which are discussed in the following section.

Theme 1: Barriers and Limitations to Employment

A few studies revealed that international students experience various barriers and limitations to employment; both these studies focus on the experiences of students in Canada (Calder et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2015). Although these studies used different methodologies, both emphasized the limited employment opportunities for international students. Calder et al. (2016), using a mixed-methods approach guided by structuration theory (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Calder et al., 2016), found that some PhD students could not find employment in career-related fields and worked in minimum-wage jobs to meet their living expenses. For these students, being unable to work in professional roles undermined their sense of identity. Even PhD students who managed to find instructor jobs struggled to obtain year-round employment. This study also highlighted limited teaching assistant (TA) opportunities due to changing faculty who did not prioritize hiring previous students.

Scott et al. (2015) employed a qualitative approach rooted in a cross-cultural adaptation framework and found that international students were mostly employed in on-campus jobs where they had positive experiences, as university employers were supportive and flexible around their academic schedules. While these students benefited from on-campus jobs, they experienced fewer opportunities for off-campus employment due to a lack of internship or practicum opportunities and employers' prejudicial attitudes. Both Scott et al. (2015) and Calder et al. (2016) found that international students desired more connections with industry professionals through networking and shadowing opportunities. Scott et al. (2015) found that students believed that a lack of professional connections would decrease their chances of finding employment after graduation. This study suggests that universities and governments should facilitate greater connections between students and employers to increase their chances of finding employment.

Scott et al. (2015) also identified several factors that impede international students' sociocultural adaptation, ultimately hindering their integration into the workforce. Sociocultural adjustment is defined as a process of social learning that evolves over time and is influenced by various factors (Hickey et al., 2010; Nguyen-Michel et al., 2006, as cited in Scott et al., 2015). For instance, many international students felt employers were biased against hiring them because

they undervalued the advantages of an intercultural workforce. These students also pointed out a lack of professional opportunities, such as cooperative programs, which could offer them valuable cultural training. These students placed importance on adopting a Canadian identity and understanding workplace norms, recognizing these as important steps in improving their employment prospects. However, their lack of experience in off-campus jobs limited their ability to familiarize themselves with Canadian workplace norms and practices.

Additionally, Calder et al. (2016) identified structural barriers that international students face in obtaining off-campus employment, including the need for a driver's license. However, limited resources, such as not owning a car, create an additional challenge for them. This study also found that these students encounter obstacles in obtaining professional licenses, which hinder their ability to work in career-related fields. These barriers reflect the constraints that international students face within various systems, where limited resources reduce their agency in the labour market. As resources are essential for exercising power (Giddens, 1984, p. 16, as cited in Calder et al., 2016), international students are placed at a disadvantage when searching for jobs.

Moreover, Scott et al. (2015) shed light on systemic barriers, such as Canadian employers' tendency to discount foreign work experience, which placed international students at a disadvantage. In addition, this study highlighted that students in social science and humanities programs experienced greater difficulty in finding employment. Scott et al. (2015) also shed light on communication barriers, particularly those related to language skills for international students who spoke English as their second or third language. According to this study, international students feared that a lack of proficiency in their language skills could negatively impact their job prospects. This led to increased stress and a lack of confidence in their abilities, negatively affecting their interview performances and creating further obstacles to securing employment.

Some qualitative studies highlighted how immigration and visa policies influenced international students' employment opportunities (Crumley-Effinger, 2024; Marbang et al., 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2019; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). All these studies are based on the experiences of international students in the U.S., except for Crumley-Effinger (2024), who looks at students' experiences in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. through the lens of institutionalism, highlighting the influence of institutions on individuals and their agency. This framework views visa policies as indicative of a local, social, and political institution at the national level that constrains international students' experiences (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, as cited in Crumley-Effinger, 2024). This study found that visa regulations created significant barriers to off-campus employment, with employers often prioritizing candidates with permanent residency status in Canada. Students also faced constraints due to the 20-hour weekly work limit in Canada, pushing some to accept exploitative, poorly paid "off-the-books" jobs. Additionally, Crumley-Effinger (2024) pointed out that students' future job prospects in the U.S. were tied to their field of study, which restricted their career options and made them feel trapped.

Studies exploring the impact of immigration and visa policies specifically in the U.S. context underscore how the anti-immigrant climate and resulting restrictive immigration policies negatively affected international students. For instance, drawing on the concept of moral panics, Marbang et al. (2020) claimed that the "fear of" something, worsened by political rhetoric and

mass media, results in consequences for social relations and is employed as a tool for managing social control. This fear disseminates moral panics and contributes to the development of restrictive policies (Altheide, 2009, as cited in Marbang et al., 2020). According to Marbang et al. (2020), such visa restrictions limit international students' ability to fully participate in society at the same level as citizens in the U.S. Todoran and Peterson (2019) shed further light into the experiences of graduate international students in the U.S., revealing that the "Buy American, Hire American" executive order and proposed changes to the H1-B work visa program led to fears that employers might be discouraged from sponsoring work visas. This study was guided by symbolic interactionism, a theoretical framework that views the interpretive process as central to understanding human behaviour.

Todoran and Peterson (2019) found that some employers told international students in the U.S. that they were ineligible for hire due to the need for work visa sponsorship, underscoring shifting attitudes toward employing international workers. According to Todoran and Peterson (2019), changes in U.S. immigration policies reinforced ideas about who is considered worthy of access to opportunities (Quinn et al., 2017, p. 708, as cited in Todoran & Peterson, 2019). Similarly, Marbang et al. (2020) echoed these findings, revealing that both undergraduate and graduate international students faced increased challenges in securing employment due to proposed and enacted policy changes, which fueled fears that employers would be less inclined to sponsor their work visas. According to this study, restrictive immigration policies create a power imbalance, consequently leaving international students with limited resources to change their circumstances.

Pottie-Sherman (2018) further highlighted how the exclusionary immigration policies shaped employers' perceptions of international students in the U.S., often leading them to view these students as financial risks, due to the increased costs and paperwork required for hiring them. This study introduces a conceptual framework that considers the role of national policies, local initiatives, and migrant aspirations in international student mobility, emphasizing the need for a multi-scalar approach to understanding migration during President Trump's administration. This study noted how policies under President Trump's leadership obstructed mobility processes and opportunities for international students in the U.S., as evidenced by companies citing hiring freezes due to political uncertainty and the shifting immigration landscape, particularly the "Buy American, Hire American" executive order. This illustrates how international students navigate uneven migration opportunity structures (Schiller & Calger, 2010, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Furthermore, these examples underscore the exclusionary impact of xenophobic politics (Ehrkamp, 2017, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018), with fewer employers at career fairs willing to hire international students, therefore limiting their mobility in the labour force (Bauder, 2015; Robertson, 2013, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

Theme 2: Racism, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion

Several studies highlighted instances of racism and discrimination experienced by international students, particularly in classroom settings and the labour market; these studies specifically focus on the experiences of students in Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2021). Howe et al. (2023) employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, guided by comparative ethnographic narrative (CEN), a culturally sensitive framework that uniquely

integrates comparative, ethnographic, and narrative elements as a means to better understand lived experiences. This study combined survey and interview data at a mid-sized public research university in B.C. The responses revealed recurring themes of racism, discrimination, double standards, group-ism, and challenges in forming friendships. Students reported feelings of isolation, often linked to being labelled as “international students,” while those from certain countries faced preconceived judgments that hindered their social integration. These experiences contributed to feelings of social exclusion and marginalization.

Sullivan (2021) conducted a qualitative study at a large research university in Ontario utilizing semi-structured interviews. Similar to Howe et al. (2023), this study also highlighted how international students experienced difficulty forming friendships. It offered deeper insights into the underlying reasons, such as difficulties engaging in small talk due to unfamiliarity with cultural references, the pre-existing social networks of domestic students, and the tendency to view international students through a one-dimensional lens. This study also shed light on the dynamics that international students encountered in group settings, where domestic students often preferred not to work with them. This segregation mirrored broader social dynamics in academic environments, where international students were isolated from their domestic peers. International students were frequently grouped together, reinforcing feelings of social separation and exclusion, while limiting opportunities for meaningful interaction. However, this study did not take into account the perspectives of graduate students, whose experiences may differ from those of undergraduate students; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to all international students.

In contrast to these findings (Howe et al., 2023; Sullivan, 2021), Worae and Edgerton (2023) found that most respondents did not experience significant discrimination in areas such as interactions with other international students, university staff, professors, and Canadian students, nor due to their religious affiliation, place of birth, and ethnicity. Interestingly, however, one of the most common personal and social challenges reported was difficulty in forming friendships with Canadian students, similar to findings by Howe et al. (2023) and Sullivan (2021). It is worth noting that since this study was conducted at a large public research university in Manitoba, this limits its generalizability to all international students across Canada.

In addition to discrimination in academic settings (Sullivan, 2021; Howe et al., 2023), Scott et al. (2015) found that international students in Canada faced discrimination in the job market. International students often perceived this discrimination to be driven by employers’ prejudicial attitudes and limited experiences in hiring foreign students. Many students believed that employers were hesitant to hire them, viewing them as an administrative burden due to the extensive paperwork and immigration regulations involved in the hiring process. This study also found that international students experienced considerable stress during job searches, often feeling overlooked due to their non-resident status. Consequently, many students were reluctant to disclose their immigration status out of fear of negative consequences. Some students, however, did not view this discrimination as malicious. Instead, they saw it as a strategic decision by employers who preferred domestic candidates due to their familiarity with the local culture and lower training costs.

Theme 3: Financial Stressors

Several studies highlighted the financial stressors experienced by international students in Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Calder et al., 2016). Findings revealed that these students experienced difficulty paying high tuition fees (Howe et al., 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Howe et al. (2023) described how high tuition fees caused financial stress and frustration for students, leading some to drop out due to their inability to afford the steep costs of education. This study highlighted that even students with strong academic records contemplated leaving because of these financial hardships.

Calder et al. (2016), drawing on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), explored the interplay between individual agency and societal structures, illustrating how “structure enables and constrains action while simultaneously being (re)constituted through action” (Chatterjee et al., 2019, p. 60). This study argued that it is important for agents to take action to improve current structures; however, international students have limited power and resources to address their financial challenges, as evidenced by how some students in Canada were unable to successfully negotiate installment payments for tuition fees. This situation illustrates the lack of agency among international students to bring about meaningful change, underscoring how “action logically involves power in the sense of transformative capacity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 15, as cited in Calder et al., 2016).

Additionally, the limited availability of scholarships for international students in Canada created a disparity between them and their peers, further exacerbating their financial challenges (Howe et al., 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). According to Howe et al. (2023), this lack of financial support had a demoralizing impact on students. Other factors contributing to international students’ financial strain were associated with the broader economic conditions in the global economy (Howe et al., 2023). Calder et al. (2016) shed light on some of these factors, including fluctuations in currency exchange rates in international students’ home countries, which significantly affected their finances. In addition to general challenges like inflation and rising tuition fees, exchange rate fluctuations further compounded the financial struggles of these students.

Additionally, the difficulty in finding employment significantly contributed to international students’ financial stress in Canada, many of whom relied on work to alleviate their financial burdens (Howe et al., 2023). Similarly, Worae and Edgerton (2023) highlighted the financial challenges created by employment restrictions, such as the 20-hour work limit per week. Calder et al. (2016) further shed light on the disparities faced by international students, noting that they received the same teaching and research assistantship stipends as domestic students, despite paying higher tuition fees, which resulted in lower overall earnings. Furthermore, these stipends were not always available year-round, exacerbating financial strain, especially for students from less affluent countries. To make matters worse, some students were unaware of tuition deductions from their stipends, leaving them caught off guard by costs that were unaccounted for and disrupting their financial planning and budgeting.

Housing costs were also a major source of financial stress for international students in Canada (Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Calder et al., 2016). Many struggled to pay rent and, in some

cases, relied on borrowing money from friends and family to cover basic living expenses (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Similarly, Calder et al. (2016) emphasized that housing costs constituted a significant portion of international students' overall living expenses, with affordability closely tied to the broader cost of living. Many international students also reported difficulties finding affordable housing near campus, and while some opted for on-campus residences, they found these increasingly expensive, with rents rising steadily over the years. Additionally, international students with families often had to search for higher-rent accommodations, further adding to their financial strain.

In addition to the financial stressors mentioned above, Pottie-Sherman (2018) highlighted the strain on international students in the U.S., caused by limited job opportunities amidst changing visa regulations. International students who had made significant investments in their education by taking out loans to fund their studies consequently faced the burden of repaying this debt after graduation. However, potential changes to immigration policy fostered uncertainty regarding their employment prospects, hindering these students' ability to plan for their future. This reality challenges the stereotype of international students as highly mobile, global elites (Pottie-Sherman, 2018), as their mobility is often restricted due to many different factors, including financial obligations and changing immigration policies.

Theme 4: Academic Challenges

Several studies highlighted the academic challenges faced by international students in Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2015; Hanbazaza et al., 2021). Some identified language barriers, particularly in academic writing, as a major factor affecting these students' performances, especially in graduate-level assignments (Howe et al., 2023). Scott et al. (2015) also found that specialized vocabulary is often required in fields such as Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. This created barriers for international students who previously studied these subjects in their native languages. These students often struggled to keep up with lectures in English, even spending extra time translating notes. Despite their strong academic backgrounds, this hindered their ability to grasp complex academic material and negatively impacted their performance.

Scott et al. (2015) also shed light on how international students in Canada had difficulties with presentation-style assessments and experienced anxiety about public speaking. Additionally, these students often found it difficult to adjust to their professors' communication styles and accents, which increased their stress. Some students were also unaware of the rules related to academic integrity, leading to greater confusion. Furthermore, the lack of intercultural awareness among staff and faculty left students feeling isolated and dejected. Overall, this study found that international students experienced a range of linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges while studying abroad. According to Scott et al. (2015), the success of international students depends on how they navigate these challenges. For instance, the integration and success of international students are determined by factors such as intercultural interactions. However, the degree to which students seek out intercultural contact depends on their language ability, identification with the host culture, and perception of discrimination (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, as cited in Scott et al., 2015).

Beyond academic adjustments in a foreign setting, international students in Canada also faced challenges focusing on lectures, exams, and coursework due to food insecurity (Hanbazaza et al., 2021). This supports findings from previous studies that showed how post-secondary students with severe food insecurity struggled to concentrate in class, study for exams, and often failed or withdrew from courses (Farahbakhsh et al., 2015; Hanbazaza et al., 2017, as cited in Hanbazaza et al., 2021). This underscores the broader implications of food insecurity as a barrier to academic success for international students.

In addition to these challenges, Crumley-Effinger (2024) specifically highlighted how visa and study permit policies impact international students' academic experiences in Canada, the U.S., and Australia. Some of the findings specific to Canada revealed that international students are required to maintain full-time enrollment status, which is a significant source of stress, particularly for students facing mental health issues. The lack of options to reduce academic workloads led some students to take medical leaves, which created complications for their return, including the need for new study permits and medical documentation. Uncertainty around study permit renewals in Canada was described as a "strenuous" process, with extensions not guaranteed, putting the completion of the degree at risk. One student struggled to finish their dissertation due to a pending permit expiration, even omitting a chapter to meet deadlines. Crumley-Effinger (2024) noted the lack of research on the effects of visa and study permit policies on international students and emphasized further exploration in this area.

In contrast to previous findings, Worae and Edgerton (2023) discovered that most international students in Canada did not experience significant challenges in areas such as group work, completing assignments, collaborating with Canadian peers, adapting to Canadian teaching methods, and participating in class presentations and discussions. Howe et al. (2023) also highlighted the positive academic experiences of international students in Canada, noting that group work was viewed as particularly beneficial, boosting self-confidence and enhancing language skills. International students appreciated the opportunity to work in teams, which allowed for more language practice and knowledge sharing. Some students also valued class discussions, interactive teaching methods, and the practical application of theory, which helped deepen their understanding of the course material. Overall, these teaching methods were considered important for improving students' academic engagement and comprehension. Looking at the impact of visa policies, Crumley-Effinger (2024) found that some students in the U.S. viewed these policies as a positive source of pressure, motivating them to perform well and avoid academic dishonesty.

Theme 5: Housing Issues

A few studies shed light on the housing challenges experienced by international students in Canada (Calder et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2023; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023). For instance, Howe et al. (2023) found that international students encountered challenges related to accommodations, including difficulty finding affordable housing, limited and costly on-campus residences, inadequate cooking facilities, and small, noisy dormitories. Similarly, Calder et al. (2016) also shed light on housing challenges, especially those related to off-campus housing. This study revealed how some students sometimes exchanged labour, such as cleaning, for reduced rent or opted to rent rooms instead of apartments. Many students frequently moved,

couch surfed, or even slept in university buildings, sometimes considering going without housing for a month. Although 24/7 access to university buildings made homelessness more manageable for these students, it remained an unsafe option, particularly at night. International students also reported poor living conditions, such as cold basements, and the emotional strain of being unable to afford both housing and childcare. This study also emphasized the difficulties of navigating housing in an unfamiliar city and how some students' occasional returns home complicated their housing situations.

Pottie-Sherman et al. (2023) further shed light on international students' housing challenges in Canada, with many students experiencing deception and exploitation by landlords. These students frequently found that housing conditions were not as advertised, citing issues such as housing code violations, pest infestations, and broken appliances. Another common problem was the withholding of security deposits. These students also experienced difficulty due to their lack of Canadian references, which limited their options in the rental market. Additionally, international students often perceived an uneven playing field when it came to accessing formal protections and lodging complaints against landlords, who typically possessed greater local knowledge, stronger community connections, and higher proficiency in English.

Although Woraie and Edgerton (2023) found that about two-thirds of respondents reported little to no difficulty in securing accommodations, however, these findings were inconsistent with other studies that were discussed previously. Moreover, this study only focuses on the experiences of students at one Canadian university, which suggests that housing challenges vary by province and depend on other factors such as cost of living, population density, and housing development projects. According to Giddens (1984, p. 28, as cited in Calder et al., 2016), addressing housing issues requires both social integration ("reciprocity between actors in contexts of co-presence") and system integration ("reciprocity between actors or collectivities across extended time-space"). These strategies can help address international students' housing challenges, as social integration builds community connections to support housing searches, while system integration enables broader policy and resource initiatives that can improve the availability and affordability of housing.

Theme 6: Factors Affecting Access to Support Services

A few studies highlighted the barriers that international students face in accessing support services in Canada (Calder et al., 2016; Soares et al., 2024; Howe et al., 2023). Howe et al. (2023) observed that while many students in Canada acknowledged the wide range of support services available to them, some preferred to seek help from peers and professors instead. Calder et al. (2016) found that a lack of information about resources often led international students to rely on personal networks for support, such as staying with distant relatives while searching for housing. In one case, a student lived with a professor for two semesters and received financial support, though such experiences varied, as some professors preferred not to engage in their students' personal lives. This study also revealed that some international students hesitated to ask for help due to stigma and inconsistent responses, thus complicating efforts to improve support services (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Calder et al., 2016).

Soares et al. (2024) specifically highlighted the relationship between university professionals and Chinese international students in Canada by drawing on Banda et al.'s (2020) concept of care. This study suggests that care goes beyond meeting institutional standards and cannot be performative in nature when considering systems of oppression such as racism (Noddings, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999, as cited in Soares et al., 2024). Similar to Calder et al. (2016), this study found that Chinese international students expressed frustration with the lack of information about available services, such as counselling options, leading them to seek support from friends instead. Additionally, long wait times for counselling appointments posed a challenge for students, with mental health services generally prioritizing urgent cases. This study found that university professionals identified the growing demand for support services, combined with limited staff and funding, as key factors limiting the availability of these services.

Soares et al. (2024) also found that a lack of clarity about available services further impacted Chinese international students' experiences in Canada, preventing them from accessing these services. Many students felt that support services did not adequately address their specific needs. Moreover, some students were unable to access support services due to their busy academic schedules. Furthermore, some university professionals perceived Asian international students as reluctant to ask for help, believing that this prevented them from seeking support services. In addition, university professionals brought up other issues preventing access to support services, such as the spread of misinformation, as students often shared information within their personal networks. They also noted that international students often struggle to retain information received during orientations, as they are in the process of adjusting to a new environment.

In addition to the factors preventing Chinese international students from accessing support services in Canada, Soares et al. (2024) found that racial and cultural differences impact interactions between university staff and students. The findings revealed how support services often adopted a deficit thinking approach, placing the onus on international students to adapt to local values, encouraging them to participate more and ask questions, rather than addressing structural issues. This study suggests that universities should focus on tackling structural problems, such as racism, rather than placing the burden of responsibility on international students (Davis & Museus, 2019, as cited in Soares, 2024). Additionally, services should be specifically designed to meet the needs of minority students, aimed at constructing solutions that promote social justice (Banda et al., 2020, as cited in Soares, 2024).

Theme 7: Mixed Experiences Navigating Support Services

Several studies highlighted the experiences of international students navigating support services in Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Sullivan, 2021; Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023). According to the existing literature, international students in Canada felt supported by the international student centre (Sullivan, 2021; Howe et al., 2023; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). In particular, international student advisors played an important role during orientation and were often the first point of contact for students (Howe et al., 2023). This support proved valuable in helping students adjust to a new environment and obtain information on practical matters such as buying a SIM card, safety, opening a bank account, course registration, and healthcare, while also facilitating peer connections. Worae and Edgerton (2023) also found that international

students especially appreciated the career and immigration assistance offered by the international student centre.

In contrast, Sullivan (2021) found that international students in Canada had fewer positive experiences with other campus services, such as academic advising, the career centre, and the writing centre. Common issues included receiving inaccurate information, which led students to conduct their own research. For example, some students were misinformed by academic advisors about switching to part-time status, unaware that this could affect their study and work permits. This, in turn, undermined students' trust in the system. Additionally, the career centre often focused more on promoting job opportunities that required permanent residency or citizenship status. This "Canadian-centric" approach also failed to account for the limited work experience of international students, particularly those from countries where gaining employment before graduation is not the norm.

Sullivan (2021) also found that while the writing center offered support with planning and organization, it did not focus on grammar instruction. This posed challenges for students in Canada who needed more targeted assistance. In addition, some students faced difficulties with late tuition payments due to bank holidays in their home countries, leading them to pay increased fees. Overall, this study found that participants expressed frustration with services outside of the international student centre, including those students who had families in Canada or who had attended Canadian high schools. International students also expressed dissatisfaction with the financial aid support provided by their university (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Additionally, international students emphasized the lack of off-campus housing resources available to them, feeling alone in navigating the rental market. This underscores the important role of universities as intermediaries in the housing market for international students (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023).

In contrast to these findings, the existing literature also highlighted positive experiences between international students, university staff, and student associations in Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Calder et al., 2016). Howe et al. (2023) found that international students in Canada valued the guidance of academic advisors, professors, and deans, particularly when planning course schedules to ensure that they could graduate on time. Some students had positive experiences with professors, receiving language support in graduate courses and expressing a desire for more frequent communication with them, such as increased office hours, workshops, and social events. Additionally, Calder et al. (2016) found that student associations played an important role in supporting peers, organizing activities such as food bank donations, welcoming new international students, and providing orientations.

Aside from the findings based in Canada, Todoran and Peterson (2019) specifically highlighted international students' experiences with support services during changing political reforms in the U.S., particularly the travel ban implemented in 2017. This travel ban restricted entry from seven mainly Muslim countries (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). Despite the stressful environment created by this executive order, many students valued the support they received from their university, particularly the international student centre and the graduate office. Both these offices proactively reached out to students and provided information on the implications of this executive order. Students appreciated receiving reassuring emails from the university and were deeply moved when administrators greeted returning students at the airport.

The university also showed solidarity by organizing a march in support of international students and creating a dedicated webpage to keep students informed about the evolving political situation.

Theme 8: Political Climate and Exclusionary Policies in the U.S.

A few studies examined the impact of changing immigration policies and the polarized political climate in the U.S. on international students (Marbang et al., 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2019; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Although these studies focus on the political and immigration landscape in the U.S., they provide useful comparative insights into how international students' experiences are shaped by changing immigration policies. However, it is important to consider the key differences between the U.S. and Canadian contexts when drawing on this literature. Pottie-Sherman (2018) found that during President Trump's first term in office, international students in the U.S. experienced heightened anxiety and self-regulation, becoming more cautious in their interactions and acutely aware of political divisions. This constant vigilance restricted their sense of freedom. Many closely followed the news, anticipating policy changes that could affect them. This study found that international students navigate a "precarious world of insecurity," existing in an "interstitial" space within national migration regimes, where social and legal precarity shape their experiences (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014, p. 212, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

Marbang et al. (2020) shed light on the impact of President Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, arguing that his scapegoating of immigrants fuelled societal prejudice. Using the concept of "racialized moral panics," this study found that the heightened political rhetoric in the U.S. disproportionately affected non-white students and those who spoke English with a foreign accent. This marginalization shaped both their interpersonal and institutional experiences. Similarly, Pottie-Sherman (2018) used the concept of "racist-spatial dynamics" (Ehrkamp, 2017, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018) to describe how racism intersects with changing immigration policies to reinforce hierarchies in the U.S. This is evident in an example where an international student in the U.S. encountered a cab driver who labelled all Indians as "illegals." Todoran and Peterson (2019) found that media outlets helped fuel this rise in hostility through misconceptions, noting that many domestic students lacked a nuanced understanding of immigration issues.

Drawing attention to one significant policy shift, Todoran and Peterson (2019) highlighted the impact of the 2017 travel ban in the U.S. on international students, revealing that many students experienced feelings of concern, insecurity, and confusion. Some students were afraid that sudden policy changes could jeopardize their immigration status, while others feared that their home country might be added to the travel ban list, causing them to cancel flights and avoid travelling due to concerns about reentry. This uncertainty led some students to choose Canada for their further studies, believing that it offered greater stability. Additionally, many international students expressed fear of discrimination from U.S. immigration officers, particularly based on their religion.

Crumley-Effinger (2024) examined the experiences of international students in Australia, Canada, and the U.S., referring to visa and study permit policies as international student mobility

and migration (ISM) policies. This study introduces the concept of ISM policy pervasion, highlighting the widespread influence of these policies on individuals. The study by Crumley-Effinger (2024) argues that such policies significantly influence many aspects of students' lives, although they are not a central concern for all international students. Notably, it highlights the uncertainty and precariousness often felt by students due to ISM regulations. This sentiment appeared in responses from all three countries, although it was less pronounced among students in Australia. For instance, an Iranian student in Canada expressed anxiety about not being allowed to re-enter the country after travelling abroad, ultimately choosing to remain in Canada during her studies. Although a French student in Canada was less concerned about reentry, she still expressed frustration with the study permit extension process, unsure of how long the extension might be granted for. These examples highlight how ISM policies impose constraints on international students, leaving them to operate within the institutional frameworks of their host country (Kouba, 2019, as cited in Crumley-Effinger, 2024).

Pottie-Sherman (2018) emphasized the varied impact of exclusionary policies on international students in the U.S. This study highlighted that, while some international students faced considerable pressure to secure post-graduate employment due to the burden of repaying their student loans, others possessed the financial resources to pursue further education. This reflects that some international students occupy a more flexible migration trajectory, similar to the “go-stop-go” mobility pattern (Szewczyk, 2016, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018). According to this study, while some international students felt forced to follow a more rigid path due to financial pressures and other constraints, others navigated their migration and education journeys with more flexibility.

Additionally, Pottie-Sherman (2018) found that in response to the challenges posed by President Trump's exclusionary policies, some international students in the U.S. adopted a pragmatic approach, prioritizing resume-building and improving their competitiveness in a shrinking job market. This reflected a “resilient attitude” toward precarious circumstances (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018). On the other hand, others felt frustrated by the uncertainty of the political climate and considered pursuing graduate studies elsewhere, particularly in Canada and Europe. While many valued the opportunities available in the U.S., those struggling to find work or feeling unwelcome increasingly considered alternative destinations. These experiences reinforce the idea that immigration should be viewed as an ongoing, incomplete, and unpredictable process (Collins, 2018, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018) instead of a fixed trajectory. This reflects how immigration experiences are shaped by both personal circumstances and external factors.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Todoran and Peterson (2019) argue that research on international students is essential for three key reasons. Intrinsically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of these students' contemporary life worlds, shedding light on their lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Extrinsically, it serves two critical functions: (1) monitoring and documenting the potential social and political effects of policies and societal changes that may disadvantage international students, and (2) generating an evidence base to support actions, critical reflection, and awareness-raising efforts aimed at promoting social justice (Bartram, 2018, p. 1480, as cited in

Todoran & Peterson, 2019). Given the recent and ongoing shifts in Canada's immigration policy, studies examining the impact of these changes on international students remain limited. Therefore, it is important to address this gap in the literature to better understand how these changes affect international students' daily lives.

The existing literature has explored various challenges faced by international students, with several studies specifically examining the Canadian context (Calder et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2015; Soares et al., 2024; Sullivan, 2021; Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Hanbazaza et al., 2021; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023). These studies highlight issues such as barriers and limitations to employment, racism, discrimination, and social exclusion, along with financial stressors, academic challenges, housing issues, and factors affecting access to support services. While the existing scholarship has broadly addressed international students' lived experiences, however, the intersection between recent immigration policy changes in Canada and international students' academic journeys, mental health and well-being, and post-graduate transitions has not been fully explored.

While some studies have examined the effects of the changing political climate and exclusionary policy changes in the U.S. (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Marbang et al., 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2019), however, the distinct political and immigration landscapes between the two national contexts limit the extent to which the findings are transferable between these two countries. Given the large numbers of international students in Canada, it is important to understand how shifts in immigration policies, such as changes to post-graduation work permits, study permit quotas, and permanent residency pathways, impact these students' academic experiences, financial stability, and future plans.

To address this gap, this study specifically explores the effects of recent changes in immigration policy, using a case study approach, focusing on international students at UVic, examining their lived experiences and access to relevant support services. Through this research, this study aims to provide insights that can inform responsive programs and services at UVic and improve these students' experiences amidst immigration reforms. Additionally, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how to create a more inclusive higher education landscape for international students in Canada, one that supports their success and well-being during their education and after graduation.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is defined as the researcher's synthesis of the existing literature to help explain a phenomenon. It provides a structured approach for conducting a research study, guiding the researcher's actions based on insights drawn from prior studies and personal observations on the research topic (Regoniél, 2015). A conceptual framework shapes and informs the focus of the research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016, as cited in Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 37). Comprising multiple intersecting components, a conceptual framework helps conceptualize key elements of a study and examines how they relate to one another within different contexts that influence the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 37). In essence, the conceptual framework serves as a roadmap for organizing and guiding the research process.

Building on this understanding, the conceptual framework for this study was developed based on a review of the available literature. Given the limited research on the impact of recent immigration policy changes on international students in Canada, this study's conceptual framework is grounded in the broader literature on international students' experiences in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. A review of the existing literature revealed several key themes that are central to understanding the phenomenon under study, with each theme comprising sub-themes that provide valuable insights into the focus of this research. These themes and sub-themes are illustrated in the conceptual framework presented in the following section.

It is important to recognize that while these initial themes and sub-themes form the foundation of this study, they do not encompass all factors shaping international students' experiences under recent immigration policy changes. Instead, they represent the most prominent themes that emerged from the literature review. Consequently, this conceptual framework serves as a guiding structure, helping this study systematically explore and understand this complex issue. This initial framework played an important role in shaping this study's data collection process by informing the development of interview questions. The themes and sub-themes identified in this framework served as focal points for discussion during the interviews and exploration throughout the study.

Figure 1: Initial Conceptual Framework: Lived Experiences of International Students



Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

Methodology

This study employed a single case study approach to explore how recent changes in immigration policies have affected international students. According to Yin (2009), a case study is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 14). Creswell (2007) further describes this approach as the study of an issue within a bounded system (p. 73); a bounded system refers to defined parameters within which the research takes place (Coombs, 2022). This study focuses specifically on the experiences of international students at a mid-sized public research university located in Victoria, B.C. The research was carried out two years after the initial immigration reforms started in December 2023. While this research was carried out, additional regulations were also being introduced. Students were experiencing these changes as they happened and shared their stories while still adjusting to the new rules. As a result, the findings should be understood in light of how recent and ongoing these changes were in the day-to-day lives of international students.

This study was also guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, a qualitative approach that aims to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experiences. This approach is grounded in three key theoretical principles: phenomenology, interpretativism, and idiography. This methodology is well-suited for this research because it is a valuable methodology for examining topics that are complex and emotional laden (Smith & Osborne, 2015); in this case, navigating changes in immigration policies can be a highly emotional and sensitive experience for international students, many of whom have invested considerable financial resources in their education while holding aspirations of settling in a new country. Thus, IPA is a useful methodology for capturing the complexity of students’ academic journeys abroad, especially as they intersect with the uncertainties and challenges of a shifting immigration landscape.

In line with the underpinnings of IPA, this case study explored the deeper meaning of participants’ experiences by going beyond simply describing them. This was a two-step process that involved both the researcher and the participants in the co-construction of meaning, with each layer of interpretation shaped by their unique perspectives. In this process, the researcher considered the participants’ unique backgrounds and circumstances, as well as their own ‘insider’ perspective as an international student. This unique approach provided a holistic understanding of participants’ experiences, where the descriptive aspect detailed life events as they occurred, while the interpretive aspect made sense of the deeper meaning behind them.

Method

This study employed semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and uncover valuable findings that emerged naturally during conversations. Several strategies from Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) were employed, including an interview protocol to guide

conversations, active listening, silence to encourage reflection, and paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues. In addition, the researcher avoided casual conversation to keep the discussion focused on the research topic. These strategies fostered greater rapport and made participants feel comfortable and willing to engage deeply in the conversation. Before engaging in this research, the researcher also connected with international students through intercultural campus events. Through these interactions, the researcher further enhanced their intercultural communication skills, supporting their ability to conduct interviews in a respectful manner. By positioning themselves as a learner, the researcher approached the interviews with humility, openness, and a genuine desire to understand the unique perspectives of each participant.

Participants

To support an in-depth level of analysis, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) state that studies involving IPA are generally published with sample sizes of up to fifteen participants. Consistent with these guidelines, this study included a diverse sample of 14 self-identifying undergraduate and graduate international students currently enrolled at UVic. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those chosen for the interviews had personal relevance to the research topic. This study included students who had completed at least one semester of study at UVic and could meaningfully reflect on the recent changes in immigration policy. This approach aimed to ensure that the understanding of the research phenomenon was grounded in the experiences of students who were directly or indirectly impacted by the recent policy changes. The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and were held in March and April 2025.

The researcher reached out to UVic's International Centre for Students (ICS), the University of Victoria Students' Society (UVSS), and the UVic Graduate Students' Society (GSS), seeking their assistance in distributing the recruitment materials through their social media accounts, email listservs, and newsletters. The researcher also engaged in outreach during campus events, inviting students to participate in interviews. This informal outreach complemented the formal recruitment strategies and allowed the researcher to connect with potential participants relationally. Additionally, the researcher also employed snowball sampling by asking active participants if they were able and willing to refer others who were interested and eligible to take part in this study. By leveraging purposive and snowball sampling, this study included participants who were interested in sharing their experiences and stories.

Data Analysis

This study used Microsoft Excel and NVivo software to organize, manage, and analyze the data. According to Tomkins (2017), there are seven key stages for data analysis in IPA, which are discussed below. The interview data was analyzed using a variation of this process.

- Step 1:** The researcher read each transcript and listened to the audio recordings.
- Step 2:** The researcher used initial noting to make detailed notes in the transcripts, capturing initial impressions and descriptive observations.
- Step 3:** The researcher identified emergent themes within a single interview.
- Step 4:** The researcher identified connections across the emergent themes within a single interview.

- Step 5:** The researcher moved on to the next participant’s transcript and repeated steps 1–4.
- Step 6:** After completing the individual analyses, the researcher identified patterns across the cases by examining the commonalities and differences between the narratives.
- Step 7:** The researcher refined the interpretation of the qualitative data by revisiting previous steps and reinterpreting the data from new angles.

Ensuring Quality of Research Study

To uphold research quality standards, this study followed 4 key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Ahmed, 2024).

Credibility

Credibility can be achieved by practicing prolonged engagement and reflexivity (Ahmed, 2024). While this study carried out only one interview with each participant, the researcher attended several international student events before engaging in this research and invited students to participate in the interviews. These interactions helped the researcher build rapport and trust with the prospective participants. Additionally, during the interviews, the researcher allocated sufficient time for participants to share their experiences at their own pace, supporting prolonged engagement and enhancing the study’s credibility. To practice reflexivity, the researcher wrote their reflections in a journal, which helped raise awareness about their unconscious biases. This reflective practice supported the credibility of this study, enabling the researcher to critically examine their interpretations and practice self-awareness throughout the research process.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which a study’s findings can be applied to other contexts and situations (Haq et al., 2023; Riazi et al., 2023, as cited in Ahmed, 2024). To enhance transferability, this study provides detailed information on the case study approach used, the research design, research participants, and data collection and analysis techniques. By including a thorough description of the research context, centered on a single mid-sized public research university in Western Canada, this study enables other researchers to assess its broader applicability, enhancing the potential for deriving meaningful insights from the findings in their own settings.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the “enduring and unwavering nature” of the research findings over time (Haq et al., 2023, as cited in Ahmed, 2024). In this study, dependability was maintained by keeping detailed documentation of all research components, including participant selection, interview procedures, and data analysis methods. By maintaining detailed records of decisions made throughout the research process, this study allows other researchers to understand the rationale behind each decision and replicate its findings. This level of transparency enhances the reliability of this study’s findings and enables other readers to verify the conclusions drawn from its results.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the research findings so that they remain free from the researcher's biases (Haq et al., 2023, as cited in Ahmed, 2024). To maintain confirmability, this study used member checking and reflexive journaling (Ahmed, 2024). Each participant was contacted following the interviews and offered the opportunity to review their transcript, which was shared upon request. In addition, the researcher summarized key points during the interviews and sought participant confirmation to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations. The researcher also revisited all audio recordings to capture any overlooked nuances. This approach strengthened the accuracy of the findings while reducing the need for extensive follow-up. Throughout this study, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document personal thoughts, biases, and reactions to the findings. This approach helped preserve the authenticity of the findings, ensuring they were rooted in the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain high ethical standards, this research was approved by UVic's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) under certificate number 24-0599. This study also incorporated several ethical considerations from Alase (2017), including fully informing participants of their rights, the study's purpose, and the voluntary nature of participation. In addition, the researcher obtained written consent and offered to address any concerns before conducting the interviews. The interviews were carried out using an interview protocol which outlined several ethical guidelines. Furthermore, participants were provided with a list of on-and off-campus support resources before and following the interviews. This approach prioritized participants' well-being and ensured that they were supported throughout the research. Furthermore, participants were assigned pseudonyms in the discussion and analysis to protect their anonymity and identities.

The interviews were guided by trauma-informed practices (Choitz and Williams, 2024), including offering participants a break after discussing heavy topics, refraining from judgment, and showing empathy. Matching the participant's energy created a safe environment and fostered greater rapport. Moreover, the researcher employed active listening to ensure participants felt acknowledged and valued. The researcher also shared some personal information, particularly when asking participants to share their own, which built trust and strengthened the researcher-participant relationship. This approach was designed to ensure that the interviews were conducted in a safe and supportive environment, minimizing the risk of further harm and trauma to participants. These practices created an atmosphere of trust, where participants felt safe and empowered to share their experiences without the fear of re-traumatization.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

A strength of this study was its use of IPA as a methodological approach, which emphasizes the value of subjective experiences as a source of scientific data (Bush et al., 2016, as cited in Noon, 2018). This approach is especially well-suited for studies seeking to examine

the “uniqueness of a person’s experiences, how experiences are made meaningful and how these meanings manifest themselves within the context of the person both as an individual and in their many cultural roles” (Shaw, 2001, p. 48, as cited in Noon, 2018). In line with this approach, this study interpreted students’ experiences by going beyond merely describing their life events. Another strength of this study is that it is conducted by an international student who has an ‘insider’ perspective on the challenges faced by other students. This allowed the researcher to easily build rapport with students during the interviews and to ask culturally sensitive questions.

While mainstream research practices emphasize objectivity, Harding (1995) argues that the pursuit of neutrality can obstruct true objectivity, challenging conventional beliefs (p. 334). Therefore, incorporating the researcher’s unique perspectives enriched the study’s findings by providing a deeper understanding of the issues being explored. Accordingly, the interaction between the researchers’ and participants’ perspectives facilitated a more holistic interpretation of the research phenomenon, rather than relying on a supposedly ‘neutral’ approach that could have overlooked important dimensions of meaning. As Harding (1995) argues, traditional objectivity often overlooks marginalized voices; instead, by embracing “strong objectivity,” the researcher acknowledges that their position as an international student enhances their ability to highlight the experiences of those facing additional barriers. This approach centers the voices of underrepresented students, revealing hidden barriers and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of their struggles.

Additionally, a strength of this study is that it offers valuable insights into a topic that has not been fully explored in the context of recent and ongoing immigration reforms. Canada has traditionally implemented welcoming immigration policies for the past twenty years, and attracted immigrants and international students, many of whom intend to settle here permanently after graduation. However, recent policy changes, while intending to address emerging issues within the international student program, such as the exploitation of international students, and alleviate national economic pressures, have also created challenges for international students who came to Canada under earlier policies. Therefore, this research is both timely and significant, offering insights into students’ experiences and how academic institutions can better support them during this period of uncertainty and change.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted within the constraints of a master’s thesis, which had to be completed while adhering to academic deadlines. In addition, this study was not externally funded; due to these limitations in time, funding, and available resources, this research uses a case study approach to focus specifically on the experiences of international students at UVic and does not extend to students attending other public universities or public and private colleges. As such, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of UVic and the Greater Victoria region, recognizing that institutional policies and supports at other academic institutions may differ significantly from programs and services offered at UVic. In addition, the availability of housing infrastructure, cost of living, and the state of the job market may also vary significantly between different cities.

Furthermore, due to time and capacity constraints, this study does not include the perspectives of faculty and university staff, whose perspectives can provide more in-depth institutional insights. Faculty members closely engage with international students in academic settings and may observe trends related to classroom participation and academic performance. Similarly, staff working in student services, international offices, and academic advising play an important role in facilitating students' transitions and providing ongoing support. Their perspectives can shed light on how institutional constraints such as available resources, staff capacity, and competing priorities affect the availability of support services. The inclusion of faculty and staff perspectives can strengthen future studies by supporting triangulation and incorporating multiple viewpoints.

In light of the limitations of this research, this study does not offer national-level recommendations for policymakers; a more holistic understanding of international student experiences across a range of academic institutions is necessary before such policy recommendations can be meaningfully developed. Broader recommendations also require incorporating the voices of academic institutions, as they rely heavily on international student revenue and are experiencing the financial consequences of the recent immigration reforms. Therefore, meaningful efforts to address this wicked issue require collaboration and ongoing dialogue between all levels of government, academic institutions, and international students to ensure that multiple perspectives and voices are considered in any policy changes. While these limitations do not diminish the quality of this study, they offer valuable considerations for future research that can enhance the depth and breadth of the findings.

Chapter 5: Findings

Presentation of Findings

This chapter presents the research findings, focusing on the lived experiences of international students, using UVic as a case study. The primary research question guiding this study is: In what ways have the recent changes in immigration policy affected the lived experiences of international students during their academic journey at UVic? In addition, this study examined a secondary research question: What are the gaps in accessing relevant support services for international students studying at UVic? The findings in this chapter are situated within the context of immigration policy changes in Canada that were announced starting in December 2023. The findings revealed six themes that are organized around the interview questions and highlight the common topics that emerged in participants' discussions.

This study involved 14 participants, including four undergraduate students, eight master's students, and two doctoral students. The participants consisted of 8 women and 6 men, with ages ranging from the early twenties to mid-forties. This group represented diverse international students from 10 countries, including Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Taiwan, the UAE, and the U.S. The participants identified with the following racial and ethnocultural categories: South Asian (8), East Asian (2), West Asian or Arab (1), Person of African ancestry (Black) (1), Latino/x/a, South, Central American or Caribbean (1), and Person of European ancestry (White) (1). The majority of participants identified as racialized persons or persons of colour. Thirteen participants spoke English as a second language, while only one participant spoke it as a first language. These participants were enrolled in a wide array of academic programs spanning multiple disciplines, including Applied Data Science, Commerce, Community Development, Computer Science, Education, Software Engineering, Linguistics, Natural Sciences, Psychology, and Telecommunications and Information Security. To protect participants' identities and ensure their anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each student.

Theme 1: Navigating the Stressful Transition to University Life Amidst Changing Immigration Policies

The findings revealed that arriving in a new country is among the most emotionally demanding periods for international students. Three students reported experiencing study permit refusals due to the stringent financial proof requirements imposed by the IRCC. These immigration-related delays and disruptions were often followed by the considerable challenges of adapting to life in a new country. These three students described the initial transition to Canada as a period of significant upheaval, involving cultural adjustment, academic pressures, and a range of challenges, including securing housing and navigating the healthcare system. A doctoral student, for example, expressed her deep disappointment after her student visa had been denied despite showing sufficient financial resources. This led her to forfeit a fully funded PhD offer at another Canadian university and delay her academic pursuits by an entire year. She shared: "You know, it was very stressful for me. I had planned my whole life accordingly, and everything was [turned] upside down. They wasted [a] very precious year of my life" (Emma, Pakistan).

Upon finally arriving in Canada, she encountered a series of additional challenges related to housing. With her study permit approved only in mid-summer, she missed UVic's housing deadline and was left to navigate the rental market, where she faced exploitative conditions. While temporarily staying with her relatives in Toronto and searching for accommodations, she missed the first week of classes and had to purchase an expensive last-minute flight to UVic. Moreover, she soon discovered that the rental she had secured had been misrepresented online; the furniture was worn out, and it was being illegally sublet. With no formal lease and rent paid in cash, she found herself in a precarious and vulnerable situation. During a visit home in December, her landlords also disappeared and began ignoring her calls, leaving her to figure out alternative housing arrangements. She was grateful that she had not paid rent in advance before going home, even though her landlords had been pressuring her to do so.

Another undergraduate student faced some academic setbacks after her study permit was initially denied, forcing her to defer her admission to UVic. Although she enrolled in a local university while resubmitting her visa application, it was approved in the middle of her semester, which meant that she couldn't complete the term or transfer her course credits to UVic. Her difficulties continued as she began her studies at UVic, where she found it difficult to adjust to her Chemistry coursework. The material felt unfamiliar to her, as it differed significantly from what she had studied in Bangladesh. The course seemed like an entirely different language to her, because the Chemistry-specific terminology was vastly different from what she had learnt previously. This made it challenging to understand the material and grasp the subject matter. Overall, her lower academic performance in her first semester left her feeling devastated and discouraged her from enrolling in another Chemistry course, despite it being a required component of her program.

In addition, she faced financial strain due to the requirement for international students to maintain their full-time enrollment status. Since required courses for her program weren't offered every semester, she had to take unrelated classes, each costing around \$3,000. She also faced numerous challenges in securing suitable housing, such as difficulties with roommates, including one who commented that she was "too loud" when speaking with her family over the phone in her native language. On one occasion, she also experienced problems with recovering her housing deposit. Within less than a year, she had to move four times. Her current accommodation was an hour-long bus ride from campus, making days with spaced-out classes especially taxing due to four hours of daily commuting. She also revealed the toll that all these challenges had on her mental health.

I am suffering from sleep dysregulation, so I was taking melatonin for sleep, and it was working well initially, but then it just stopped working for me. I think I built up a tolerance [towards] it. I am also on antidepressants because I [was] diagnosed with a major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. I have very limited energy [on] any given day, and even texting someone back, I feel like, [it] takes so much energy. And let me tell you—living with depression is just absolute hell. Everything is just so stressful and draining. (Zoe, Bangladesh)

An undergraduate student shared that his study permit application was refused twice before finally being approved, resulting in a break of over a year in his academic journey. During this gap year, he experienced considerable pressure from his family and relatives, who were concerned about his future. This pressure created a significant source of stress for him. In contrast to the experiences of other students, he did not encounter housing challenges upon arriving in Victoria, as he secured on-campus housing, which made his transition significantly smoother, eliminating the stress of long commutes and dealing with landlords. However, the cultural adjustment to life in Canada proved to be more difficult for him. Coming from a country where his cultural and religious practices were deeply integrated into his daily life, he found it challenging to adapt to a new environment where these practices were less visible. Being separated from his community and family during important traditional holidays also left him feeling isolated.

Even students who did not experience study permit rejections described their first few months at UVic as stressful, as the beginning of the semester coincided with several changes to immigration policies. For example, a master's student described experiencing a lot of anxiety during his first semester at UVic, particularly following the announcement of these changes. While volunteering for the Global Community's Conversation Partner Program, he observed that many international students were visibly distressed, with these changes dominating conversations for several weeks. He also felt overwhelmed and ultimately requested an extension on an assignment.

Back in October, when we were getting word about what was going on, I was kind of obsessing about it and freaking out, wondering what was going to happen. And as a result of that, I did ask for an extension on one of my assignments. I ended up doing fine on the assignment, so it didn't actually impact my academics [too] much, but the anxiety was [a lot] to bear for that period of time. (Sam, U.S.)

As his spouse was not a U.S. citizen, he and his partner had moved to Canada to settle here permanently, as the spousal visa process in the U.S. involves a long processing time. Therefore, the uncertainty surrounding immigration pathways added significant emotional strain as they planned their futures together. In addition, he shared that he experienced heightened academic pressure at UVic, unlike his more relaxed university experience in the U.S. He feared that any academic underperformance could jeopardize his immigration prospects. This resulted in intense pressure to succeed, driving him to push himself to excel in his program. This constant pressure and ongoing stress profoundly shaped both his academic experience and day-to-day life.

When I was going to school in the States, I was more relaxed about my grades, and now that I've seen that it's extraordinarily competitive here, I've not been relaxed at all about my grades, and I am taking everything extremely seriously and trying to get as high of a grade that I can possibly get in my classes. And that tends to be pretty stressful. (Sam, USA)

Theme 2: Difficulties Securing On-and Off-Campus Jobs

The introduction of the 24-hour weekly work limit for international students employed in off-campus jobs resulted in a range of lived experiences, shaped by factors such as academic workloads, family responsibilities, and the high cost of living. Five international students perceived that the policy had no significant effect on them. An undergraduate student, for instance, said that he was able to earn sufficient income by completing four co-operative work terms, which were mandatory in his program. In other cases, students in demanding academic programs viewed this policy as both reasonable and necessary, noting that 24 hours of work per week was more than sufficient, as their coursework left them with little time to work more hours. One master's student, who worked 8–12 hours per week at a restaurant while taking five courses, emphasized that her studies were her top priority and that she intentionally limited her work hours to maintain her strong academic performance.

Similarly, a doctoral student reduced her work hours after noticing a decline in her academic performance. Before the introduction of this work restriction, she had been working 40 hours per week on the night shift at Walmart during the summer, while also conducting research. When the academic term began, she attempted to maintain the same schedule, squeezing in course readings during bus commutes. However, the strain soon took a toll on her, and she received a lower grade in one class. Recognizing the impact on her studies, she took a part-time job at Thrifty's, where she experienced a better work environment and worked 8–12 hours per week. This reduced workload allowed her to refocus on her studies, improving her grades.

Once school resume[d], I thought I was going to be able to keep up with that—I started teaching, I was doing research, [and] I was taking one class—but boy, did that class suffer. The reason was that I had to teach [and] I would take [my] class, but I didn't have time to read the materials. So, what I used to do then [was] when I was going home on the bus, I would read the course materials, then get home and sleep and wake up before, like, 11 pm...before I [had] to go to work again...And that course suffered. That was the only course that I [have] gotten a B in. (Lily, Nigeria)

However, when she reduced her work hours to focus on her studies, the resulting loss of income made it difficult for her to find better housing options. She currently shared an accommodation with a roommate who often made her feel unwelcome, complaining about the smell of her food and asking her not to cook whenever she was at home. Without the financial flexibility to afford more suitable housing, she was left to navigate a difficult roommate situation. In another example, a master's student who worked 10–12 hours per week at Walmart thought about quitting her job because of the challenges of managing both employment and research work. In the end, she decided to keep her job, noting that it has become harder to find even casual work in the current job market, with more students competing for fewer jobs.

Five older graduate students shared a different perspective altogether, often needing to work more hours due to family responsibilities and greater financial pressures. While some students relied more on their family's financial support, these older graduate students were financially independent and depended on regular employment income to meet their basic needs. A master's student, for example, supported himself by working remotely for a UK-based

company. In another example, a master's student found the cap on work hours particularly difficult as she had to financially support her two children. Despite working up to 24 hours as an educational assistant, she explained that this was not enough to cover essential expenses like rent, groceries, and her family's needs. However, she was unable to earn more income, as permanent jobs in school districts required employees to devote 30 hours per week.

In addition, a doctoral student mentioned how her classmate was financially struggling because of this cap, but could not earn enough to afford stable and private housing. As a result, she was forced to move into a crowded living arrangement where three people were sharing one room. This lack of space and privacy, combined with ongoing financial pressures, made it extremely difficult for her to focus on her studies.

And [my classmate] said that she doesn't have money, and she's unable to work for more hours... That's why she had to [move into] housing where three people [are] sharing one room... And now [she is] a PhD student sharing [a] room with two more people, [who] doesn't have [the] time to focus on [her] studies [and] has problem[s] with her living expenses and fee[s]... so how [is she] going to be in a state of mind where she can do some intensive research work? (Emma, Pakistan)

Moreover, a master's student shared that he had been actively searching for off-campus work, specifically teaching positions in language schools, to gain professional experience aligned with his Linguistics background. However, he found that the 24-hour work limit restricted both the number and type of jobs he could apply for. Despite applying to over 100 positions in six months, he received only three interviews. He attributed this to the competitive Canadian job market and employers' reluctance to hire international students with limited work-hour availability. The only position he was able to secure was a seasonal job during the Christmas holidays. He also emphasized that, with the high cost of living in Victoria, even 24 hours of work per week was not enough to make ends meet.

In addition to the restriction on work hours, students also faced additional barriers and limitations to employment. One master's student highlighted the need for certifications for teaching jobs, which demanded extra time and money. In addition, some roles required a driver's license, posing challenges such as passing the knowledge and driving tests, buying a car, and even learning to drive on the opposite side of the road. Aside from these structural barriers to employment, students also expressed frustration about not hearing back from employers, attributing this to the high number of applicants and a perceived preference for hiring permanent residents or citizens. Additionally, a master's student revealed that his friends were only able to find contract positions after graduation, which made it difficult to meet the requirements of permanent residency pathways. In contrast, those who successfully found work often did so through personal and professional connections. Four students mentioned finding jobs via referrals from friends, professors, supervisors, and networking connections.

Although international students can work unlimited hours on campus, three students found it difficult to access these employment opportunities. These students shared that on-campus jobs are limited, and eligibility for the Work Study program, which offers part-time employment to students with financial need, creates additional barriers. One master's student

said she was unable to apply for on-campus positions because she did not qualify for this program. This posed challenges for her as she was using her savings to pay for her expenses. Meanwhile, an undergraduate student who was ineligible for the Work Study program also faced repeated rejections when applying for off-campus jobs due to her lack of prior work experience. She expressed frustration at not being able to work on campus because she did not meet the financial need criterion.

When I look at job postings, they want experience, and I don't have experience, so I'm not able to get a job. It's been really...it's been really hard. It's been really stressful...and I feel guilty at times because [my father] should be retiring. And the only reason he's not is because of me. It's because I'm in school, and school is expensive... I think that they should get rid of that criterion for Work Study. Like, I do understand that [financial need] should be a priority; students who need financial accommodation should be the first ones to get work on campus. That's absolutely true. That should definitely be a priority. But we should also be allowed to work. Just because my parents are able to pay for [my education] doesn't mean they should have to. I want to be able to pay for myself. (Zoe, Bangladesh)

In addition to a lack of work experience acting as a barrier to on-campus employment, one PhD student noted that being overqualified for most positions was another obstacle. She mentioned that the career office had advised her to tailor her resume to entry-level roles to better align with on-campus positions. The findings also revealed that although ten students held on-campus positions, either currently or in the past, the majority worked in TA or research assistant (RA) roles. As TA positions offered limited hours per semester and research assistantships provided a modest stipend, therefore, the income from these positions was not considered sufficient to cover students' living expenses. As a result, all the students working in these academic roles either held additional part-time jobs or were actively seeking employment.

Theme 3: Additional Strain Due to the Language Proficiency Requirement for the PGWP

The recent implementation of a new policy requiring students applying for the PGWP to provide proof of language proficiency through a standardized exam has introduced considerable emotional, financial, and academic challenges for international students. The majority of students expressed shared frustration and concern, noting that this policy imposed additional strain on them, particularly on those in their final semesters. The abrupt nature of this new requirement intensified feelings of unfairness, as students already balancing demanding coursework and part-time jobs now had to dedicate time and energy to prepare for a time-consuming exam. For one master's student in her final semester, this added pressure heightened her stress and anxiety, leading her to shift focus away from her coursework and request extensions on assignments.

This student experienced increased stress after having to retake the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam multiple times, having fallen short of the minimum required score in one of the four components during her first two attempts. This not only added to her anxiety but also further strained her already limited resources. This student described experiencing chronic anxiety and sleeplessness while preparing for this exam, fully aware that a

low score could derail her family's future plans in Canada. As a result, she temporarily deprioritized her coursework, requesting multiple extensions from professors who were aware of her circumstances.

I have taken a tremendous amount of loan from my [home] country. I have to pay that loan. I [also] have to [work]. I have to [finish] my final semester, and it has to be in a project form, so I have to do that, as well as [prepare for] this IELTS [exam]. Everything is [happening] simultaneously at the same time. (Rose, India)

The majority of students expressed frustration at having to retake a language exam, especially those who had taken one before coming to UVic. Since UVic requires international students to demonstrate English language proficiency for admission, these students had previously taken the Academic IELTS or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. Therefore, they questioned the redundancy of this new policy, arguing that since they were already completing their studies in English, retaking a language exam seemed unnecessary.

And yeah, I think it's a very [strange] policy because we had to meet certain English requirements to be admitted to [UVic], but now [the IRCC] requires us to take [this exam] again, with a lower-level language requirement. We have to take the exam again. It just doesn't make any sense. (Jack, China)

For these students, this policy seemed to undermine the value of their degrees and the credibility of the Canadian education system that had previously accepted their language proficiency during their university admission. While one student acknowledged that this policy aimed to address issues such as fraudulent test-taking, she argued that a targeted approach would be more effective than applying this requirement universally, overlooking students' existing academic qualifications and work experiences. Financially, the cost of taking a language exam, typically costing over \$300, was described as an added expense for international students already juggling tuition, rent, and high costs of living. Additionally, students felt burdened by the fact that their test scores expire after two years, forcing them to retake the exam multiple times.

The thing about the testing that stands out the most is the time limit. After you take it, it's only [valid] for two years. So, if you apply for anything important after that—like [the] PGWP, for instance, or permanent residency—you have to take it again. (Sam, USA)

Students also highlighted the time required to prepare for a language exam. Even one whose first language was English noted that he would still need to familiarize himself with the exam format, investing time and energy in reviewing practice materials.

Theme 4: Uncertainty Surrounding Permanent Residency Pathways and Future Plans in Canada

Eleven students expressed a shared sense of unease and uncertainty about their futures, largely driven by the frequent and unpredictable shifts in immigration policies. These changes complicated their long-term aspirations of settling in Canada, introducing new and unforeseen obstacles. A significant source of stress stemmed from the decreased permanent residency targets

and frequent changes to the pathways for obtaining permanent residency, such as the BC PNP program, including the newly added job requirement and the language proficiency requirement. These changes extended students' immigration timelines and disrupted what were once more straightforward plans for immigrating to Canada. For instance, an undergraduate student voiced his concern that the constantly shifting policy landscape undermined any plans he made today, contributing to broader instability about his future.

These frequent changes made it difficult for students to confidently plan their next steps, as they experienced uncertainty about whether policies might change again by the time they graduated. A doctoral student, who was in the process of submitting her application for the BC PNP program under the IPG stream, had her plans unexpectedly disrupted when the provincial government introduced three new streams, only to later pause them until the federal government restores full provincial nomination levels. This sudden shift in policy left her uncertain about her next steps, disrupting her plans and creating a sense of unpredictability regarding her future. With the new streams placed on hold, she was left to reconsider her options and adjust to the changing circumstances, which added complexity to her path toward gaining permanent residency. Two master's students also expressed uncertainty about staying in Canada long term due to the difficulty of finding employment amidst changing immigration policies. One master's student described the impact of these recent changes on her ability to focus on her academics, saying:

When you are [experiencing] uncertainty and you don't know anything about [the] future, that definitely adds pressure during our research. Like, yeah, I feel pressured and I feel anxious, and I feel less motivated. It's not that I am not putting all [my] effort into my research. I am [giving it] my hundred percent, but still I [wonder if] I will be able to achieve my goal [of] stay[ing] in Canada for a few years and build[ing] my career. So I feel a little bit confused and anxious about [my future]. It [is] add[ing] some pressure and stress [on me]. (Grace, Pakistan)

For two students who had arrived in Canada with their families, the stakes felt even higher. One master's student expressed profound concern not only for herself but also for her spouse and children, who had built their lives in Canada and grown increasingly disconnected from their country of origin. She spoke of the emotional weight of potentially returning to a country that was facing economic hardship, and the distress of uprooting her children from their schools, friendships, and the cultural environment they now considered home. This looming uncertainty led to mounting stress and anxiety, as the fear of an abrupt relocation placed immense pressure on her family's sense of stability.

It's not all about me. It's about my entire family, because if I'm not able to make it, my husband [will] also have to go back, even though he [has] much more capability, much more knowledge [compared] to me. But going back to India and starting all over again... my children have [forgotten] everything about India, because it's been two years. They would have to cope with a new language, Hindi. They've forgotten everything, so I'm super, super nervous. (Rose, India)

For three students, these policies did not just affect their career and permanent residency plans; they also strained their personal relationships due to the emotional toll of being separated from their loved ones. A master's student, whose wife was from Brazil, shared his fear that if he and his spouse were unable to settle in Canada, they could face indefinite separation, as she would have to return to Brazil and he to the U.S., disrupting their plans to build a life together in Canada. Having already endured a long-distance relationship, the possibility of being separated once again added a deeply personal and painful dimension to the broader uncertainty caused by shifting immigration policies. Another participant expressed dismay that changes to spousal visa policies had disrupted his personal life, as the current restrictions on spousal work permits had created significant barriers to bringing his partner to Canada.

For the majority of students, the decision to study in Canada involved significant personal and financial investments in the hopes of building a better future. A master's student shared that while she appreciated the experience of studying in a multicultural country, she also acknowledged the significant financial burden that came with studying here, having used most of her savings to fund her degree. With the cost of education being a major investment, she expressed a desire to stay in Canada, where the earning potential is higher compared to her home country. However, she was unsure of her future plans due to the difficulty of finding a job after graduation. In addition, a doctoral student shared that the exchange rate depreciation made it extremely expensive to live in Canada, costing her millions in her local currency. She conveyed a deep sense of loss if she had to leave Canada after her studies, having invested many years of her life, substantial financial resources, and emotional energy into building a future here, only to face growing uncertainty about whether that future would be possible. As she reflected: "I am giving five to seven [of the] best years of my life to this country, [but] what am I going to get in the end?" (Emma, Pakistan)

In addition, concerns about Canada's upcoming federal elections also emerged, with two students fearing that a Conservative Party victory could usher in stricter immigration policies, similar to those seen in countries like the U.S. Beyond individual circumstances and restrictive policies in Canada, two students pointed to a broader global trend of increasingly unwelcoming immigration policies, which heightened their sense of helplessness and further narrowed their options of settling in other countries.

In addition to those concerned about immigration policy changes, three students admitted that they were not closely following new policies because they were still in their first year at UVic and were more focused on navigating the academic demands of their programs. For these students, long-term concerns felt less immediate, as they understood that the current policies might be replaced by the time they graduated. These students shared that they were already grappling with the challenges of adjusting to a new country, navigating a different culture, academic pressures, and housing problems, leaving them with little capacity to fully process or respond to policy changes. For them, keeping up with evolving immigration requirements felt overwhelming and added an extra layer of anxiety to an already difficult transition. As one student expressed: "I have enough on my plate, you know, so I'm not [going to] think about it now, because even if I think about it now, it's not going to change anything." (Max, Egypt)

A common theme that emerged in this study was that students primarily relied on informal networks to receive information about immigration policy changes, including their family, friends, and other international students in their classes or social circles, or by proactively researching information on their own. A few students sought more formal support: two had paid for appointments with immigration consultants for specific advice on immigration pathways and settling in Canada, while two others attended sessions offered by UVic's ICS office on applying for the PGWP. Additionally, three students booked individual appointments with UVic's ICS advisors. Overall, there was a clear desire for more consistent updates and detailed communication from UVic to help students stay informed about immigration policy changes and better understand their options for settling in Canada after graduation.

Amidst this uncertainty, students also demonstrated resilience and a proactive mindset, seeking ways to regain a sense of agency over their futures. Two students were already exploring alternative pathways to permanent residency, for example, learning French to enhance their immigration prospects. However, both students admitted that learning a new language involved a significant time commitment and that paying for classes was an expensive option. The majority of students concentrated on maintaining strong academic performances, finishing their research projects, completing their degrees, and gaining professional experience. One undergraduate student chose to "go with the flow," focusing on adaptability rather than fixating on uncertainty, preparing himself for a range of possible outcomes. He reflected on his personal growth and global perspective that he had developed throughout his international education, finding value in the journey itself, even as the goal of settling in Canada grew increasingly uncertain.

Some people look at studying in Canada as a way to settle [here], but this journey itself has been amazing for me. I have learnt a lot [of] skills and how to [navigate] life in general. I have already gained more than enough. Even if I [had] to go back [to India] or anywhere else, I wouldn't call coming to Canada a waste. (Brad, India)

After looking at the lived experiences of international students amidst immigration policy changes, the next part of this study explored the gaps in accessing relevant support services at UVic. This stage of the research focused on identifying barriers that prevent students from fully utilizing available resources. Understanding these gaps is important for supporting students' academic success as well as their transition to employment after graduation.

Theme 5: Reluctance to Access Support Services

A gap in accessing support services for international students at UVic arose from cultural barriers that impacted how students perceived and utilized mental health and wellness services. For five international students, seeking professional help was not normalized in their cultures and was seen as a source of stigma. These cultural differences shaped their willingness and comfort level to access services that were seen as the norm in Western society.

Where I'm from, we barely discuss our issues with other people. You don't talk about your problems with another person, you deal with [them]. Whether you are a man or [a] woman. Men have it even harder in my country. You know, it's a thing. So, it's harder for me to talk about my experiences, [because] it makes me feel like I'm playing the

victim. And that's not what I want, you know. It's just like [a] 'deal with it' kind of mentality for me. For me personally, I think that was what it was, more than, you know, if there wasn't an available option to go to [counselling]. (Lily, Nigeria)

As a result, rather than seeking professional support, these students relied on other forms of emotional support. For instance, a doctoral student relied on her religion for emotional support, finding comfort in going to the Multifaith Centre. She shared that on days when she couldn't visit the Centre, she would sometimes retreat to the UVic washrooms to cry, feeling overwhelmed and in need of a quiet moment alone to process her emotions. In another example, an undergraduate student expressed discomfort with the idea of opening up to a counsellor, questioning how to explain his situation to someone who might not fully understand his experience. One undergraduate student, despite using counselling services multiple times, remained skeptical of the process. She found that counselling services felt disconnected from the gravity of her circumstances. She acknowledged her bias against therapy, recognizing that these services did not align with her challenges.

I tried counselling at the Student Wellness Centre, but I realized that therapy doesn't really work for me. I went a few times to the same person. And she's a lovely person, but I feel like therapy doesn't really work for me, because I don't really believe in it. I think that I am biased against therapy, and that's why it doesn't work for me. I think it's helpful when you're open to it...I think I've just been conditioned in such a way that I don't believe in those things. But like, more specifically, I can recall, like different breathing techniques that she was trying to teach me. And I tried to remain perfectly respectful, but, like internally, I couldn't take it seriously, because that's not going to do anything about the civil war happening in my home [country]. (Zoe, Bangladesh)

Although one student accessed counselling, she chose to meet with a counsellor virtually from her home country because it was easier to schedule appointments without the long wait times experienced at UVic. Aside from cultural barriers, a master's student also revealed a reluctance to seek professional help, driven by fears about the potential impact on his immigration prospects. As a result, this student intentionally avoided seeking out any mental health and wellness services, concerned that being diagnosed with a mental health condition could negatively affect his chances of immigrating to Canada. Whether based on actual policy or perceived risk, this fear discouraged him from seeking help, even when he was in need.

Theme 6: Reliance on Relational Support Networks

For the majority of international students in this study, relational support networks, such as connections with professors, research supervisors, international students, community connections, and peer programs, were found to be valuable in navigating the challenges of studying abroad. Among graduate students in particular, close relationships with supervisors and professors often helped them academically and promoted their overall well-being. Both professors and supervisors acted not only as academic mentors but also as key sources of day-to-day support. A master's student explained that she was only able to attend UVic after her former internship supervisor in Vancouver, who is also a professor at UVic, offered her a research

assistantship. This opportunity helped her meet the increased financial requirements for her study permit after her external funding was cut due to budget reductions.

Well, I was really, really worried when I saw that the proof of funds was higher [than previously]. I was hoping to use the money [from my fellowship] to, you know, pay for my studies, and then, without that [financial] support, it was...it was really challenging to find a way to prove that I had enough funding, so luckily, I got the idea of coming back from my supervisor from that internship. She works here at the university, and she discussed the opportunity of coming back. When I talked to her about [this], she was very supportive in how much funding she could offer me [and] she kind of topped up a little bit of what I was [expecting to receive] from my fellowship. (Jane, Mexico)

In another example, a master's student, who initially arrived in Victoria alone due to delays in her husband's and children's visa approvals, shared how a professor provided ongoing support during this challenging period. The professor visited her home with essentials such as blankets, sheets, and even a small cash gift. She expressed deep gratitude for these generous gestures, although she sometimes felt conflicted about accepting them. Similarly, another student recounted how her supervisor played a key role in supporting her through the study permit process. Her supervisor wrote a detailed letter explaining how a second master's degree would advance her career, which she submitted along with her study permit application; he also advised her to apply for a study permit extension when she needed additional time to complete her master's thesis.

He was very supportive. For example, when I was applying [for my study permit], I needed a detailed letter from him, because [this] is my second master's degree and I [had] to justify in my application how this second [degree would] help me in my career; for the visa officer, you have to show study progression...My supervisor understood [this requirement] very well and he provided me [with] a very detailed comparison...[This letter] was really helpful for me. Whenever I ask [him for] something in my visa process, [if] I need something, [if] I need reference[s], he [is] always there to support [me]. (Grace, Pakistan)

Faculty members continued to play an important role in advising students even after graduation. For instance, after completing her undergraduate degree at UVic, a master's student took a research position to gain the work experience needed for permanent residency. However, an appointment with a local immigration advisor revealed that she still lacked the qualifications for permanent residency. After discussing her situation with her professor, he encouraged her to apply to graduate school and provided her with guidance and support throughout this transition. In addition to providing valuable practical support, professors also played an important role in facilitating connections between students. For example, a master's student mentioned that her supervisor funded monthly team-building activities for students in her research lab. These opportunities not only fostered a sense of community but also helped her develop meaningful connections with her peers.

In addition to guidance from professors and supervisors, peer support was revealed to be equally valuable for new international students. This support was strengthened through initiatives

such as the Global Community Mentorship Program, organized by UVic's ICS office. For instance, a master's student shared that he initially felt isolated and excluded from campus social events, especially those organized for students living in residence, as cultural differences and age gaps made it difficult to connect with domestic students. The Mentorship Program, however, provided a structured and culturally sensitive environment where he could build meaningful relationships with other international students. He appreciated the program's inclusive design, the diversity of the participants, and the fact that mentors received cultural training to support students from different countries.

Similarly, an undergraduate student who joined the Global Community Conversation Partner Program was grouped with students from Japan, China, and Canada. He described the experience as positive and enriching; his peers, many of whom had been at UVic longer, helped him navigate the city, introduced him to local spots, and offered advice on adjusting to life in Victoria. Being part of this group not only helped him feel more connected to the local community but also allowed him to reflect on his cultural identity. He expressed gratitude for his peers who shared information about social and networking events with him, making it easier for him to feel integrated within the university community. In addition to programs hosted by UVic's ICS office, two undergraduate students also attended weekly events known as Fusion Fridays, organized by the Multifaith Centre, which helped them engage in meaningful conversations and learn more about other cultures over a shared meal and enriching dialogue.

One master's student emphasized the importance of community connections in navigating the challenges of finding housing. He explained that a WeChat group specifically for Chinese international students was instrumental in easing his housing search. Through this group, he was able to connect with other Chinese students and landlords, which helped him find furnished accommodations and compatible roommates, making this transition significantly smoother for him. He noted that it was much easier to interact with Chinese landlords who were more accommodating and flexible, often not requiring credit reports, references, or in-person meetings. By connecting easily with other students and landlords through the WeChat group, he was able to secure housing without difficulty throughout his five years in Victoria, during both his undergraduate and graduate studies.

Seven graduate students also reflected on the global diversity of students in their programs, noting that most of their classmates were international. This created a culturally safe space where open and meaningful discussions took place, ranging from everyday challenges to changes in immigration policy, allowing students to share personal struggles. These conversations often provided much needed emotional relief, as students found comfort in sharing their struggles and hearing from others with similar experiences. Through these exchanges, students not only learned new ways to cope with their difficulties but also developed a deeper sense of gratitude and understanding for their circumstances.

In my class, I think hardly two people are Canadian. [Most] are international students. So, we have this kind of discussion, and people just share their problems [and] challenges with each other. And that's how—you know—by sharing, you feel light[er] sometimes, and sometimes you find new ways [of dealing with problems] after listening to someone's stories. So, that's why maybe I have [greater] exposure to such stories, and

maybe that's why, when I listen to their stories, then I become more thankful to God.
(Emma, Pakistan)

This excerpt shows that conversations among international students about shared struggles created a safe space and fostered a sense of belonging for them. Hearing about the resilience of their peers made these students more appreciative of their individual circumstances. However, one master's student, who was among the few international students in her program, expressed that she did not have this supportive community and felt excluded in classroom settings. During discussions, she felt like her input was often not taken seriously, and she was asked to repeat herself multiple times because of her accent, which felt isolating.

In my cohort, I am the only international student. And in my workplace, it is kind of the same. So, [sometimes], I do feel like I am a stranger [and] an outsider. Yeah, it feels different compared to [my friends who] work with other international students, or their supervisors are from other countries. They are more aware of how the experience[s] [of] my friends have been, and they ask [them] how they are doing and if they need any help adapting or being part of the [campus] community. For me, it has been different because my colleagues and classmates are local. (Jane, Mexico)

For students with limited interaction with other international students in their classrooms, workplaces, and social settings, this lack of peer support intensified feelings of disconnection. This underrepresentation heightened their sense of difference, while language barriers, accents, and cultural misunderstandings frequently led to their contributions being overlooked and undervalued during class discussions. Without a supportive peer network, they experienced a lonely and isolating academic environment, especially when facing complex issues like changes in immigration policies. One master's student shared that although her cohort was primarily made up of international students, many tended to form groups with others from their own countries. She initially found it challenging to connect with them and felt excluded when working in groups. Over time, however, she began to build stronger connections by taking the initiative to reach out and engage more intentionally with her peers.

These findings shed light on the lived experiences of international students at UVic, showing how recent immigration policy changes, along with gaps in support services, have shaped their academic journeys. The findings outline key themes and insights that emerged from the data, providing a foundation for deeper discussion and analysis in the following chapter. The following discussion includes a critical interpretation of the findings, connecting them back to the study's research questions, while situating them within the broader literature outlined in Chapter 3. In addition, the next chapter builds on the earlier conceptual framework to highlight the study's key contributions, offering a deeper understanding of international students' lived experiences.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Analysis

This chapter presents a detailed discussion and analysis of the research findings, drawing comparisons with existing literature to highlight areas of alignment and divergence. It also offers new insights that deepen the understanding of international students' lived experiences within the evolving immigration landscape in Canada. However, since the findings are based on the experiences of international students at one public university, therefore, this case study approach limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts. International students in other public universities and public or private colleges may face different challenges due to differences in the quality of education, institutional policies, and the accessibility of available programs and support services.

In addition, the geographic location of an academic institution can also shape students' experiences. For example, Victoria is a mid-sized coastal city with a moderate population. Compared to larger metropolitan centers, it has a smaller job market. Students living in Victoria also contend with the high cost of living, including housing and the price of groceries, which shapes their everyday experiences. Therefore, this discussion situates international student experiences within the context of the Greater Victoria region. Based on the findings, this study illustrates the impact of the recent immigration policy changes on international students at UVic across three key phases of their academic journey: the transition to university, their lived experiences during university, and the transition beyond university. As this study only included a small sample of newly arrived international students, it provides a more limited exploration of that early phase.

International Students Transition to University Amid Changing Immigration Policies

The Impact of the Study Permit Cap on International Students

According to the findings, newly arrived international students at UVic faced various challenges during their transition to university, primarily due to study permit rejections and subsequent delays in obtaining study permits. These delays had an emotional toll on these students, leaving them feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and under growing family pressure. These students also experienced increased financial costs from reapplying for study permits. These challenges highlight the impact of the study permit cap, which has consequently led to increased rejection rates, causing some students to defer their studies. These disruptions not only hinder students' access to higher education opportunities but also impact their academic mobility, adding additional barriers alongside the already competitive university admissions process.

The study permit cap was introduced in Canada to ease pressures on public infrastructure, particularly housing. It is not surprising that its implementation has created new challenges for prospective international students, many of whom are facing delays and disruptions in their education plans. Although there is little that academic institutions like UVic can do to address the impact of the study permit cap, it does raise questions about the role of higher education institutions in providing more scholarships and need-based aid for international students from

low-income backgrounds. Especially with the new regulations that require study permit applicants to show higher proof of funds, this means that it will become harder for students from low-and middle-income countries to receive a study permit approval due to the high cost of studying in Canada. In addition, the study permit cap and other immigration policies might impact Canada's reputation as a welcoming destination for future students. As traditionally popular study abroad destinations like the U.S., the U.K., and Australia are also adopting restrictive immigration reforms, future international students may start to look elsewhere for higher education opportunities. This includes emerging destinations in East and Southeast Asia, where governments are actively investing in higher education opportunities to attract global talent. These changing migration flows raise questions about the impact of immigration policies on academic institutions in Canada that heavily rely on international student tuition and the need for alternative funding sources to support diversified revenue streams.

The findings also revealed that international students faced persistent housing challenges upon arriving in Victoria. Building on the previous literature on international students' housing challenges in Canada (Calder et al., 2016; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2023; Howe et al., 2023), this study adds to the existing literature by highlighting that international students face disproportionate barriers to securing adequate housing due to study permit rejections and subsequent delays in receiving study permits. This constrained timeline limits their ability to search for affordable and safe off-campus accommodations that are within close proximity to the university. As a result, students are frequently left to settle for substandard and faraway housing, making rushed decisions based on limited information. These challenges not only negatively affect their living conditions but also contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, and feelings of instability during a critical transition period.

It can be argued that over time, the study permit cap may ease housing pressures and improve international students' ability to find housing. Although housing pressures may ease in the short term due to declining international student enrollment, however, new student housing will still be necessary to keep pace with the increase in domestic student enrollment. This is especially the case if academic institutions increase domestic student enrollment to make up for the loss of revenue from declining international students. This trend may still drive up demand for housing and contribute to challenges for both international and domestic students. As the study permit cap does not address the lack of development in non-market student housing, therefore, in the long term, both domestic and international students may still experience increasing housing pressures.

The findings also revealed that some students experienced culturally unsafe living environments, such as when a student was told by her roommate that she was "too loud" while speaking with her family over the phone, and when another student felt uncomfortable after her roommate complained about the smell of her food. These experiences can be rooted in cultural stereotypes and prejudice, isolating students from their peers. Experiences like this highlight the need to promote culturally safe environments, which can help international students feel comfortable in their new surroundings. Universities can address this issue by promoting a campus culture that encourages all students to recognize unconscious bias and microaggressions and develop intercultural competencies needed to respectfully engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. These findings support existing research calling for universities to focus

on tackling structural problems, such as racism, rather than placing the burden of responsibility on international students (Davis & Museus, 2019, as cited in Soares, 2024). Such efforts can foster greater inclusivity, aligning with institutional commitments to upholding equity and creating a culture of belonging for all students (University of Victoria, 2023, p. 1).

International Students' Experiences During University Amid Changing Immigration Policies

Intersecting Employment Pressures Due to the Restrictions on Work Hours, Labour Market Challenges, and the Limitations of On-Campus Employment

According to the findings, some international students experienced financial strain due to the 24-hour work cap. While some students chose to prioritize their academics and were unaffected by the cap, others experienced significant financial hardship due to this policy. This disparity shows how current work-hour regulations often fail to reflect the financial realities many students face, particularly in cities like Victoria with high costs of living. This policy also disproportionately affected older graduate students who were financially independent or supporting dependents, for whom the cap was insufficient to cover essential expenses. Although they needed to work more to support themselves and their families, the restriction on work hours limited their employment options in an already competitive job market, exacerbating their financial stress. These findings align with previous research (Worae & Edgerton, 2023; Crumley-Effinger, 2024; Howe et al., 2023), which similarly links difficulties in finding employment and restrictive work-hour policies, such as the former 20-hour limit, to heightened financial strain among international students.

The findings suggest that the 24-hour work restriction not only limits international students' finances but also constrains their access to employment opportunities aligned with their long-term career goals, as professional roles typically require greater availability. In addition, when these work-hour restrictions intersect with existing structural barriers, such as holding specific certifications, this further restricts students' access to certain jobs. These findings align with Calder et al.'s (2016) argument that limited access to resources diminishes international students' agency in the labour market, drawing on Giddens' (1984, p. 16) concept of power as rooted in the availability and control of resources. In addition, students also shared that they perceived that employers preferred to hire citizens and permanent residents, reinforcing existing structural disadvantages, an issue also highlighted by Crumley-Effinger (2024). Therefore, in an increasingly competitive job market in Canada, the work-hour restriction and existing structural barriers place international students at an even greater disadvantage when competing for employment opportunities.

Prior research by Scott et al. (2015) suggests that on-campus jobs provide international students with meaningful employment opportunities that can develop their professional skills. However, some students in this study found themselves ineligible for UVic's Work Study program due to restrictive criteria. This contrasts with Scott et al. (2015), who found that international students easily accessed on-campus jobs and supportive work environments. The current study suggests that restrictive access to on-campus employment not only limits income

but also reduces opportunities to gain local experience, develop skills, and build networks, key assets for navigating a competitive job market. Although on-campus employment can be a good starting point for international students to build job-related skills, it cannot substitute for professional experience that can be obtained off campus. Therefore, international students require access to both on-and off-campus employment that can provide them with opportunities to earn sufficient income and build career-aligned skills. Without such access to jobs, students from low-income backgrounds and those juggling multiple family responsibilities can face financial hardships and remain unprepared for the labour market after graduation.

The limit on off-campus work hours was introduced to prevent international students from working excessive hours that can negatively affect their academic performance. However, this strict work limit may underestimate the capacity that many students possess in managing their coursework and prioritizing their studies over earnings. Moreover, the work-hour limit does not accurately reflect the diverse circumstances of international students. Some students have lighter course loads in certain semesters and more flexibility in their schedules, which enables them to take on additional work without compromising their academic performance. For those students who do need to work beyond the cap, the issue is not necessarily a disregard for academic responsibilities, but rather a reflection of financial necessity. In such cases, the limited access to funding and scholarships places pressure on students to seek additional income through casual employment and may even push them to work beyond the legal limit to earn more. This situation not only increases their risk of exploitation but also undermines the very protections the cap was meant to provide. Instead of restricting students through uniform limitations, a more constructive approach would involve addressing the underlying financial challenges they face. By expanding their access to a wide range of funding, including loans, grants, bursaries, and scholarships, academic institutions could reduce the need for students to seek precarious work, allowing them to focus more fully on their academic goals.

The findings also revealed that students who were more successful in securing employment during their studies often relied on professional connections. In contrast, students who lacked access to such networks faced greater difficulties in securing work. This access to professional networks and better success in finding employment reflects the importance of social capital in navigating labour market barriers and constraints, supporting previous findings by Scott et al. (2015) and Calder et al. (2016), who emphasize the need for structured networking opportunities to improve students' employment outcomes. The labour market outcomes of international graduates in Canada show that they have a lower employment rate compared to their domestic peers. In addition, they earn less than Canadian graduates and are less likely to be employed in a position corresponding to their level of education compared to their Canadian counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2025). To address these disparities in employment outcomes and improve international students' labour market transitions, academic institutions should help these students build professional networks and connections. An alumni mentorship program, for instance, can help students develop networking skills and gain practical advice for navigating the labour market. A mentorship program can also address the issue of resource constraints in career offices, recognizing limited staff capacity to work with each student individually.

How International Students Cope With Existing and New Challenges

The findings revealed how international students, especially women, were more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviours and rely on relational support networks, which indicates that these students may find greater trust and meaningful connection in personal relationships built over time, compared to institutional services that may feel distant and impersonal. This reliance on relational networks supports findings by Howe et al. (2023), who observed that many international students preferred to seek help from peers and professors. However, access to such networks was uneven, especially in cohorts with few or no other international peers; students in such programs described feelings of isolation and exclusion. These findings support the literature, which highlighted how international students experienced group-ism and difficulty in forming friendships with domestic students (Howe et al., 2023; Sullivan, 2021; Worae and Edgerton, 2023).

Even in programs with international students, they sometimes tended to form groups with others from similar cultural backgrounds. While unintentional, this behaviour reinforced social boundaries, making it more difficult for international students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to fully participate and engage with them. To provide a more welcoming environment for international students, academic institutions should facilitate intentional opportunities for cross-cultural engagement within students' programs of study. Instead of adopting a deficit thinking approach that expects international students to adapt to local norms (Davis & Museus, 2019, as cited in Soares, 2024), universities can bridge these gaps by providing cultural competency training to create safe, supportive, and inclusive environments for international students.

The findings revealed that cultural stigma around therapy, especially in many non-Western contexts, discouraged some students from seeking help and taking mental health services seriously. This stigma around help-seeking behaviours aligns with previous research by Calder et al. (2016). In addition, men were less willing to openly engage in conversations about mental health and wellness, which may indicate that gender norms discourage them from seeking help. In addition to cultural factors, concerns about repercussions, such as the belief that mental health disclosures could affect immigration status, also contributed to this hesitation, although this concern was only raised by one participant. While this concern was not widespread, it still points to how immigration precarity can influence students' willingness to seek support from institutional services.

Given the ongoing changes in immigration policies and the uncertainty that many international students face about their future, especially those who came to Canada with the intention of settling here after graduation, the need for emotional support is becoming more pronounced. The stress of navigating immigration reforms can feel overwhelming, especially when support networks are limited or far away. Developing healthy coping habits early on can help students feel more grounded and better equipped to manage these difficult experiences. Conversations about mental health play an important role in this process, particularly when students may hesitate to seek help. Even when students feel unsure or hesitant to seek wellness support options, it may help to know that counselling is available and to have a clear sense of

what the experience might be like. When students know what to expect from counselling, the idea of reaching out to a counsellor can begin to feel more approachable.

Support can also take many different forms and does not always need to be through counselling. More informal options can be especially meaningful for international students who may not feel comfortable accessing traditional mental health services. As Soares et al. (2024) argue, drawing on the works of Banda et al. (2020), Noddings (2008), and Valenzuela (1999), care in university settings must move beyond performative and standardized support to meaningfully address the systemic challenges students face. Academic institutions can explore other ways to meet the diverse needs of their international student populations, such as offering counselling in a student's first language or hiring counsellors from culturally diverse backgrounds. If there is a lack of relatability, students can feel disconnected from the person supporting them, which can limit the impact of mental health care. In addition, creating spaces where students can connect with others from similar backgrounds, such as through peer support programs designed specifically for international students, is one example of an alternative approach. Thoughtful and inclusive approaches can help create a sense of belonging and encourage students to seek support when they need it.

How Shifting Immigration Policies Impact International Students' Transitions Beyond University

How Immigration Reforms Shape Post-Graduation Plans

Recent changes to immigration policies have created challenges for international students who came to Canada under previous policies with the intention to settle here after graduation. Before December 2023, Canada had become a popular destination for international students because of its friendly immigration policies. This was a defining factor that separated Canada from other historically popular study abroad destinations, promoted through the Express Entry system, a federal program that manages immigration applications using a points-based system to rank candidates. Under this system, points are awarded to applicants who have completed their studies in Canada. In addition, the CEC program under the Express Entry system also provides international graduates a pathway to qualify for permanent residency after gaining work experience through the PGWP. Under previous immigration regulations, these programs provided a fast route to immigration for international students, a selling point that was heavily promoted through recruitment agencies.

The findings show that recent immigration reforms have left many students who came to Canada under previous friendly immigration policies in a state of uncertainty about their future plans, highlighting how immigration is an unpredictable process (Collins, 2018, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018). This state of limbo has heightened these students' anxiety and disrupted their efforts to build stable futures in Canada. As these students have invested considerable time, financial resources, and emotional energy with the hopes of settling permanently in Canada, this makes the prospect of departure feel like a significant loss. This sense of disillusionment has created an emotional toll for students as they grapple with the potential loss of not only future stability but also their sense of belonging in Canadian society. Despite the ongoing challenges of changing immigration policies, some international students showed resilience by seeking ways to

improve their immigration prospects in Canada, such as strengthening their academic and professional efforts, and for some, even improving their French language skills. This adaptive response suggests that while exclusionary policies create barriers, students respond by adjusting their plans, demonstrating flexibility, and a continued commitment to their long-term aspirations. This reflects what Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014, as cited in Pottie-Sherman, 2018) describe as a “resilient attitude” in the face of precarious conditions.

The ability to adapt to changing immigration reforms is more difficult for international students with family responsibilities. The overlapping pressures of family responsibilities, academic expectations, restrictive immigration rules, and an uncertain job market push these students to overextend themselves to balance multiple priorities. For these students, the possibility of uprooting their families after years of settlement brings significant emotional strain. Moving a family across borders disrupts routines, children’s education, and spouses’ careers, exacerbating the instability caused by shifting immigration policies. This supports the argument by Pottie-Sherman (2018), who challenges the notion of international students as highly mobile elites, as their mobility is often restricted due to many different factors.

Meanwhile, students whose spouses are not able to join them are affected by the emotional toll of separation. Although only a small number of participants in this study had spouses and children who had either accompanied them or hoped to join them in the future, their experiences reveal the compounded stress that arises at the intersection of family life and immigration policy; this is an often overlooked dimension in the international student experience. Spousal visa restrictions may have wider implications for prospective international students’ decisions to study in Canada, potentially creating financial strain for academic institutions that rely heavily on international tuition revenue.

The period leading up to graduation represents a pivotal transition for international students, as they begin to shift their focus to navigating immigration processes and preparing for entry into the labour market. While many participants in this study were not yet in their final semester, those nearing graduation revealed growing uncertainty around their future. For students with limited financial resources, student debt, and a lack of professional connections, this stage was viewed as especially stressful and restrictive. These challenges build on Pottie-Sherman’s (2018) findings on the varied impact of exclusionary immigration policies, highlighting how such policies disproportionately affect international students based on their financial circumstances and other constraints.

As Canada faces labour shortages across various sectors and an aging workforce, international students already in the country represent a group with valuable skills and education that could contribute to filling existing labour needs. As many have spent years studying in Canadian institutions, becoming familiar with the culture, and building social networks, improving their employment outcomes in sectors facing labour shortages can help meet regional labour demands. Therefore, educational institutions and governments should collaborate with each other to support their transition into the workforce; this can also provide relief to students who arrived in Canada with the intention of settling here long term. To facilitate these students’ post-graduate success, there needs to be a greater focus on reducing the mismatch between the needs of the labour market and international students’ programs of study. According to findings

by RBC, more international students need to pursue programs of study in healthcare, some trades and services, and education to meet Canada's future labour market needs (Richardson & Hussain, 2022). Currently at UVic, programs such as engineering, computer science, and business are among the most popular fields of study for international students, while programs in healthcare and education are less represented despite being areas of high labour market demand (University of Victoria, 2025, p. 5).

International student flows in Canada also raise the question of brain drain in other countries, which are losing out on valuable talent. Some may argue that restrictive immigration policies in Canada may help address the problem of brain drain, as international students often pursue higher education opportunities in foreign countries with the intention of settling there after graduation due to better job prospects and quality of life. However, restricting international student mobility through policies like the study permit cap does little to address the deeper structural issues that shape migration patterns. Factors such as political instability, limited foreign investment, and underfunded education systems prevent low-and middle-income countries from fully benefiting from the talents of their own citizens. Meaningful efforts to address the problem of brain drain require long-term commitments to improve local opportunities, including stronger institutions and more stable governance.

A role that countries like Canada can play in the brain drain problem is to fund scholarships to support international students whose primary goal is to gain a high-quality education and apply their knowledge and skills in their home country. These scholarship opportunities should emphasize cross-cultural learning in a global environment for students who commit to return and contribute to their home country's national development goals. These students could receive a forgivable loan that only becomes non-repayable after they return to their home country and work for some years. An example of a similar scholarship program is the Chevening Scholarship, a global program introduced by the U.K. government that provides full financial support to students who wish to pursue a master's degree in the U.K. One of the conditions of this program is that applicants must return to their home countries for at least a period of two years after the completion of their program (Chevening, n.d.). Such scholarship programs can support the retention of talent in low-and middle-income countries and also alleviate concerns about housing pressures from increasing migration flows in Canada.

Navigating Repetitive Language Proficiency Requirements

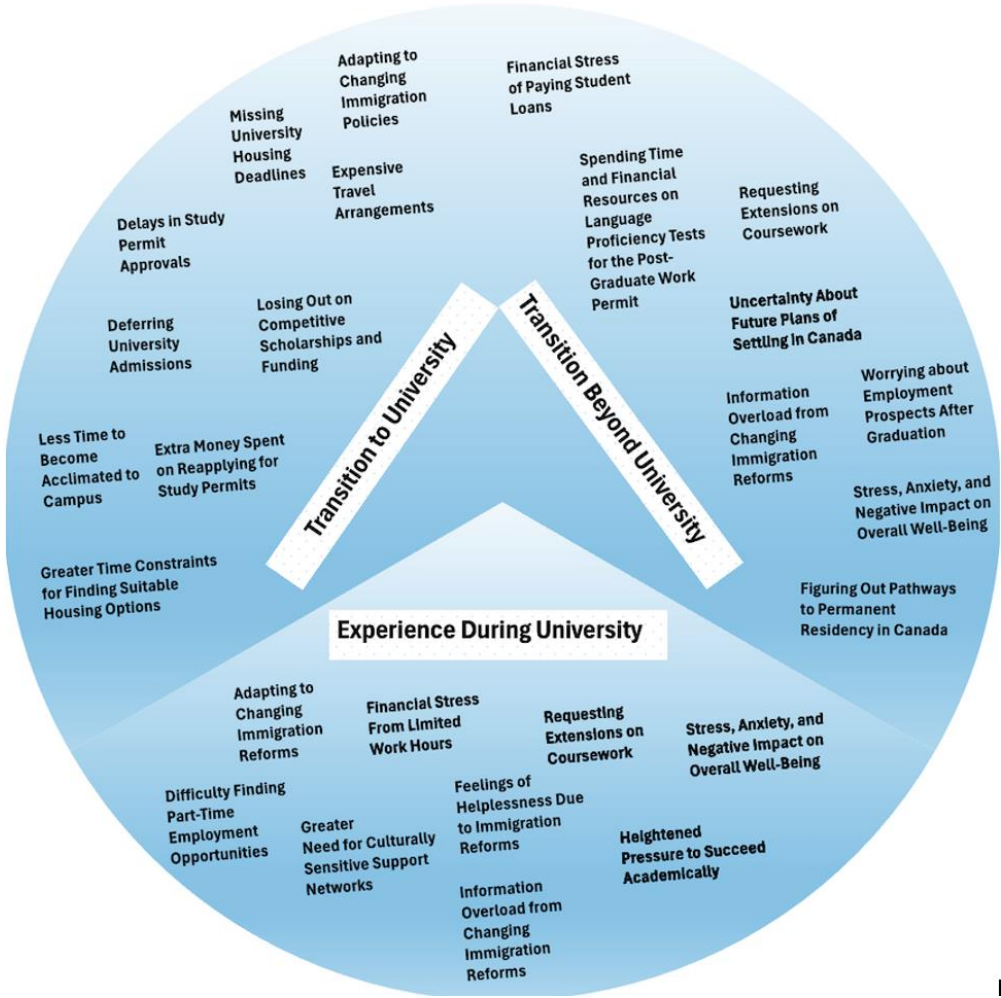
Based on the rationale provided by the IRCC, the language proficiency requirement for the PGWP aims to ensure that international graduates possess the necessary language skills and can better integrate into the Canadian workforce and society. However, this policy reflects a misalignment that disregards the academic and language credentials international students have already demonstrated. Rather than facilitating labour market integration, it introduces redundant barriers at a critical transition point in these students' lives, right before they are about to graduate, when students are already managing ongoing pressures related to finances, job hunting, and completing their thesis and capstone projects. Requiring students to take a less rigorous exam after completing a degree in English undermines trust in both immigration processes and the value of the Canadian higher education system.

In addition, the costs and high stakes of this requirement also create unnecessary anxiety, particularly for students who do not perform well on standardized exams under time constraints. Moreover, the blanket application of this requirement, even to native English speakers, imposes an unnecessary burden on students who already possess language proficiency. In addition, preparation for such tests does not generally encompass meaningful language development, as it typically involves students practicing test-taking strategies instead. As a result, this policy diverts time and resources away from job hunting and networking, ultimately undermining the goal of supporting students' transition into the Canadian workforce. To better facilitate international students' entry into the workforce, there should be more focus on reducing the mismatch between students' programs of study with regional labour market demands.

Revised Conceptual Framework

Based on these findings, this study developed a revised conceptual framework to better understand international students' experiences amid the recent changes in immigration policy. Although many of the themes in the following framework are supported by the existing literature, this framework offers a clearer way to understand these students' experiences through three distinct phases: transition to university, experience during university, and transition beyond university. It highlights the types of pressures that are most prominent during each phase, emphasizing how students' challenges change over time. This approach deepens the understanding of students' experiences and provides valuable guidance for enhancing support services that address their changing needs throughout their journey.

Figure 2: Revised Conceptual Framework: Three Distinct Phases of International Students' Lived Experiences Amid the Recent Changes in Immigration Policies



Recommendations: Enhancing Support for International Students

Building on the findings in the previous section, this study presents four recommendations to enhance the international student experience at UVic. Recognizing that the experiences of international students differ widely across various types of academic institutions, as well as across distinct stages of their educational journeys, these recommendations do not encompass the full spectrum of international student experiences. Moreover, they do not address every challenge faced by international students, as immigration policies remain under federal jurisdiction. Addressing these complex issues requires ongoing dialogue among academic institutions, various levels of government, employers, and international students to develop coordinated approaches that balance the needs of these students with national and regional economic pressures while considering the funding issues faced by educational institutions.

As this case study is grounded in the specific context of UVic, its findings can contribute to ongoing efforts at the university to deepen the understanding of international student experiences amidst immigration reforms and enhance students' access to relevant support services. This study presents four recommendations for UVic leadership to support the evolving needs of international students. Each recommendation is guided by three core criteria, which draw from UVic's Equity Action Plan and are defined below (University of Victoria, 2024a, pp. 8–15). The recommendations are followed by a few examples that show how they can be applied in practice.

Criteria

- **Enhances Access to Support Services:** Creates equitable support structures that address the diverse needs of international students.
- **Fosters Meaningful Engagement:** Creates opportunities for meaningful engagement and connection that make international students feel like a valued part of the campus community.
- **Nurtures Belonging:** Shows value for diverse lived experiences and ways of knowing to build relationships across and beyond UVic.

Recommendations

1. **Improve international students' access to a range of mental health and wellness support options.**
 - Establish peer support groups for international students, including culturally specific groups that reflect diverse identities. UVic can draw from similar initiatives at other institutions¹.
 - Increase the hiring of counsellors from diverse cultural backgrounds and designate some specifically to work with international students to ensure culturally informed support.

¹ The University of British Columbia's Global Connections support group and the University of Toronto's South Asian International Support Group provide spaces for international students to connect with one another (University of British Columbia, n.d.-b; University of Toronto, n.d.).

- Provide greater education around counselling options at UVic through mental health workshops to improve help-seeking behaviours and help students understand what to expect from counselling sessions.
- 2. Reduce economic hardship for international students from low-income backgrounds and those facing financial difficulties.**
 - Provide greater access to need-based financial aid, grants, bursaries, and scholarships for international students.
 - 3. Strengthen career development and professional networking opportunities for international students and support labour market needs.**
 - Create an alumni mentorship program to facilitate professional connections with UVic alumni across different industries.
 - Increase scholarships, grants, and financial assistance for international students pursuing healthcare and education programs to encourage more students to choose careers that help fill labour market shortages.
 - 4. Enhance intercultural competency across the UVic community through collaborative training initiatives with the Equity and Human Rights Office.**
 - Incorporate a mandatory seminar on intercultural awareness into new student orientation.
 - Offer intercultural competency workshops during the Five Days of Action week at UVic. UVic can draw from examples of similar initiatives at other institutions².

² The University of British Columbia Okanagan's Intercultural Development Program combines interactive workshops, social events, and community engagement to build cultural competency among students and staff (University of British Columbia, n.d.-c).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Recent changes to Canadian immigration policies, beginning in December 2023, aimed to strengthen the integrity of the international student program and alleviate broader economic pressures, such as housing shortages. While intending to address multiple competing priorities, these policy shifts have introduced increasing challenges for current international students who arrived in Canada under earlier policies with the intention to settle here long term. Caught in the midst of new policies, these students are now struggling to figure out pathways to permanent residency. In addition, post-secondary institutions like UVic, which depend heavily on international student tuition as a key revenue stream, are experiencing a decline in international student enrollment. This situation has placed a significant financial strain on UVic, further complicating this issue. In addition, international students face various barriers to employment and a disconnect between their programs of study and labour market needs that prevent them from alleviating regional labour market shortages. The intersecting challenges of national economic pressures, funding for educational institutions, local labour market needs, and international students' long-term goals reveal the complexity of the immigration reforms and their broad-reaching implications for multiple groups.

This study focused on the experiences of international students at the University of Victoria—a mid-sized public research university in Western Canada. Therefore, the findings reflect the specific institutional context of UVic and are intended to inform recommendations specific to this university. This study recognizes that it does not address every challenge faced by international students, as many of these are due to immigration reforms that are under federal jurisdiction. To provide national-level recommendations for the federal government, future studies should conduct research on students' experiences across a range of educational institutions, including private colleges, public colleges, and public universities. Future studies should also incorporate the perspectives of educational institutions to better understand resource constraints that can limit students' access to support services. In addition, future conversations about immigration reforms should consider how international students already in Canada can help meet regional labour market shortages.

The changing immigration landscape in Canada raises several important questions that warrant further reflection. How can educational institutions and all levels of government work together to better support international students in transitioning to the labour market, to help alleviate regional labour shortages and support students who aim to settle in Canada long term? How will educational institutions in Canada diversify their funding model so that they do not heavily rely on international student tuition? What is the responsibility of countries like Canada to help address the issue of brain drain in other parts of the world due to large numbers of international students coming to Canada? As immigration reforms continue to be implemented, such questions call for ongoing dialogue from policymakers, academic institutions, employers, and international students.

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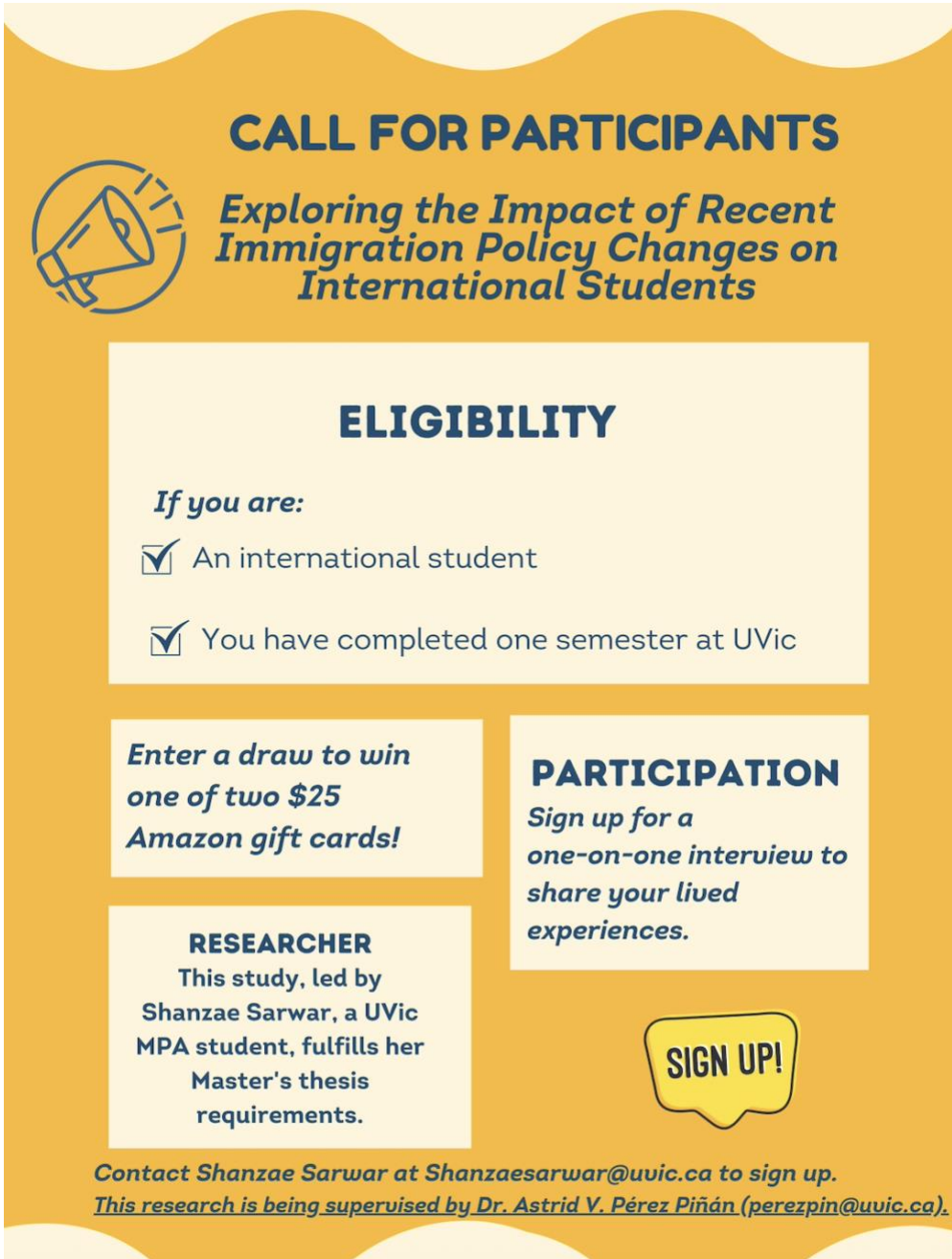
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Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

A1: Outreach Poster



The poster features a yellow background with a white scalloped border at the top and bottom. At the top left is a megaphone icon. The main title is 'CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS' in bold blue letters. Below it is the subtitle 'Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students' in a smaller blue font. A central white box contains the heading 'ELIGIBILITY' and two bullet points with checkmarks: 'An international student' and 'You have completed one semester at UVic'. To the left of this box is a white box with the text 'Enter a draw to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards!'. To the right is another white box with the heading 'PARTICIPATION' and the text 'Sign up for a one-on-one interview to share your lived experiences.'. Below the eligibility box is a white box with the heading 'RESEARCHER' and text describing the study leader, Shanzae Sarwar. At the bottom right is a yellow speech bubble with the text 'SIGN UP!'. At the very bottom, there is contact information for Shanzae Sarwar and the supervisor, Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán.

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students

ELIGIBILITY

If you are:

- An international student
- You have completed one semester at UVic

Enter a draw to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards!

RESEARCHER
This study, led by Shanzae Sarwar, a UVic MPA student, fulfills her Master's thesis requirements.

PARTICIPATION
Sign up for a one-on-one interview to share your lived experiences.

SIGN UP!

Contact Shanzae Sarwar at Shanzaesarwar@uvic.ca to sign up.
This research is being supervised by Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán (perezpin@uvic.ca).

A2: Request to Circulate Recruitment Materials

Dear [UVic Office/Student Organization],

I hope you are doing well! My name is Shanzae Sarwar, and I am a graduate student in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. I am conducting a research study titled 'Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students' as part of my graduate research. This study seeks to understand how recent immigration policy changes have shaped the lived experiences of international students, using a case study approach at UVic. This study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on how best to support these students during this period of uncertainty and change.

This study is supervised by Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán, Associate Professor in the School of Public Administration. For inquiries, she can be reached at perezpin@uvic.ca.

I am reaching out to kindly ask for your support in sharing the invitation to participate in this research study, along with the recruitment poster, through your social media platforms or any other relevant communication channels that may reach interested students. This study involves a virtual interview via Zoom (approximately 60 minutes, depending on how much students wish to share). Participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain confidential. To take part in this study, the eligibility criteria are listed below:

Eligibility Criteria:

- Be registered as an international student at UVic
- Have completed at least one semester of study at UVic

If students meet these criteria and are interested in participating, they can contact me at shanzaesarwar@uvic.ca to arrange an interview.

I have attached the recruitment poster for circulation with this email, and I would greatly appreciate your assistance in sharing it with students who may be interested.

Thank you for your time and support!

Best regards,
Shanzae Sarwar, MPA Candidate
School of Public Administration
University of Victoria

A3: Email Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear [Participant's Name],

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my research study, 'Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students.' Your involvement is incredibly valued.

This study is part of my graduate research in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. It aims to explore the unique experiences of international students, focusing on how recent immigration policy changes have impacted their lived experiences. This study is supervised by Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán, Associate Professor in the School of Public Administration. For inquiries, you can contact her at perezpin@uvic.ca.

Since December 2023, the federal government has introduced several changes in immigration policies to respond to national economic pressures and address the unsustainable growth in international students in Canada. However, these immigration reforms have introduced various challenges for current international students who came to Canada under earlier policies. These immigration reforms are also taking place alongside increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, with international students being unfairly associated with broader issues like housing shortages and economic pressures.

This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how these immigration policy changes have impacted the lives of international students, using a case study approach at UVic. This study aims to share these findings with the university community, contributing to ongoing discussions on how best to support international students during this period of uncertainty. Your experiences and insights are vital in shaping this understanding, and I invite you to share your story. While I acknowledge the differences between my identity and yours, I am committed to approaching this study with sensitivity, respect, and dedication to ensuring that your voice is heard and valued.

The study will involve a brief interview that will be approximately 60 minutes long (depending on how much you want to share), conducted virtually via Zoom. Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain confidential. No personally identifiable information will be collected, and you can choose not to answer any questions that you find sensitive. Additionally, you have the right to stop participating at any time.

As a token of appreciation, after completing the interview, you will be eligible to enter a draw to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards.

To participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- You are registered as an international student at the University of Victoria
- You have completed at least one semester of study at the University of Victoria

If you meet the above criteria and are interested in sharing your insights, please contact me at shanzaesarwar@uvic.ca to coordinate a suitable time for the interview.

Please see the attached consent form that is required to enable your formal participation in the study. It contains information about the terms of the research that will help inform your decision to participate. We can discuss any questions you may have on the interview day.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you again for considering this opportunity to contribute to important research.

With gratitude,
Shanzae Sarwar, MPA Candidate
School of Public Administration
University of Victoria

Appendix B: Consent Form

B1: Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research Study

Who is conducting this study?

You are invited to participate in the research study: Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students. This study will be conducted by Shanzae Sarwar, a graduate student in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for a Master of Public Administration degree. The study has received approval from the Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) of the University of Victoria (certificate number 24–0599).

What is the purpose of this study?

Since December 2023, the federal government has introduced several changes in immigration policies to respond to national economic pressures and address the unsustainable growth in international students in Canada. However, these immigration reforms have introduced various challenges for current international students who came to Canada under earlier policies. These immigration reforms are also taking place alongside increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, with international students being unfairly associated with broader issues like housing shortages and economic pressures. This study aims to examine the impacts of these immigration policy changes on the lived experiences of international students, using a case study approach at UVic. By sharing the findings with the university community, this study intends to inform discussions on how to support international students through this challenging period.

Who is eligible to participate in this study?

- You are eligible to participate in this research if you:
- Are registered as an international student at UVic
- Have completed one semester of study at UVic

If I choose to take part in this study, what will I do?

You will participate in an informal one-on-one interview with the researcher (Shanzae Sarwar). This interview will be conducted virtually via Zoom. The interview will be approximately 60 minutes long, depending on how much each participant chooses to share. During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences as an international student, including how recent immigration policy changes have impacted you and your experiences with relevant support services at UVic. Some demographic questions, such as age, gender, and academic program, will be asked for research purposes and will be kept confidential.

What are the possible harms and discomforts?

International students at UVic face various pressures, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, and financial difficulties, which can contribute to stress and fatigue. The ongoing uncertainty stemming from frequent immigration policy changes may amplify these pressures. Given the sensitive political climate, participants in this study may experience stress and fatigue when reflecting on their personal experiences. While it is not possible to predict all potential

challenges, I have taken reasonable steps to minimize any known risks. Furthermore, I will provide a list of support resources should you need assistance or additional help after the interview.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

Participating in this study offers an opportunity to contribute valuable insights into the lived experiences of international students, shedding light on the challenges they face while studying abroad. By acknowledging and respecting their experiences, the study aims to foster a sense of being heard and understood while honouring both their resilience and the significance of their perspectives. The findings could inform the development of more effective support systems at UVic, benefiting current and future international students.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in the study?

If you choose to take part in this study, your name and email will be entered into a drawing for a chance to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards. Please note that, under federal law, you must correctly answer a skill-testing question to be eligible for the prize.

Who will see my information?

The data, responses, and stories you choose to share with me will be used solely to complete this Master's thesis. Data will be collected without identifiers, meaning your personal information will not be linked to your responses. Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study, with only the researcher having access to the data. Additionally, the findings will be shared in academic journals and student publications such as the Martlet. However, no personal information will be included in any published material.

Will my information be kept private?

Your identity will remain protected, and I will use a pseudonym instead of your legal or chosen name when analyzing and sharing the findings of this research. All data collected will be securely stored on the UVic server, which only I can access. The data will be encrypted and safeguarded with password protection. The information will be retained for 5 years to support the academic publication process, such as submitting this study to peer-reviewed journals and student publications. After this period, all electronic data will be permanently deleted, and any physical records will be securely destroyed.

How will the study results be shared?

The findings from this study will be reported in my Master's thesis and will also be shared in academic journals, student publications, and presentations to the campus community. Your name will not be used in any publications or presentations, and all data will be de-identified to ensure your privacy is protected.

Ongoing Consent

By providing your consent, you agree that your data may be used in future publications, including in academic journals and student publications such as the Marlet. You also agree to be contacted via email if further follow-up is needed regarding your data.

Yes No

Contact information

Shanzae Sarwar can be contacted by e-mail at shanzaesarwar@uvic.ca. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán, who can be contacted by e-mail at perezpin@uvic.ca. You can also contact the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca if you have questions about the ethical approval of this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose to take part in this study after understanding the research purpose, potential risks, and benefits. You may withdraw at any time. You will not lose any benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. Any data or information you have provided for the sake of this research up until your point of withdrawal will be destroyed and no longer used in this study’s analysis and dissemination if you so choose. Additionally, even if you withdraw after the interview, you will still be eligible to enter the draw to win one of the two \$25 Amazon gift cards.

Audiotaping

I would like to use a voice recorder to record your responses. This is solely to analyze and disseminate data for the final paper. Please tick the box to indicate whether you authorize me to record the interview. Your answer will be confirmed at the start of the interview.

Yes No

“Please be advised that this research study includes data storage in U.S.A. As such, there is a possibility that information about you that is gathered for this research study may be accessed without your knowledge or consent by the U.S. government, in compliance with the U.S. Freedom Act.”

Signature

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher, and that you consent to participate in this research project. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature: _____ *Printed Name:* _____

Date: _____

Researcher’s Signature: _____ *Printed Name:* _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Support Resources

C1: Support Options

In conducting research on international students' lived experiences during their academic journey at UVic, difficult conversations may arise, leading to emotional stress or sensitive feelings. As such, students may find themselves in need of various forms of support, including after participating in the interviews related to this study. A variety of resources, including peer-led support, professional counselling, and community-based initiatives, are available to help students navigate these feelings. The following list outlines key support options and where they can be accessed.

UVSS Peer Support Centre

The [UVSS Peer Support Centre](#) has trained student volunteers available to listen and offer non-judgmental, empathetic, and confidential support to fellow students. Whether you are struggling with or have questions regarding mental health, are concerned for a friend, or need help accessing resources on or off campus, UVic students can seek a first point of contact at the Peer Support Centre.

UVic Student Wellness Centre

The [Student Wellness Centre](#) at UVic consists of a team of practitioners who offer a variety of services to support students' mental, physical, and spiritual health. You can make a same-day or pre-booked appointment with a counsellor, nurse, physician, or spiritual care provider.

Multifaith Centre

The [Multifaith Centre](#) is a peaceful place to mark important life events, connect with peers and spiritual leaders, or just take refuge from your day. The Centre provides one-on-one spiritual care as well as culturally diverse free weekly activities, events, and programs. Please call [250-721-8338](tel:250-721-8338) or email the Centre at multifaith@uvic.ca to book an appointment with a spiritual care provider.

Support Connect

[SupportConnect](#) is a free, confidential mental health support service for UVic students to get connected with qualified counsellors. SupportConnect offers short-term, solution-focused counselling with the same counsellor. This service is available 24/7 by phone and online. They also offer video and in-person counselling options. To speak with a qualified counsellor, you can call the toll-free number at 1-844-773-1427.

Facebook Support Group

The [UVic Mental Health Awareness Club](#) is an inclusive and supportive online community which works to promote mental health awareness on campus and in the community. You can follow this group to keep up to date on mental health-related news. You will also find events and activities on campus, self-care and wellness tips, and personal stories.

Student Blog

The [UVic Student Mental Health Blog](#) is run by a group of UVic student bloggers. They are passionate about promoting wellness and self-care practices. They work to increase awareness of topics related to mental health and decrease the stigma toward mental illness.

If you require further support, the following health plans provide additional services:

UVSS (Undergraduate) Health Plan

This plan covers 80% of the cost of a mental health practitioner, up to a combined maximum of \$800 per policy year for all practitioners. The practitioner must be a Registered Psychologist, a Registered Clinical Counsellor, have a Master of Social Work degree, or be a Canadian Certified Counsellor, only when registered with the CCPA. More details are available [here](#).

GSS (Graduate) Health Plan

Registered psychologist/Registered Clinical Counsellor (combined) has an annual maximum of \$500 per person per calendar year. Paramedical practitioners each have a \$10 per person per visit copayment, which is the responsibility of the plan holder to pay. More details are available [here](#).

Appendix D: Interview Materials

D1: Interview Protocol

This document serves as a guide for researchers conducting semi-structured interviews. It outlines essential aspects such as opening statements, interview structure, obtaining consent and ensuring confidentiality, key practices during the interview, and appropriate closing remarks. The ideas and guidelines presented in this document are informed by the Center for Higher Education Research and Scholarship (n.d.).

Introduction

Warmly greet the interview participant:

“Hello, and thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. How has your week been going so far?”

Introduce yourself by explaining your role in the research study:

“My name is Shanzae Sarwar, and I’m a graduate student in the School of Public Administration. For my Master’s thesis, I’m conducting interviews with international students like you to better understand how the recent changes in immigration policy, introduced starting in December 2023, have impacted your lived experience during your academic journey at UVic. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Astrid V. Pérez Piñán.”

Interview Structure

Provide an overview of the interview structure:

“Before we begin, I’d like to briefly outline the structure of today’s interview. I’ll start by asking you a few demographic questions, such as your age, gender, program of study, and other relevant information. Then, we’ll discuss how recent changes in immigration policy have impacted your experience at UVic. Finally, we’ll explore your experience with support services at UVic and any recommendations you may have for improvements.”

State the expected duration of the interview:

“The interview is expected to last about one hour, though it may vary depending on how much you would like to share. If at any point the discussion becomes uncomfortable or if you need a break, please let me know. You are welcome to take a moment, have some water, or skip any questions that feel too difficult to answer. Your comfort is a priority, and as stated in the consent form, your participation is entirely voluntary.”

Consent and Confidentiality

Reaffirm expectations about confidentiality:

“I want to assure you that your responses will remain confidential, and any identifying information will be removed in the final results. Additionally, a pseudonym will be used in the analysis to safeguard your identity.”

Confirm consent to have the interview audio recorded:

“With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview, as stated in the consent form. The recordings will be stored securely and deleted once the research findings are published. If you prefer not to be recorded, I can take detailed notes during the interview instead.”

Review the consent form and allow time for questions:

“Thank you for taking the time to review and sign the consent form. I appreciate your attention to this process. Before we move forward, do you have any questions or concerns that I can address for you? I'm here to provide any clarification or additional information you might need.”

During the Interview

- **Create a safe space in virtual interviews:** Respect participants’ preferences and avoid pressuring them to turn on their video if they choose not to.
- **Avoid asking difficult questions at the start of the interview:** Even if you’ve explained the topic, don’t assume the participant understands it the same way. Asking abstract questions too early can alienate them. Begin with easier questions to build rapport and trust more effectively.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Ask open-ended questions using phrases like “Tell me about…” to encourage richer responses. If a participant provides a brief answer, follow up with “Can you explain why?” or “Could you elaborate?” to gain more insight.
- **Check in with participants about a break:** Ask participants if they would like to take a short break when they are midway through the interview.
- **Support participants’ well-being:** If a participant seems uncomfortable with a particular question, refrain from pressing further to avoid causing distress.
- **Be mindful of non-verbal cues:** Pay attention to body language and other non-verbal signals to help ensure the participant’s well-being throughout the interview.
- **Practice active listening:** Listen carefully to the participants’ responses, and paraphrase or repeat what they have said to ensure you have understood them correctly.
- **Balance note-taking and engagement:** Take notes during the interview, but make sure to periodically look up and remain engaged with the participant to maintain a connection and build rapport.
- **Allow for flexibility:** During the interview, you may need to reorder questions based on the participant’s responses and the interview’s direction. If this new order works well, you can incorporate it into future interviews and adjust the questions accordingly.

Closing and Next Steps**Thank the participant for their participation:**

“Thank you so much for your time today and for being open to sharing your personal experiences with me. I truly appreciate your willingness to provide your valuable perspective. Your experiences are deeply valued, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to hear your story. I hope that by sharing your story, you feel empowered and that it raises greater awareness about the challenges faced by international students at UVic.”

Offer to share the study’s findings:

“Before we wrap up, I wanted to ask if you would be interested in receiving a copy of the transcript or the findings from today’s interview. I’d be happy to provide them if you'd like.”

Provide a list of available support services:

“ I recognize that during this interview, we discussed sensitive topics that may lead to emotional stress. If you find yourself in need of support, various peer-led support services, professional counselling, and community-based initiatives are available to you. You can find this list in the email I sent before the interview. Additionally, if any questions or concerns arise after the interview, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me. I’m here to help and more than willing to provide any further clarification or support you may need.”

D2: Interview Questions

Background Questions

1. Please introduce yourself in the way you feel most comfortable. It would be helpful to know what country you call home and any information that you deem relevant to your identity, such as gender, ethnicity, age, or something else.
2. What is your academic program at UVic?
3. What year of study are you currently in?
4. How long have you been in Canada, and how long do you expect to be here?
5. Are you here on your own or with relatives? If you have relatives here, did they come with you as part of your academic placement, or were they already here?

Lived Experiences

1. Are you aware of any recent changes in immigration policies affecting international students in Canada that were introduced starting in December 2023?
 - a. Can you share how you heard about them and how you reacted to the news when you first heard about them?
2. How have recent changes in immigration policies affected your experience as an international student at UVic?
 - a. What specific areas of the policy changes do you feel impacted by?
 - b. Can you speak to some examples of how you are being impacted?
3. Have these immigration policy changes impacted your academic performance? Can you elaborate on what you are experiencing?
4. Have the recent changes in immigration policy affected your life in any other ways?
 - a. For instance, have you experienced financial stress due to these changes?
 - b. Have you faced challenges with securing employment due to these changes?
 - c. Have you faced any difficulty with finding housing due to these changes?
5. In what ways have the recent immigration policy changes affected your sense of belonging on campus and your ability to connect with your peers?
 - a. Have you encountered any instances of racism or discrimination, either on campus, off campus, or through social media, as a result of these policies?
6. Have you experienced any stress, anxiety, or other concerns due to these immigration policy changes?
7. If you have future plans involving staying in Canada after completing your studies, how have these immigration policy changes impacted these plans?

Relevant Support Services

1. What have you done to deal with these experiences in terms of getting support?
 - a. Can you comment on the coping strategies that you have used to address the experiences you described, and have they been effective? Are there any examples you wish to share to illustrate your answer?
2. Are you aware of the support services available at UVic, and have you used any of them? If so, how did you find out about them?
3. What was your experience like? If the experience was positive, what made it feel helpful?

4. If the experience with UVic support services was negative, can you describe why it felt that way? What should have been done to make it a positive experience? What could they have done differently?
5. Have you faced any barriers that have prevented you from accessing relevant support services at UVic? If so, what were they?
6. What changes or improvements would you recommend for UVic to better support the needs, including the mental health needs, of international students like yourself? (Feel free to suggest things that are aimed at professors, support services, student associations, or other relevant groups.)

Appendix E: Ethics Approval

E1: Certificate of Approval



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of Victoria**

Office of Research Services | Human Research Ethics Board
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Certificate of Approval

<p>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Astrid Perez Pinan (Supervisor)</p> <p>PRINCIPAL APPLICANT: Shanzae Sarwar Master's student</p> <p>UVIC DEPARTMENT: Public Administration PADM</p>	<p>ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER: 24-0599 Expedited review - delegated</p> <p>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: 09-Mar-2025</p> <p>APPROVED ON: 09-Mar-2025</p> <p>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: 08-Mar-2026</p>
<p>PROJECT TITLE: Exploring the Impact of Recent Immigration Policy Changes on International Students</p> <p>RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS: None</p> <p>DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: None</p> <p>DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL: TCPS 2 Certificate.pdf - 14-Dec-2024 Interview Questions.docx - 17-Jan-2025 Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research Study.docx - 21-Jan-2025 Support Options.docx - 21-Jan-2025 Poster.jpg - 24-Feb-2025 Email Invitation to Participate in Research Study.docx - 24-Feb-2025 Request to Circulate Recruitment Material.docx - 27-Feb-2025 AVPP_tcps2_core_certificate.pdf - 05-Mar-2025</p>	
<h3>Conditions of approval</h3>	
<p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.</p> <p>Amendments To make changes to the approved research procedure in your study, please submit "Amendments" or "Annual renewal with amendments" form. You must receive research ethics approval before proceeding with your amended protocol.</p> <p>Renewals Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.</p> <p>Project Closures When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.</p>	
<h3>Certification</h3>	
<p>This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria's policies for research involving human participants.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> Dr. Sandra Gibbons Chair, Human Research Ethics Board </p> <p style="text-align: center;"> Dr. Cindy Holder Vice-chair, Human Research Ethics Board </p>	

Certificate Issued On: 09-Mar-2025