

Comparative and International Education Éducation comparée et internationale

“Sitting with myself by myself”: Indian Students in Canada During the Pandemic

« Assis tout seul avec moi-même » : les étudiants de l'Inde au Canada durant la pandémie

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Volume 51, Number 1, 2022

International Students from Asia in Canada's Postsecondary Institutions: Disconnections and Connections

Étudiant.e.s internationaux en provenance d'Asie dans les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire au Canada : connexions et déconnexions

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105682ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5206/cieeci.v51i1.14226>

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Publisher(s)

University of Western Ontario

ISSN

2369-2634 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Varughese, A. M., Schwartz, S. & Sheen, N. (2022). “Sitting with myself by myself”: Indian Students in Canada During the Pandemic. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation comparée et internationale*, 51(1), 57–74.
<https://doi.org/10.5206/cieeci.v51i1.14226>

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Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 51 | Issue 1 Special Issue International Students from Asia in Canada's Postsecondary Institutions: Disconnections and Connections

November 2022

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Recommended Citation

Varughese, A., Schwartz, S., & Sheen, N. (2022). “Sitting with myself by myself”: Indian Students in Canada During the Pandemic. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale*. 51(1). 57-74.
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“Sitting with myself by myself”: Indian Students in Canada During the Pandemic

« Assis tout seul avec moi-même » : les étudiants de l’Inde au Canada durant la pandémie

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Abstract:

The number of international students from India in Canada has increased rapidly in the last 5 years. Students from India now comprise 35% of Canada’s international students and 62% of all Ontario college students. This article begins by describing the context in which the recent growth in the number of Indian international students in Canada has occurred. Then, drawing from an online national survey and qualitative interviews, it examines the major challenges experienced by Indian international students in Canada during COVID-19. Key findings include heightened, and often intersecting, psychosocial, academic, and financial disruptions experienced by Indian international students. Based on the findings, we hypothesize that the intensity of challenges faced by Indian international students is correlated with the recent commercialization of the “study-work-immigrate” pathway offered by Canada.

Résumé

Le nombre d’étudiants internationaux au Canada venant de l’Inde a rapidement augmenté au cours des cinq dernières années. Les étudiants de l’Inde représentent à présent 35% des étudiants internationaux au Canada et 62% de toutes les inscriptions au collégial en Ontario. Cet article commence par établir le contexte dans lequel la croissance récente du nombre d’étudiants internationaux de l’Inde s’est produite. Ensuite, s’appuyant sur un sondage national fait en ligne ainsi que des entrevues qualitatives, il exposera les défis auxquels les étudiants internationaux de l’Inde ont été confrontés au Canada pendant la COVID-19. Des bouleversements accrus et souvent interreliés, de nature psychosociale, académique et financière vécus par ces étudiants internationaux de l’Inde, en sont les principaux constats. À partir de ces constats, nous proposons que l’intensité des défis auxquels font face les étudiants internationaux de l’Inde soit liée à la commercialisation du parcours « études-travail-immigration » offert par le Canada.

Keywords: India, Indian international students, Canada, COVID-19, postsecondary education, commercialization, colleges, pandemic, “study-work-immigrate”

Mots clés : l’Inde; étudiants internationaux de l’Inde; Canada; COVID-19; études postsecondaires; commercialisation; collèges; pandémie, « études-travail-immigration »

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Partnership Engage Grant [1008-2020-1147]

Introduction

International students have been enrolling in Canadian universities and colleges in large and steadily increasing numbers over the past decade. The remarkable growth of international students has occurred within the context of Canada's efforts to "internationalize" its higher education sector. Recognizing international students as an important source of human capital and as a driver of economic growth, the Government of Canada released two "International Education Strategies," one in 2014 and another in 2019 (Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2014; Global Affairs Canada, 2019). These strategies positioned education as an important sector in which Canada has a strong competitive advantage and signaled its importance for the Canadian labour market and the future pool of immigrants. The government committed funding of approximately \$198 million over a decade to increase the inbound and outbound mobility of students, to "brand" Canada in potential markets, to diversify and increase international recruitment of students, and to help Canadian higher education institutions expand their services abroad. In addition, the Government implemented a range of measures to ease immigration and work restrictions, including dedicated permanent residence pathways for international students. As a result of these measures, international enrollments in Canadian universities and colleges more than doubled between 2011 and 2021.¹

During the same period, Canadian postsecondary institutions came to rely on international enrollment as a key source of revenue. The number of domestic students in Canadian colleges and universities has remained roughly constant since 2010.² In addition to the lack of growth in domestic enrollment, provincial grants and contributions—the main source of revenue for Canadian postsecondary institutions—were roughly constant or perhaps slightly declining in real terms (Usher, 2021, p. 36).³ If universities and colleges wanted to increase their revenues, attracting more international students was an appealing option because international students pay, on average, four times more in tuition fees than domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2021a). The importance of attracting international students is evident: "100% of all increased spending over the past seven years has come from international student fees." (Usher, 2021, p. 30)

These interconnected developments in the education and immigration sectors have led to increased commercialization of both sectors. Because postsecondary institutions are under pressure to bring in a larger share of their revenues from international students, new programs are created primarily to attract them. In addition, many stages of the international student journey, including pre-application counselling, language training, visa application, travel, and housing, are now dominated by for-profit entities, some Canadian and some foreign. It appears that the market potential of each of these stages is being rediscovered in new ways and the resulting revenue for postsecondary institutions and profit for private actors may be accruing at the expense of international student well-being.

In this paper, we first review the recent trends in the enrollment of international students from India and the commercialization of their experience, as a necessary background to our subsequent analysis. Having set this background, we describe our methods for collecting data. Then, in Section III, we turn to the major challenges experienced by Indian students during

¹ https://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/EN_ODP_annual-TR-Study-IS_PT_study_level_year_end.xlsx (viewed May 7, 2022).

² According to Statistics Canada (STC) (2021b), there were 1.82 million domestic postsecondary enrollments in Canadian universities and colleges in the fall of 2010 and 1.78 million in the fall of 2019.

³ Measuring overall government expenditures on postsecondary education is not an easy task. Using data compiled by STC, Usher (2021, pp. 9–10) summarizes the situation by writing that "[government] payments to institutions have been rock steady since 2010–2011."

COVID-19. Drawing on data from an online national survey, in-depth interviews and available secondary data, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have had adverse, and often intersecting, impacts on all international students, including those from India. Our analysis exposed three kinds of adverse impacts: (1) social isolation and diminished mental health; (2) lower quality academic experiences; and (3) greater-than-expected financial stress. Based on the findings, we hypothesize that the intensity of the challenges faced by Indian international students is correlated with the commercialization of the international student pathway. Section IV concludes the paper by recapping the main findings and offering policy recommendations.

Indian Students in Canadian Colleges

International students from India have been the engine of the overall growth of international students in Canada. In 2000, they were a mere 1.8% of the total number of international students in Canada; by the end of 2021, they were 35%. Their numbers have grown almost hundred-fold, going from 2,210 students in 2000 to 217,410 in 2021 (Table 1).⁴ Such a remarkable increase has made India the top source country for international students in Canada.

Table 1: Study Permit Holders in Canada, 2000, 2010, 2015–2021

Year	2000	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of international students in Canada	122,665	225,295	352,330	410,570	490,775	567,065	638,280	528,190	621,565
Number of Indian international students in Canada	2,210	20,245	48,755	76,075	123,110	171,530	218,640	179,650	217,410
Percentage of Indian students	1.8	9.0	13.8	18.5	25.1	30.2	34.2	34.0	35.0

Source: Rows 1 and 2 are drawn from https://www.cic.gc.ca/opendatadonneesouvertes/data/EN_ODP_annual-TR-Study-IS_CITZ_year_end.xlsx. Row 3 is the ratio of Row 2 to Row 1, expressed as a percentage. This table includes all international students, who enrolled in any educational programs in Canada lasting more than six months, including elementary and secondary school students.

Apart from the increase in number, the most striking trend for Indian international students in Canada during the last 10 years has been the steady increase in the proportion enrolling in Canadian colleges (as opposed to Canadian universities) (Buckner et al., 2021).⁵ The share of

⁴ Data from Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) uses the term “study permit holders” to refer to international students. In this paper, we are interested in international students who enrolled in postsecondary institutions, who comprise about 75% of all international students in Canada.

⁵ The two main types of colleges in Canada are: (1) government-assisted public colleges; and (2) private career colleges. The former receive grants from federal or provincial governments while the latter depend primarily on tuition fees.

Indian students among incoming international students at the college level was only 4.2% in 2000–2004; it grew to 66.8% in 2015–19 (Crossman et al., 2021, p. 7).⁶

A recent report published by Ontario’s Auditor-General highlights the extraordinary dependence of Ontario colleges on Indian international students. Indian international students comprised 62% of Ontario college students in 2020–21 and the proportion of international students from India exceeded 90% in five Ontario colleges (Office of the Auditor-General of Ontario, 2021). Among students who received their first study permit between 2015 and 2019, Indian students were four times as likely to attend college than university, in marked contrast to Chinese students, who were four times as likely to attend a Canadian university as opposed to a college (Crossman et al., 2021).

College education has a distinct focus on vocational training—developing employability skills and preparing students to meet the needs of the labour market without further training (CICan, 2019). Admission standards at Canadian colleges vary by individual program but most require only high school graduation. In effect, a large proportion of Indian high school graduates can meet the admission standards for vocational programs at most Canadian colleges.

The flood of Indian students into the college system means that, compared to previous cohorts, the current group of Indian international students are enrolling in shorter, cheaper, lower-level, easier-to-get-into, vocationally oriented programs. This trend of “vocationalization” also implies that Indian international students are younger on average. Recent cohorts of Indian students view Canadian education primarily as a ticket to permanent residence and eventual citizenship, as opposed to an opportunity to secure high-quality education. Among Indian international students who received their first study permit between 2005 and 2009, 66% had become permanent residents within 10 years of having obtained their first study permit (Choi et al., 2021, p. 7). Indian students’ rates of transition to permanent residence across successive 5-year cohorts have been steadily increasing while the transition rates of other major source countries have been decreasing (Choi et al. 2021).

These trends present both opportunities and challenges for Indian international students. While overseas education has become more accessible at younger ages and to those outside urban centers, the increasing global competition for international students and the shifting primary motivation from education to immigration has led to creeping commercialization of the education sector. Educational institutions are increasingly driven by financial imperatives to compensate for the lack of growth in domestic revenues. On the other side, international students and families are driven by the desire to secure a path to permanent residence in Canada, and hence are more willing to take large financial risks. A spectrum of associated private business interests (e.g., education agents, agent aggregators, travel advisors, language training centres, visa consultants) have turned “universities and colleges [into] acting like businesses, education being treated as a commodity,” (Kahlon, 2021, p. 4) and international students being treated as “cash cows.” This has created a conducive milieu for questionable and exploitative practices in some instances, including lowering of admission and program standards, unscrupulous agents engaging in false advertising, absence of regulation and oversight of language training centres, pressures on program administrators to admit international students, the exploitation of student workers and tenants, and a lack of transparency and accountability on the part of Canadian postsecondary institutions (Bascaramurthy et al., 2021; Heringer, 2020; Hune-Brown, 2021; Stein et al., 2019).

⁶ China and Brazil, the second and third biggest source countries accounted for only 3.2% and 3.1%, respectively, of incoming international college students in 2015–2019.

The Indian state of Punjab, from which many Indian international students originate, is an illustrative case. An ongoing agrarian crisis and widespread unemployment have led many farming households to want to send their children abroad, at considerable risk and hardship, in search of a path to upward social mobility (Nanda et al., 2021; Singh & Bhogal, 2014). Based on secondary sources, we can form a picture of the situation faced by Punjabi international students in Canada. Hune-Brown (2021) and Bascaramurthy et al. (2021) document the path that many follow. They describe the families of Punjabi students as small land-owning farmers, far from rich but willing to pay for the “study-work-immigrate” package offered by Canada—a powerful enticement to students from rural and less affluent families to escape poverty and unemployment.⁷ The students seek the advice of a local “education agent” who directs them to the college that offers the highest agent commission. Some students end up in private colleges, with dubious admission standards, that offer lucrative commissions to education agents—up to 20 to 25% of tuition fees paid (Chaba, 2021). Once they arrive in Canada, many end up in overcrowded and poor-quality housing due to financial precarity (Peel Regional Council, 2021). Helped by many Canadians of Punjabi background, the incoming students find low-wage work, although they are sometimes exploited by their employers who know that immigration rules limit off-campus work to only 20 hours each week. Lack of adequate proficiency in English also often compounds their vulnerability.

To pursue this overseas dream, some students and their families risk the family’s life savings, take out large bank loans or in some cases sell or mortgage property. The students are often responsible for repaying the loans, placing enormous pressure on them to reduce expenses and increase their work hours in Canada.⁸ From the start, the students understand that they are not only paying for education but also for a path to permanent residence. As a result, at least when it comes to many Indian students from Punjab, it is not a rush to secure the best education; instead, it is a risky passage to future prosperity. The combination of the above factors—Canadian postsecondary institutions desperately trying to boost revenues and students desperately trying to find better futures—creates a set of mutually reinforcing conditions where the well-being of students is frequently neglected for financial gain. The rising numbers of Indian international students and their critical importance to Canada’s postsecondary revenues and immigration goals make their experiences highly salient. We now turn to an empirical analysis of the Indian student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

Our study employed a mixed-methods design, using primary and secondary sources. Primary data come from a national online nonprobability survey of international students conducted in late 2020 and early 2021.⁹ International students who were enrolled in a Canadian postsecondary institution (university, college, or CEGEP) during any part of the 2020 calendar year were eligible to take part in the survey. They were asked a series of questions on the impact of COVID-19 in various domains of their lives. The survey was advertised on social media targeting international students. It was also sent by email to campus clubs and international student offices. We received responses

⁷ Kim and Kwak (2019) refer to the “study-work-immigrate” combination as “edugration.”

⁸ A survey conducted by Khalsa Aid Canada, the Canadian chapter of an international charity, found that 69.6% of international students in Canada reported having a familial debt or education loan. 68% of respondents also noted that they were expected to help pay off the debt or loan. Of the 303 respondents, 98.4% were Indian students, mostly from Punjab (Kahlon, 2021, pp. 31–32).

⁹ For more information about online nonprobability surveys, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/06/what-are-nonprobability-surveys/>. The main implication is that we cannot be sure that our sample is representative of all Indian international students in Canada.

from about 1,000 international students; roughly 600 answered the majority of questions. A preponderance of the respondents (41%) named India as their home country and our analysis here focuses on those students. Almost three-quarters (74.9%) of the Indian respondents were college students, split roughly equally between men and women. Almost three-quarters of respondents were in the 18–25 years age bracket.

After we closed the survey, we analyzed the survey data, and based on the major themes that emerged, conducted in-depth interviews with 25 international students who had expressed willingness to be interviewed. Of these 25 interviewees, 12 were from India. Secondary data from STC, IRCC, and other published research were used to analyze the recent trends in the migration of Indian international students.¹⁰

Indian Students and COVID-19

Three major areas of vulnerability—psychosocial, academic, and financial—emerged from the analysis of our survey and interview data. We observed in our data that the compounded effects of heightened social isolation, academic dissatisfaction, and financial stress took a heavy toll on international students in general and on Indian students in particular. In this section, we present our findings, as they pertain to Indian students.

Psychosocial Impact

Several studies have pointed to the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic on students in general (Chen et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Those same impacts disproportionately affect international students, especially those from marginalized groups (Dubey et al., 2020) and those in the early stages of their study abroad (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Lockdowns associated with the pandemic contributed to varying degrees of personal loneliness, social and cultural isolation, lifestyle changes (such as binge eating), mental exhaustion, panic attacks, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and increased substance use among students (Cao et al., 2020; Killgore et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

One of the greatest challenges endured by international students during the pandemic was social isolation. International students are at risk of social isolation at the best of times because of their lack of social networks and the cross-cultural adjustments required in a new country. They encounter significantly more psychosocial challenges than their domestic peers and are, in general, less likely to seek out mental health services (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2018). The pandemic exacerbated their vulnerabilities by cutting them off from friends and from familiar campus spaces and services. Campus closures and lockdown restrictions kept international students in their modest and crowded dwellings for an extended period of time. The sudden pivot to online instruction and uncertainties around academic performance, program completion, and immigration deadlines compounded the effects of social isolation, with adverse impacts on mental and physical health (Stickley & Koyanagi, 2016; Zavaleta et al., 2017).

Our survey contained several questions related to the effect of COVID on mental health. Four questions on depression and anxiety were drawn from Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2), two-item scales which screen for depression and generalized anxiety respectively. These scales were used in another international student experience study conducted in the United States in mid-2020 (Chirikov et al., 2020). The PHQ-2 questions ask about the frequency of depressed mood over the past 2 weeks while the GAD-2

¹⁰ A methodological appendix, available from the authors, provides more detailed information about our methods along with detailed tabulations of the characteristics of Indian respondents.

questions ask about the frequency of anxiety over the past 2 weeks. Each of the four questions (two for PHQ and two for GAD) is scaled from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). For each scale, the responses to the two questions are summed to yield a score that ranges from 0 to 6. If the combined score on the two PHQ-2 questions is 3 or greater, major depressive disorder is likely; if the combined score on the two GAD-2 is 3 or greater, generalized anxiety disorder is likely.¹¹

As Table 2 indicates, roughly 57% of our Indian respondents had scores of 3 or above, putting them at risk of major depressive disorder on the basis of PHQ-2 and 51% were at risk of generalized anxiety disorder on the basis of GAD-2.¹²

Table 2: Scores of Scales Measuring Depression (PHQ-2) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2)

<i>Sum of the Two PHQ-2 Questions</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>	<i>Sum of the Two GAD-2 questions</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>
0	25	10.4	0	34	14.3
1	20	8.3	1	24	10.1
2	58	24.2	2	59	24.8
3	46	19.2	3	26	10.9
4	98	20.8	4	36	15.1
5	50	6.7	5	17	7.1
6	16	10.4	6	42	17.6
Total	240	100.0	Total	238	100.0
Source: Calculations from authors' survey data					

One interviewee described the effects of social isolation this way:

So I lost all the connections, like my friends ... that make us a human person, right? That was a drastic reduction. Because of the time difference, I was not able to connect properly with my friends or connections in India and not able to make new friends here and everything was online, Zoom. Even if I was volunteering and I am still volunteering, it's not that effective to make friends in an online platform, so that was the first challenge. (Interviewee 9)

The percentages of depression and anxiety reported by Indian international students in our survey are broadly similar to those reported by non-Indian students.

Another set of questions in our survey asked about respondents' psychosocial experiences. One of the possible responses was "I was psychologically affected by the lockdown (e.g., experienced loneliness, depression, or anxiety)." More than 75% of respondents who were in school in the winter of 2020 and who answered this question responded to this question with "yes."

Interviewees reported loss of income, worries about contracting COVID, inability to go back home, uncertainty about online instruction, academic performance, time to completion, job prospects, and deadlines and requirements for permanent residence. All of these contributed to added stress and deteriorating mental health. Potential exposure of housemates to the virus and associated tensions led to more stress for some. Physical access to counselling services became

¹¹ For PHQ-2, see <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/phq-2> For GAD-2, see <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/gad-2>

¹² Note that the number of respondents reported in Table 2 (~240) is lower than the number who began the survey (407). As is typical in surveys, more of our respondents answered questions at the beginning of the survey than in the middle or toward the end of the survey. Moreover, some questions were asked only of a subset of respondents.

more difficult during campus closures. Even though these services had moved online, and some international students reported receiving mental health services, several noted delay or lack of consistency in receiving timely and adequate mental health care from their schools. One student shared their experience in the following words:

My mental health has been affected negatively. I did seek out help for that. I was in touch with the counselling service at my university, but unfortunately it's not super consistent because of I think the limited resources. So it could be ... like once in every three weeks or so, or sometimes not even that but I mean ... my mental health had been affected negatively, and I had panic attacks for while. (Interviewee 24)

Another student reported coping with mental health struggles and lack of access to counselling services by reaching out to family.

I mean, at times, I ... there were times when I cried, and I had, I mean I just had to call my parents and talk about that, talking with people really helped and, since you cannot ... hug anyone or basically you cannot ... even [have] physical contact..., so I just had to talk with people and talking made things a little easy on me. (Interviewee 18)

Such experiences, coupled with the silence and cultural stigma associated with mental health problems, put Indian international students at heightened risk of mental challenges (Shidhaye & Kermode, 2013). In extreme cases, social isolation, loneliness, pressure to succeed academically, earning adequate income to pay off loans in addition to navigating a new culture have led to student suicides among Indian students. According to the Indian High Commission in Ottawa, there has been a rise in suicides, with seven Indian students ending their lives in 2020 (Hune-Brown, 2021). As the pandemic wore on, several institutions began to recognize the increased need for mental health services and additional resources geared to international students, in the form of culturally competent counsellors, 24/7 emergency helplines, peer support, and other informational resources (Chen et al., 2020; Koo & Nyunt, 2020).

Xenophobia Many international students in Canada are members of racialized groups. One of the psychosocial challenges for international students is dealing with xenophobia, racism, and discrimination (Brown & Jones, 2013; Gui et al., 2016; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Scott et al., 2015). Because of its supposed origins in China, amplified by media reports, COVID-19 has led to increases in incidents of harassment of those perceived to be of Chinese origin (Devakumar et al., 2020; Gover et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2021).

As part of a larger survey conducted through the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium, Chirikov and Soria (2020) surveyed about 6,600 international students studying, for the most part, in the United States. They report that a quarter of international students were concerned with xenophobia, harassment, or discrimination. A higher proportion (22–30%) of East and Southeast Asian students had personally experienced instances of intimidating, hostile, or offensive behaviour based on their national origin. This rate was roughly 15% among all international students (p. 4).

From the SERU survey, we adapted two questions asking about xenophobia, racism, and discrimination in relation to COVID-19. Our first question asked about actual experiences with xenophobia, racism, or discrimination in connection with COVID-19. The second question asked about concerns about future exposure to xenophobia, racism, or discrimination. In Table 3, we show the results from these two questions. For each question, we first distinguish between international students whose home country is India and those whose home country is not India.

We then compare Asian international students (from South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia) to non-Asian international students.

Table 3: Xenophobia, Harassment, or Racism

Have you personally experienced xenophobia, harassment, or racism in connection with COVID while in Canada?			
	Yes	No	I Have Not Yet Lived in Canada
Indian ($n = 241$)	27 (11%)	187 (78%)	27 (11%)
Not Indian ($n = 341$)	60 (18%)	267 (78%)	14 (4%)
South Asian ($n = 266$)	31 (12%)	205 (77%)	30 (11%)
East Asian ($n = 59$)	15 (25%)	44 (75%)	0
Southeast Asian ($n = 35$)	25 (71%)	9 (26%)	1 (3%)
Not Asian ($n = 214$)	32 (15%)	173 (81%)	9 (4%)
How concerned are you that, in the future, you will personally experience xenophobia, harassment, or racism in connection with COVID while in Canada?			
	Not Concerned	Concerned	Very concerned
Indian ($n = 240$)	124 (52%)	95 (40%)	21 (9%)
Not Indian ($n = 339$)	157 (46%)	148 (44%)	34 (10%)
South Asian ($n = 265$)	136 (51%)	104 (39%)	25 (9%)
East Asian ($n = 59$)	10 (17%)	42 (71%)	7 (12%)
Southeast Asian ($n = 34$)	8 (24%)	18 (53%)	8 (24%)
Not Asian ($n = 214$)	124 (58%)	75 (35%)	15 (7%)
Notes: Our questions ask about racism <i>in connection with COVID</i> , not about racism in general. Note also that the question is about experiences <i>in Canada</i> and some students had not yet been to Canada. South Asian students are from India (241), Sri Lanka (10), Bangladesh (9), Pakistan (5), and Nepal (1). East Asian students are from China (47), Japan (6), South Korea (6), and Hong Kong (1). Southeast Asian students are from the Philippines (22), Vietnam (9), Malaysia (2), Singapore (1), and Indonesia (1). For the second question, the sample answering the question was one respondent lower for India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Source: Calculations from authors' survey data.			

The various groups of international students are quite similar in terms of the percentages reporting actual experiences. Differences emerge when asked about future concerns. The percentage of South Asians expressing concerns is similar in size to that of non-Asians but greater

percentages of East Asians and Southeast Asians report concerns. We note, however, the small sample sizes for East Asians (59) and Southeast Asians (34).

Academic Experience

Aucejo et al. (2020) reported a range of adverse academic outcomes due to COVID-19 for American college students, including lower GPAs, withdrawal from courses, delayed graduation, loss of internships, and lower labour force participation. They also note that the impacts varied systematically based on socioeconomic factors, with the degree of disruptive impacts higher for low-income and marginalized students, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities. This is consistent with other works that point to the complex interaction of existing inequalities (in socioeconomic status, age, gender, and ethnicity) with the pandemic disruptions across several domains of life such as health, education, and employment (Bambra et al., 2020; Blundell et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, the forced transition to online learning in universities and colleges went well for some and much less well for others. As one American college administrator put it, “We were doing everything right and nothing right simultaneously” (Ezarik, 2021).

In addition to navigating a new culture, international students are adjusting to a new academic system and a new level of study, often in a language in which they are not fluent. This already difficult challenge was intensified by the online pivot and associated adaptations induced by the pandemic. In our survey, we see that a significant minority of respondents believe that they had not adapted well to online instruction. Table 4 shows that about one-quarter of respondents answered “not at all well” to the relevant question. Interestingly, a higher percentage of college students (22%) reported adapting “very well” compared to university students (5%).

Table 4: How Well Did You Adapt to Online Learning

	Indian Students in Colleges	Indian Students in Universities	All Indian Students
Not at all Well	53 (25%)	21 (29%)	74 (26%)
Well	114 (53%)	48 (66%)	162 (56%)
Very Well	47 (22%)	4 (5%)	51 (18%)
Total	214 (100%)	73 (100%)	287 (100%)
Note: Sample is Indian international students enrolled in fall 2020 who had only online courses. Source: Calculations from authors’ survey data.			

Asked about obstacles to online learning (Table 5), the most frequently mentioned factors were unrelated to the quality of teaching. By far the most commonly mentioned obstacle was “lack of interaction with other students” (68.9%). “Lack of access to an appropriate study space” was the second most common response (46.2%). Factors related to the courses themselves —“inability to learn effectively online” (43.2%) and “lack of motivation for online learning” (41.4%)—ranked third and fourth among the twelve options given.

Table 5: Obstacles to Learning Online ($n = 273$)

Obstacle	Number	Percent
Lack of interaction with other students	188	68.9
Lack of motivation for online learning	113	41.4
Lack of access to an appropriate study space	126	46.2
Inability to learn effectively online	118	43.2
Course content not appropriate for online learning	68	24.9
Lack of access to instructors	75	27.5
Lack of access to appropriate technology	70	25.6
Time zone issues	39	13.3
Language difficulties	13	4.8
Other	14	5.1
None	14	5.1
Note: Sample is those enrolled in fall 2020 and who had only online courses. The question allowed respondents to choose all that applied so the percentages do not add to 100%. Source: Calculations from authors' survey data.		

Many interviewees spoke of the initial challenges and adjustments with the online pivot:

Very difficult to understand things online, ... there are so many distractions at home, so if you are studying in college, there are none ... you can keep focus. Here you can't; it's not like hundred percent possible. (Interviewee 19)

Students reported a range of technological challenges to online adaptation, including the use of clunky learning management systems, spotty internet connections, lack of accessories such as headsets, appropriate furniture, and lack of adequate online skills on the part of the instructors. Some students noted that professors in general lacked competence to teach online, as they spoke too fast, or tried to fit in too much material in a short span of time. A minority of professors were unresponsive and unsupportive, imposing, for example, strict deadlines.

When respondents were asked to choose the one factor that was the most challenging obstacle to their learning online, "lack of interaction with other students" was again the most often chosen (26.0%) followed by "inability to learn effectively online" (15.8%) and "lack of access to an appropriate study space" (13.6%). Face-to-face interaction with domestic peers and faculty is an important attraction of studying abroad as international students expect to learn a range of skills through social contact including cultural etiquette, critical thinking skills, and ways to seek and provide critical feedback. Existing research has demonstrated that social contact with co-nationals and host nationals have significant positive impacts on the academic adaptation of international students (Pho & Schartner, 2021). For the same reasons, our interview participants overwhelmingly preferred synchronous classes.

Inability to interact with professors and peers emerged as one of the major concerns in interviews as well. There was a clear sense of frustration (or even desperation) when there was no direct interaction with the professor, and when the course format was asynchronous.

Till now I haven't seen the professor of these two courses ... like I don't know how they look. ... They just post the lecture with their recorded voice, like the lectures goes on to the record ... in the background the voice will be explaining ... there is no photo or video. (Interviewee 7)

Table 6: Single Most Challenging Obstacle to Learning Online (*n* = 265)

Obstacle	Number	Percent
Lack of interaction with other students	69	26.0
Lack of motivation for online learning	23	8.7
Lack of access to an appropriate study space	36	13.6
Inability to learn effectively online	42	15.8
Course content not appropriate for online learning	20	7.6
Lack of access to instructors	18	6.8
Lack of access to appropriate technology	18	6.8
Time zone differences	15	5.7
Language barriers	3	1.1
Other	7	2.6
Note: Sample is those enrolled in fall 2020, who had some online courses and who checked at least one response on the list of possible obstacles. Source: Calculations from authors' survey data.		

Table 7: Satisfaction with Educational Experience

Aspect of Education Experience	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Sample Size
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the support you received from instructors to learn online during the COVID pandemic?	13 (5.1%)	37 (14.4%)	166 (64.6%)	41 (16.0%)	257 (100%)
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the overall quality of your online courses?	18 (7.3%)	51 (20.6%)	148 (59.7%)	31 (12.5%)	248 (100%)
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the overall quality of your educational experience in the fall term of 2020?	24 (9.5%)	60 (23.8%)	141 (56.0%)	27 (10.7%)	252 (100%)
Source: Calculations from authors' survey data					

Dissatisfaction with the support received from instructors was relatively rare. Asked “how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the support you received from instructors to learn online during the COVID pandemic?”, only 13 of the 257 Indian students who answered this question (5.1%) said “very dissatisfied,” another 14.4% were “dissatisfied,” and the remaining respondents (80.5%) were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” Similarly, only 7.3% reported being “very dissatisfied” with the overall quality of their online courses and another 20.6% were “dissatisfied.” The remaining 72.2% were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied.”

The picture is less clear when the respondents were asked about the overall quality of their educational experience, which would include not only their academic experience but also the social

and economic aspects of being an international student during COVID. A somewhat higher percentage of the respondents (33%) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, compared to the corresponding percentages for the questions about the quality of online courses (28%) or the instructors (19%).

Some international students liked the convenience of online education, but even they overwhelmingly felt that it undermined their overall educational experience, due to lack of peer and instructor interaction, inability to experience and adapt to Canadian culture, inattention to soft skills, lack of connections and networks, and inability to use campus space and amenities. There was a persistent and pervasive feeling of missing out or not receiving adequate value for the fees they were paying, as demonstrated by the following quote:

... so whenever we start our journey ... in a foreign country we expect to improve our soft skills, improve interactions, improve the networking, make some friends here, connections here. That's how it works, that's all the expectations we have and that didn't happen so definitely that. Yeah it's a disappointment, a bit of a disappointment. I was actually expecting this to happen, I was working for seven years ... So this was a dream come true, after seven years ... Yeah so with that much expectation and excitement I came here, and this happened, and it was definitely disappointment for me. ... What I expected to gain from my degree here, that definitely didn't happen; it hasn't been fulfilled, to my expectations. (Interviewee 9)

Financial Stress

There is surprisingly little published research that documents the economic situation faced by international students. An exception is Forbes-Mewett et al. (2009), who interviewed 200 international students studying at nine universities in Australia. The researchers collected detailed information about the way that the students were financing their lives and concluded that “significant numbers of international students experience serious financial difficulties.” International education was once viewed as luxury choice available only to the wealthy. That is no longer true.

In the case of the average Indian student, the burden of having to pay tuition and, for some, to pay back large bank loans, while in a postsecondary program or immediately after graduation, is a constant stressor. Even if the students’ families are not low-income by Indian standards, paying international tuition fees at a Canadian institution as well as supporting a child living abroad, strains most family budgets. The severe burden of tuition fees forces students to minimize living expenses as much as possible and settle for poor-quality and overcrowded housing, shared with many other students. The pressure of having to save money also leads to accepting multiple low-skilled jobs, sometimes in exploitative conditions (e.g., receiving less than the minimum wage, facing harassment), and, for some, working over the legal limit of hours (Ricci, 2019).

COVID-related disruptions significantly increased the financial burdens of international students as many part-time jobs vanished in March 2020 when large swathes of the economy shut down because of the pandemic. We asked a number of survey questions related to the economic situation facing our respondents. Two questions asked about the ability of international students to pay for their education. They were first asked how concerned they were about their ability to pay for their education and then how COVID had affected their ability to pay. Asked “how concerned are you about your ability to pay for your education in the 2020–2021 academic year?”, only 16.7% of all international students were unconcerned with the others being “concerned” (33.5%) or “very concerned” (49.8%). Among the Indian students, the percentage concerned or very concerned was higher by about 10 percentage points when compared to the survey respondents from other countries. Asked “how has COVID affected your ability to pay for your

education?” 78.5% of the Indian international students either said that the pandemic “made it somewhat harder” (36.9%) or “made it much harder” (41.6%), with those percentages again being higher than those of students from other countries. We also asked how concerned respondents were about finding a job in the summer of 2021 and the vast majority were either “concerned” (26.5%) or “very concerned” (64.5%).

We then asked a more general question about the financial hardships that the respondents might have faced during the pandemic, up to the time when they filled out the survey. There were 15 financial hardships listed, and respondents were asked to check all that applied. A follow-up question asked them to identify, from the subset of those they had chosen, the financial hardship that was most impactful.

Several of the hardships listed had approximately the same number checked. The three most commonly checked were: “unexpected increases in living expenses,” “unexpected increases in spending for technology,” and “loss or reduction of income of other family members.” Close behind were “loss or cancellation of an expected job” and “unexpected increases in tuition fees.” Asked which of the 15 financial hardships had the “biggest negative effect on your finances,” 18.1% checked “unexpected increases in tuition fees” while 14.1% checked “loss or cancellation of an expected job.”

Our interviewees reported on specific forms of these hardships—loss of co-op jobs, parents losing jobs during the pandemic, parents having to take a second bank loan to support living expenses, having to pay for mandatory quarantine in hotels while also paying for rent elsewhere, uncertainty as to whether funding would continue, the stress of unexpected tuition increases. One of the interviewees described the extent of financial stress in the following way:

I had to borrow some money from my parents back in India, who were already going through some financial trouble because the pandemic is worldwide, of course. So they had problems too; I had to ask some of my friends sometimes, and at one point in time, I had completely zero balance in my current account, so I had to withdraw some funds from my savings. (Interviewee 18)

Our interviews corroborated the loss of part-time jobs and associated income as the major source of economic stress. Some students lost a good job during the pandemic because of business closures and ended up taking a minimum-wage front-line job. Others cycled through a series of low-wage jobs, getting laid off, suffering reduced hours or varying work hours from week to week. The Canadian government’s decision to extend emergency financial relief from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to eligible international students was a welcome relief, even though it reached only a portion of the international students.¹³ Some students received emergency bursaries from their institutions. Support from the government, educational institutions, and community organizations was appreciated but was limited and sporadic. For those who had a summer or part-time job or volunteer opportunity, it appears to have been essential for their financial as well as emotional well-being, even when it put them in the frontline and at risk of catching the virus.

Conclusion

In the context of a public health emergency such as COVID-19, international students constitute a vulnerable group that is not immediately visible on the policy radars of the host country or the home country. Amidst explosive growth in the numbers of Indian international students in

¹³ CERB was available to those international students who were forced to stop working because of COVID-19 and had an income of at least \$5,000 in 2019 or in the 12 months prior to the date of their application.

Canadian colleges and the associated commercialization of the international student pathway, our analysis, based on data from an online nonprobability survey and in-depth interviews, point to the complex intersection of psychosocial, academic, and economic vulnerabilities during the pandemic. COVID-19 served as a magnifying glass, illuminating the pre-existing vulnerabilities of Indian international students, and leading to alarming rates of mental health challenges and financial distress. We believe that the recent groups of Indian students coming to Canada are less financially secure than previous cohorts and the pandemic therefore had severe impacts on them. Our findings suggest that the most important negative impacts of the pandemic seem to have resulted from the loss or reduction of employment income and lockdown-related social isolation.

We view the larger trends identified in this paper—the blurring of lines between education and immigration, the increase in the number and vocational orientation of Indian international students, and the financial, psychosocial, and academic vulnerability to the pandemic—as interrelated. The depth of these vulnerabilities and their crosscutting effects are related to the commercialization of the “study-work-immigrate” ecosystem. This is a hypothesis coming out of our study that needs to be tested with further research.

A number of policy implications follow from our study. International students need access to better, timelier, and more tailored support services. Currently, the availability of support services varies across institutions and the need is especially pressing in less well-resourced colleges where Indian international students predominate. There is a sense that support services have not kept pace with the rapid increase in numbers (Kang, 2020).

Mental health supports

Postsecondary institutions need to identify and address the barriers in accessing timely mental health care. Lack of adequate awareness about conditions and care options, cultural stigma, lack of time due to long work hours, language barriers, lack of culturally competent care, and difficulty to access are some of the barriers illustrated by Sivapalan and Khan.¹⁴ Indian international students would benefit from more culturally sensitive and more accessible mental health services. Gaps in mental health knowledge, if left undetected, can lead to more severe conditions or even suicides. There is a need for more investment in awareness campaigns, peer-to-peer support groups, 24/7 access to culturally and linguistically competent mental health counsellors, wellness programming and awareness campaigns.

Emergency financial support

During the pandemic, many colleges and universities allocated emergency funds to meet the urgent short-term financial needs of their international students. However, this emergency support fell far short of what was needed. The existing funds allocated for emergency support need to be increased and more widely publicized. Additional measures such as extension of tuition fee deadlines and opening up of scholarships and grants that are currently only available to domestic students may be considered. As revealed in our study, there is ongoing economic hardship among the international student population, with or without the pandemic. For almost a decade now, Canadian postsecondary institutions have been relying on international students to raise revenue in the face of stagnant domestic enrollment and provincial grants. In Ontario public colleges, 68% of all tuition fee revenue now comes from international students (Auditor-General of Ontario, 2021, p.

¹⁴ Dr. Shivajan Sivapalan and Dr. Yasir Khan, campus clinic physicians at the Health and Wellness Centre of Durham College, presented a webinar on their work on December 1, 2021. The transcript appears at https://canadaindiaresearch.ca/system/files/Improving_Health_Access_for_International_Students_Transcript.pdf

2). Across all Canadian universities, over 40% of all tuition revenue comes from international students. It seems only fair to allocate a larger share of that revenue to support international students.

International students are not only guests in Canada but they are an essential source of revenue for Canadian colleges and universities. More importantly, a large proportion of them are future Canadian citizens. Indian international students are of enormous significance to Canada, given their numbers and the high likelihood of their conversion to permanent residence. Yet the needs and experiences of these international students rarely form part of policymaking discussions. The predominant focus has been on the needs of the Canadian society and the needs of Canadian educational institutions. The many benefits from the transnational knowledge and cross-cultural experiences international students possess are not fully realized in Canadian classrooms due to the invisibility and precarity of international students. In building enhanced support systems geared to the needs of international students, Canadian policymakers and postsecondary institutions need to pay greater attention to the full international student journey, one that starts with the pre-application phase outside Canada and ends with postgraduate work and potential resettlement in Canada. There is also a need to study more thoroughly the experience of Indian international students and engage in critical conversations about the set of heightened, interrelated challenges they experience as a result of the commercialization of the education sector. Additionally, Canadian stakeholders need to ensure international student voices find a place in the policy process. There is some emerging evidence that Canadian colleges and universities have begun to think about how best to support international students and customize support services for their specific needs. While Canada has done better than its competitors in recent years in supporting international students, more needs to be done.

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