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Editorial

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International student mobility in crisis?

The era of constant growth in international student mobility appears to be at an end. A global benchmark study found that nearly a third of responding universities had seen a decline in international undergraduates, and more than 40% had experienced reductions in international graduate students (Greenfield, 2024). This appears to be the result of what some are calling the “great policy backlash”—a fundamental shift in government priorities in some of the leading student receiving countries (Mitchell, 2024). Canada is the epicentre of this backlash. As discussed in a previous *CIE/ECI* editorial (McCartney et al., 2023), international student mobility is less popular and more controversial in Canada than it has been in decades. A new international student cap has caused a steep decline in the number of international students entering the country (Keung, 2024), and popular opinion about international students is declining rapidly (Neuman, 2024). International education, and especially international student mobility, have long been seen as fundamental to contemporary higher education. However, there appears to be a new era dawning, in which postsecondary institutions lack public trust, international mobility is seen as a threat, and international students are viewed as competition for limited resources. But how did we get to this position? And why are institutions themselves not doing a better job of making their case for international student mobility? What is the future of the international education project if international student mobility has lost its appeal?

In Canada it has been common to blame postsecondary institutions for “misbehaving,” recruiting too many international students and causing a number of downstream problems in the surrounding communities. However, this ignores the larger context that produced the drive to recruit international students. Two linked global phenomena have produced this current “crisis,” and make governments’ claims that they were surprised by the effects of student mobility especially unconvincing.

The first is the reorganization of borders in the era of globalization. Starting in the 1970s, governments began to redraw border policies to enable more selective forms of human mobility, away from primarily race-based systems towards efforts to recruit immigrants based on human capital (though often still characterized by institutionalized racism). In Canada this was most obvious in the *Immigration Act* of 1976, which both formalized the point system for immigration (theoretically removing race-based exclusion and ensuring only high human capital individuals would become immigrants) and created categories of migrants, including migrant workers and international students. These migrants were invited to enter Canada but only temporarily, to serve short-term Canadian interests rather than to build a life as permanent residents. The creation of international students as a category of migrant was not only a formal, political process; it was an ideological process as well, that marked those students as outsiders who had no right to Canadian education. As a result, charging them dramatically higher tuition fees was not only reasonable, but seemed just—after all, in the eyes of many Canadians, they did not deserve the same rights as citizens since they were by definition foreigners being granted special access to Canada. Even though pathways to immigration have been created for international students in the subsequent decades, this attitude largely remains in place. This makes international students both susceptible to the revenue-seeking recruitment of postsecondary institutions and an easy scapegoat for politicians who want to blame social ills on a group who are both politically marginalized and seen as other.

While their migrant status made it possible to charge international students differential fees, it was other changes that made institutions financially dependent on their tuition. Contemporaneous to changes to migration policies was the rise of neoliberalism, or the systematic reorganization of government policy to eliminate social welfare programs, emphasize individual responsibility, and fetishize markets as the best way to distribute resources. Neoliberalism, as David Harvey pointed out decades ago, is meant to redistribute wealth upwards, to an ever-richer employing class (Harvey, 2005). In Canada this meant the reorganization of social program funding and a dramatic reduction of corporate tax rates from 50.9% in 1981 to only 26.5% in 2024 (Trading Economics, 2024). The result has been declining government support for postsecondary education, and a growing reliance on user fees—tuition. International students have become disproportionately important in this context, and Canada’s government has helped support institutional efforts to recruit them for this reason. Yet now that politicians face the consequences of 40 years of neoliberal policymaking—stagnating wages, climbing prices, a housing crisis, and limited access to social supports—they have turned on international students to blame them for large systemic issues of which the students, alongside their domestic classmates, are only victims.

Unfortunately, institutions have proven incapable of defending international student mobility as it currently exists. This is, in large part, because they have been corrupted by its structures. They argue against the backlash towards international students not on the basis of their educational or social value, but purely on economic terms. This actually serves to undermine postsecondary education’s social license, as it cheapens the claims that institutions serve a larger social good beyond their own financial need.

Of course, much more important is the group who have been impacted the most: international students. The categorization of international students as migrants, as mentioned above, was the first such move in the creation of the distinct identity of “international student.” During the late 1990s and early 2000s the notion of internationalization of higher education came into prominence, supplanting the term *international education*, both being used interchangeably. Internationalization was conceptualized as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into postsecondary institutions (Knight, 2004); international students were identified as one of the key drivers of internationalization, helping to bring this intercultural and international dimension into the institution. With great enthusiasm, universities and colleges adopted this rationale, and along with the licence to charge differential fees, found a way to address shrinking government funding. International students came to be treated as an economic asset as well as a cultural asset.

The drive to recruit international students over the past two decades was supported by provincial and government-level policies making them complicit in the unbridled growth of an “educational commodity.” Both federal policies on international education (FATDC, 2014; GAC, 2019) are more about creating and promoting the Canada brand, and marketing Canada with promises of “high quality schools,” a “peaceful, welcoming and diverse” society, “an enviable quality of life,” “opportunities to work and start careers” and, significantly, “pathways to permanent residency” (GAC, 2019). With this kind of hospitality promised, the students have been showing up by the thousands, keeping Canadian higher education afloat. To have this sudden reversal of welcome, with the implication that the international students themselves are the problem, is the last of many other unanticipated hostilities that students have faced.

Recent polls have reported that six in 10 Canadians believe there are too many immigrants entering the country—a four-fold increase over August 2020, and that too many immigrants are visible minorities (Graves, 2024). And these attitudes are not new. On the one hand, international

students are valued as bearers of culture and diversity to our institutions, but their differences are accommodated only within the norms of dominant culture. As Schick and St. Denis have argued, “the rhetoric of multiculturalism is enacted as a symbol of the ‘good’ nation” (2005, p. 295), which is raceless, benevolent and innocent, thus erasing race and racism. Their cultural differences, languages, knowledges, ways of being, are seen as deficient. This doubling discourse is a classic colonial trope (Bhabha, 1994; Jiwani, 2010) that keeps international students contained, and visible only as a threat, as deviant or deficient.

In our view, the problem from the start of this “enterprise” has been the focus on economic rationales of internationalization; the educational purposes and value of international education have become invisible. Institutions have been moving away from the responsibility of providing services and supports that would give international students the quality educational experience that they were promised. Despite the restrictions and limitations on visas issued for international students, institutions are still pursuing their recruitment or having to face budget crises, as have been reported in many institutions across Canada. While the more obvious response should be a focus on restoring public funding of higher education, there needs to be a reckoning of how we hold international education, and how we can engage more ethically with its unrealized educational promise.

In this issue of *Comparative and International Education*, we have a number of articles that once again capture the breadth of contemporary comparative and international education research.

This issue begins with two articles that offer further critical insights into international student mobility in Canada. Hijin Park and Margot Francis contribute to the emerging study of the interaction between international education and settler colonialism. They examine how settler colonial violence is embedded in systems in Canada, including the internationalization of education. The result for racialized international students is that they face gendered, racist treatment both on campus and off, and are especially vulnerable to violence and exclusion.

Next, María Cervantes-Macías and Anne-Cécile Delaisse provide a critical look at Canada’s immigration pathways for international students, interviewing students from Mexico and Vietnam and exploring how their approach to their own journeys is distinct from, and sometimes in conflict with, the linear, mechanical policy systems that they are interacting with in pursuing their immigration goals. Their work shows that Canada’s immigration system, and its expectations about how students will move through it, fails to account for the complex trajectories of students themselves. Moreover, Cervantes-Macías and Delaisse show that students employ a range of innovative strategies to cope with this disjunct, in the process offering a new and complex view of students’ migration paths.

This issue also features an article about a vitally important but understudied element of international education, the offshore school. Focusing on British Columbia (BC) particularly, Ian Alexander and Laura Werbitsky explored the marketing efforts that BC’s government-run Offshore School Program produced to recruit students to attend BC-curriculum schools located outside of Canada. Using critical discourse analysis, they found that BC had developed a coherent and somewhat misleading brand for its offshore schools. More strikingly, they also found that the advertising material associated with the brand tended to reflect misaligned rationales for the program, particularly for students trying to plan their future. Finally, they noticed a lack of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, despite stated efforts by BC’s government to advance these topics in the school system. The resulting article highlights the complex and possibly worrisome effects of the race to market BC schools around the world.

The final two articles offer a more international viewpoint. Mourad Bacha's article offers a critical perspective on professional development and the conception of teacher professionalism in different contexts. Bacha's piece traces the evolution of the professionalization of teaching since the 1980s, emphasizing the role of international organizations such as the OECD. Through the analysis of 13 OECD documents, the study reveals that the organization's efforts to redefine teacher professionalism are part of a broader agenda aimed at reforming the public sector according to the principles of new public management.

Finally Charlene Tan and Diwi Binti Abbas examine the idea of global competence in Singaporean schools. Generally the global competence literature has privileged Anglo-American perspectives, and Tan and Abbas explore whether changing the focus to Singapore significantly recasts ideas of global competence. They find that the communitarian underpinnings of Singaporean education significantly reshapes the way global competence is taken up by students, leading them both to value international well-being and their local rootedness. The result is a potentially productive tension that can support students' own values and their vision of a good life for everyone.

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