



International Student Pathways and Supports in Canada: Lessons from Toronto – York Region¹

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International students bring unique opportunities and challenges to Canadian educational institutions and communities that were discussed in a second public forum hosted by the *Building Migrant Resilience in Cities – Immigration et resilience en milieu urbain (BMRC-IRMU)* partnership. The forum emphasized the need for holistic settlement supports and identified gaps in their availability for international students.

[Denis Gravelle](#) (Chief Strategist, Devant) began the forum by outlining Canada's role as a key global study destination with over 40 per cent year-over-year growth in international student intake between 2015 and 2017 (ICEF Monitor Report 2018). A panel discussion facilitated by Woo Kim (Associate Director, International Student and Scholar Services, York International) focused on how to ensure the successful recruitment, retention, and permanent Canadian residence of international students.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

Canada attracts international students at all levels of study; post-secondary education at universities and colleges, and in English as a Second Language (ESL) schools, high schools and elementary schools.

International demand for admission to Canadian colleges has grown exponentially since 2014 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2019). In 2018, college applications were nearly 40 per cent of total study permit applications (Polestar Student Immigration News 2019). Panelists pointed to growing appreciation for applied vocational training, lower costs, fast-tracked study permits, and a path to immigration and employment as driving international applications to colleges.

According to [Arshdeep Sandhu](#), a recent York University international graduate, high tuition fees and the limited availability of scholarships for international students compound the pressures of adapting to Canada. Stress is exacerbated by students' limited knowledge of the services available in the community and their limited eligibility for services.

The growing numbers of young international students enrolling in Canadian K-12 programs also raise distinct issues. [Moy Wong-Tam](#) (Executive Director, Centre for Immigrant and Community Services) discussed the roles of fee-based local legal guardians for minors in high schools and elementary schools. Some 'homestay parents' act as custodians for over two hundred students and some do not even reside in the same city as the minors they host. Without more regulation of the guardianship process by IRCC and school boards, young students can end up in vulnerable and precarious positions.

PSYCHOSOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

International students face a number of unique mental health stressors as they adjust to new academic and social environments. Talking about international students in Peel region, [Baldev Mutta](#) (Founder and CEO, Punjabi Community Health Services) emphasized their unmet mental health and psychosocial needs. The shortage of affordable housing, academic and financial pressures, difficulties accessing services, and limited social support contribute to high rates of 'youth breakdown' for isolated international students.

Some students live in squalid, overcrowded conditions and rely on food banks, while others are victims of price-gouging, malnutrition, and illness. Limited knowledge of their rights as tenants often keeps international students from seeking protection and leaves them vulnerable to being lured into the drug and sex trades.

¹ This summary is based on a review of the BMRC-IRMU Knowledge Exchange Event held at York University in November 2019. The author is responsible for any errors or omissions.

Baldev Mutta commented that rates of suicide, overdose, and depression among international students are rampant and relatively unknown. Current policies leave students trapped and under-served. Study permit visas do not allow breaks from educational programs to deal with family and mental health needs.

University administrators report that international students underutilize existing campus counseling services. They advocate for sufficient and readily accessible mental health services to serve international students who also need insurance that pays the costs of mental health services.

BARRIERS TO RETENTION AND SETTLEMENT

Panelists and the audience described the challenges that international students experience during the transition from their studies to employment and permanent residence. Employers' preference for 'Canadian experience'; challenges of language and culture; and discriminatory hiring practices pose challenges for international students at the beginning of their careers.

International students seldom qualify for internships during their studies or placements upon graduation. Most lack the social and professional connections that help recent graduates secure jobs in the 'hidden' job market where 80 per cent of jobs are filled without public posting (Ryerson University). Jobs are often created for candidates who come to an employer's attention through internal referrals, or recommendations from associates and recruiters. In addition, many employers are unaware that international students can work legally in Canada and hesitate to offer jobs to those with temporary status.

Students often resort to under-the-table 'survival jobs' that threaten their safety and their studies. [Rahila Mushtaq](#) (General Manager, International Student Connect Project, COSTI) described five international students studying outside the GTA, who regularly drove to Toronto on Fridays and worked multiple twelve-hour and fourteen-hour shifts, often sleeping in their car before heading back to classes on Monday.

While the possibility of obtaining permanent residence appeals to international students, immigration processes are often challenging, changing, and complicated. Since

2016, Canada has awarded additional points to applicants for permanent residence who are graduates of Canadian universities and colleges. Yet, the path to permanent residence for international students remains lengthy and costly. In response, students often look for shortcuts that jeopardize their right to live and work in Canada.

SERVICE GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

Panelists and participants noted that even when available, services for international students are fragmented, inconsistent, and marked by lack of training. Significant service gaps and eligibility restrictions were identified. The inclusion of students in the development and delivery of services might also increase awareness and encourage them to use available on- and off-campus services.

As they compete for international student recruitment, Canadian educational institutions have introduced programs to improve international students' experiences before arrival, during their studies, and after graduation. In addition to academic advising, information about housing, finances, and employment is sometimes available. However, under-resourced and overburdened international student offices do not have the capacity to address the growing needs of international students.

Funding support is a persistent issue. Students need specialized services that cannot be provided with the current funding model. Practitioners asked whether a portion of tuition fees could be used to pay for additional student services, as well as for faculty and frontline staff development.

Current programs treat students as solo-sojourners and temporary migrants, without acknowledging that many students come with the intention of staying, often bringing their partners or family. Extending services and resources to accompanying family members and recent graduates is key.

COMMUNITY LINKS AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

The impact of international students in Canada extends far beyond tuition fees. Their contributions support jobs and often enrich local communities.

Practitioners in the audience advocated for coordinated and comprehensive supports for international students in a discussion led by Arslan Mahmood (Director, International Student Services, Seneca College) and Monica Brennan (Manager, Internationally Educated Professionals Bridging Program, York University). Students would benefit from increased social support and settlement advice via holistic wraparound services.

According to Rahila Mushtaq, “whether here for a 1 or 4-year program, international students need to be linked to wider community networks while they are registered at educational institutions, because once they graduate they [are likely to] fall through the cracks [and can] no longer access services on campus.” Educational institutions need to work with the existing ecosystem of service providers to connect students with cultural, religious, and immigrant-serving organizations.

While off-campus services may ease the pressure on international student offices, agencies are not funded to serve international students. Current funding agreements need to be revised to fund services for international students. In addition, the barriers community organizations encounter when trying to serve international students need to be removed. Many are barred from operating on campuses, while other organizations partner with universities and colleges to provide services on a fee-for-service basis.

The International Student Connect (ISC) program offers an alternative model of partnership. In its role as Provincial Coordinator, COSTI Immigrant Services manages the ISC program - a bilingual project funded by the Government of Ontario. It identifies and develops appropriate services to meet the settlement needs of international students in collaboration with twenty-two colleges and universities and the settlement sector. Facilitating collaboration and the expansion of service linkages between educational institutions and settlement agencies requires resolving complex issues such as how to ensure appropriate referrals; how to facilitate student access to organizations; how to increase the availability of in-person and online resources; and how to coordinate funding among service-providers.

In closing, panelists acknowledged a moral and ethical obligation to support international students. They pay tuition fees that are far higher than those paid by domestic students, often while receiving few services. International students need greater support from educational institutions, service providers, communities, and all levels of governments during and after their studies in Canada, and as they seek employment and permanent Canadian residence.

For more information about the panel and upcoming events, please contact bmrcirmu@yorku.ca



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