

“Canada’s Foreign Student Surge Prompts Changes and Anxiety”. Opinion Response to a New York Times Article

By [Tina Renier](#)

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I would like to share my opinions on the article entitled, “[Canada’s Foreign Student Surge Prompts Changes and Anxiety](#)” written by Vjosa Isai and published in the Canada letter on January 6, 2024.

Excerpt from the article

Recruiting foreign students who pay higher tuition fees — roughly five times as much as Canadians to obtain an undergraduate degree, according to the census agency — has always been attractive to the country’s institutions. It has also become increasingly important for the federal government, which is vying to hit a lofty goal of attracting 1.45 million immigrants between 2023 and 2025.

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In Canada, the surge of overseas students has fanned concerns about the readiness of university and college communities to adequately host them, and about efforts to ensure that their labor and their finances are not exploited. The immigration minister, Marc Miller, recently announced a handful of measures taking effect this month for foreign students.

For the first time since the early 2000s, the government has increased the savings threshold that foreign students must have to qualify for a study permit to about 20,600 Canadian dollars, up from 10,000 dollars. And it will continue, until at least April, to allow international students to work more than 20 hours per week, a policy it had previously [walked back](#).

Without providing details, Mr. Miller's ministry said it was also [looking into ways](#) that it could ensure colleges and universities, which are provincially regulated, accept only as many students as they can assist in finding housing.

"Ahead of September 2024, we are prepared to take necessary measures, including significantly limiting visas, to ensure that designated learning institutions provide adequate and sufficient student supports," Mr. Miller said last month at a [news conference](#) in which he announced the changes. He accused some institutions of operating the "diploma equivalent of puppy mills," depriving those foreign students of a positive academic experience in the face of outsize hardships and a lack of intervention by provincial governments.

-[Vjosa Isai, The New York Times](#), January 6, 2024

First, let me commend the editorial team and author of the article for raising awareness on the paradoxes of the influx of international students' presence in Canada, their contributions, and a variety of struggles in their living, studying, and working experiences. I like the fact that the article shared the broader context of Canada's recent immigration policy towards international students that influenced the recent surge. In fact, Canada's major policy document is outlined in its International Education Strategy (2014-2018) and the recent one (2019-2024) where Canada states its ambitious intent to increase the number of international students and to utilize international education as one of the key drivers to foment national, economic, and social development.

Despite the ambitious intent outlined in these key policy documents and Canada's immigration policy, **international students do not only contribute five to six times more in tuition fees than domestic students, but they also contribute \$22 billion to the Canadian economy, according to Global Affairs Canada.**

The issues of labour exploitation due to precarious citizenship status (study permits/temporary status) should be examined in the longer trajectory of the Canadian project of nationhood. In other words, we should interrogate the ways in which Canada established its nation building project and the premises on which nationhood was predicated. When one does an extensive examination of this topic, there are histories that affect the present-day predicament of international students' lived experiences of exploitation and precarity that are often not discussed thoroughly in national discussions.

One of such issues that is often not discussed thoroughly is Canadian universities and classrooms, as sites of ongoing racial-colonial and imperial encounters that promulgates multiple racisms/ systems of oppression, repressive institutional structures, subordination, and subjugation as well as indigenous land dispossession. Professor Sunera Thobani (2022) argues about the same issues raised in this article about precarious labour and citizenship status in one of her texts on 'Coloniality and (in) Justice in the University: Counting for Nothing?' Thobani (2022) debates that there have been multiple and consistent attempts to de-radicalize insurgent, critical scholarship but also to obscure histories that influence contemporary problems.

Precarity is not only a matter of temporary resident status or an exploitation of labour. It is also an existential phenomenon whereby international students are socially constructed as "bodies of out of place" and while they are formally invited

and integrated into Canadian society and institutions such as university through immigration policies, they continue to experience feelings of isolation, silencing, erasure of multiple histories, cultures and identities, social marginalization and labour exploitation because of the values that underpin Canadian state formation, national identity, and foreign policy coordination, domestically and internationally. I also think this article opens important avenues for international/ transnational dialogue about considerations for Canadian policy makers to engage in transformative public policy on international education.

For international education to fulfill a sustainable development imperative, policy objectives and actions need to go beyond simply attracting an influx of international students because of Canada's race in the global competition for international students and instead shift focus on making immigration policy more equitable. Already the Government of Canada has made an important stride in this area by removing limitation of working hours for international students through Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), but more can be done as the years, progress.

I am recommending lowering the threshold of proof of financial status for international students from low-income backgrounds and countries and Canada increasing financial aid for international students in the form of partial, full scholarship and student funding programs for a variety of programs of studies at different levels (undergraduate, Masters and Ph.D.).

I am also aware that the Government of Canada has invested heavily in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programming especially at the university level where there are a number of high academic positions that are dedicated to centralized responsibilities but nevertheless problems of underrepresentation of racialized faculty and students persist as well as feelings of isolation and exclusion. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) needs to have a stronger anti-racism and anti-colonial focus for it to be more effective because equity, diversity inclusion (EDI) currently stands, this regime is a "containment zone" for broader transformational changes.

I also suggest greater collaboration between Canadian employers and Canadian academic institutions along with support from the Government of Canada to enforce stronger labour regulations that protect the rights of international students as student-migrant workers and alleviate labour exploitation in precarious industries such as the services sectors, which they are heavily concentrated in, according to institutional reports and academic journals on Canadian international education.

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Tina Renier is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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