

# International Students' Lived Experiences in Canada. Exploitation in the Labour Market

Benevolent inclusion, "Border Imperialism". Part I

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*"The Canadian federal government is focusing on numbers and dollars without consideration of the infrastructure and regulation to effectively support student, migrant workers. With few options in labour market, many international students are pressured into accepting exploitative employment." —*

Excerpt from Howard Levitt and Lavan Narenthiran, (9 January 2024) in Dark Side of International Student push is exploitation in the Labour Market, Financial Post.

I would like to share my comments on the article entitled, "Dark Side of International Student push is exploitation in the Labour Market" written by Howard Levitt and Lavan Narenthiran in the Financial Post on January 9, 2024.

First, I commend the authors and editorial team for raising awareness to their reading audience about the disparities in international students' perception of Canada before their arrival as well as upon their arrival, their lived experiences of the exploitation of their labour. Internationally, Canada has been well-renowned for its reputation to promote equity, diversity and inclusion in social institutions such as its universities and workplaces. In more recent years, Canadian immigration policy has targeted the recruitment of international students to foment social and economic development, as part of its objectives outlined in the International Education Strategy (2014-2018 and 2019-2024).

Canada launched its International Education Strategy in 2014 because it is heavily invested in building a highly competitive knowledge economy and thus, sees international students as drivers of change by filling critical gaps in the Canadian labour market. In its International Education Strategy, Canada promotes itself as a safe, multi-cultural country that offers high-quality education at an attractive price and a world leader in innovation, research and

development. Consequently, there is an exponential growth in the number of international students (551, 405) in Canada from 184 countries since 2022.

Despite the fact that international students contribute CAD\$22 billion to the Canadian economy, CAD\$2.8 billion in tax revenue in 2016 and they pay five to six times (5-6) more in tuition fees than domestic students, they are not fully integrated or included in Canadian society because they are socially constructed and treated as “bodies out of place”.

Professor Sunera Thobani (2022) highlights that Canada has a racial, hierarchal citizenship structure that determines who fully belongs to the nation-state and who does not belong. The issues of exploitation of international students’ labour due to their temporary legal status and other intersecting factors should be interrogated in the longer trajectory of Canadian project of state formation and national identity. This will allow us to fully understand the implications of the underlying discriminatory mechanics of Canada’s immigration policy targeting the recruitment of international students. The 1976 Immigration Act laid the foundation for discriminatory treatment towards international students paying differential and higher tuition fees than domestic students.

As a former racialized, international student and post-graduate worker, I can attest to the fact that the contemporary predicament of international students’ lived experiences of subordination in work spaces or the Canadian labour market are not often discussed thoroughly in national discourses because international education is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. One of the issues that was not raised in the opinion article is that fact that Canadian universities and workplaces are not sites of benevolent inclusion, as proposed in several federal policy documents. These spaces are sites of border imperialism as there are ongoing, racial-colonial, capitalist and imperial encounters that permeates repressive, institutional structures, subjugation as well as indigenous land dispossession.

Border imperialism is embedded in the class structure of Canada’s immigration policy targeting international students with specific amount of savings or proof of financial independence as part of the study permit application requirements’ package.

It is also evident in the fact that the international students are typically employed in low-waged, service industries in the labour market where there is little or no enforcement of employment standards at the provincial or federal government levels. Therefore, precariousness is not only a matter of a labour market position or matter of a lack of Canadian citizenship status. It is also an existential phenomenon that is prevalent in international students’ every day interactions and lived experiences.

This article opens crucial avenues to re-imagine alternative considerations for Canadian policy makers to engage in fairer, more transformative approaches in international education. In order for international education to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development, Canadian policy makers need to ensure that their policy objectives, decisions and actions go beyond simply attracting an influx of international students to earn record-level profits.

This can be done by reducing the low income cut off (LICO) threshold requirement for potential international students to study in Canada, as most international students are from regions of the world that are affected by economic policies such as local currency depreciation. The Government of Canada should be commended for a significant stride for

removing the limitation of working hours for international students through Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) but more needs to be done for this important group of migrant workers as the years, progress. The Government of Canada should deeply consider one of Just Peace Advocates' recommendation, to adopt an international convention protecting migrant workers.

I recommend that financial aid in the form of partial and full scholarships should be increased for international students from different regions or countries. Finally, I recommend that there should be a stronger anti-colonial, anti-racist lens in the applicability of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) capacity building for universities and workplaces. Additionally, there should be stronger oversight mechanisms to mitigate breaches in the labour and human rights of migrant student-workers. This will ensure that Canada's truly fulfill its objective as being a global leader in inclusion rather than maintaining the status quo of enforcing geographic and social lines of demarcation through border imperialism.

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#### Sources

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