

University Internationalization, Immigration, and the Canadian Dream: How Federal Citizenship Immigration Legislation Marginalizes International Graduate Students

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An Overview

From 2014 to 2017, Canada's citizenship and immigration policies underwent significant changes that directly impacted international students in Canada, and through extension, the internationalization of Canadian higher education. At a time when "international education is critical to Canada's success" and "is at the heart of [Canada's] future prosperity" (Government of Canada 2014, p. 4), it is critical that scholars look at how citizenship and immigration policies are linked with the internationalization aspirations of higher education, as it relates to international student recruitment, support, and retention. Canada's International Education Strategy seeks to increase the number of international students studying in the country and to make it a global hub for education to compete with other host countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

This article is part of a larger study that looked at the relationship between citizenship and immigration policies and the internationalization of higher education in Canada. Around the time when Canada published its International Education Strategy, the Canadian federal government and Citizenship and Immigration Canada, under the leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada, reformed Canada's Citizenship Act. These changes significantly impacted international students studying in Canada (Adams, Macklin, and Omidvar 2014). These changes meant that international students were no longer given a time credit for the years they spent in Canada studying as an international student when applying to Canadian citizenship. They would also have to live in Canada for longer to be eligible for Canadian citizenship. Last, other federal policy changes dictated that only certified immigration consultants at the university could offer immigration advice, limiting how much support international students could get from the university on immigration matters. Some feared that these changes would marginalize international students and make Canada an unattractive place to study

(Tamburri 2014). While the current Liberal government in Canada curtailed some of the restrictive elements of Canada's citizenship and immigration policies (McCallum 2016; Zilio 2016), the reality is that international graduate students still face barriers and challenges with Canada's citizenship and immigration policies pathways.

As such, this article discusses how Canada's citizenship and immigration policies impacted international graduate students who aspired to transition into permanent residents and eventually Canadian citizens. The article will discuss why international students chose Canada to pursue graduate studies, why they want to become permanent residents and Canadian citizens, and share the challenges international students face when going through Canada's immigration pathways. Last, this article will discuss the detriments of systemic barriers to Canada's citizenship and immigration pathways and how that will impact both Canadian universities looking to internationalize and ultimately Canada's future economic prosperity.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

I collected data for this study using qualitative methodologies and an instrumental case study approach. The qualitative approach was useful because I wanted thick and descriptive data with respect to how international graduate students were affected by Canada's citizenship and immigration policies (Shavelson and Town 2002). Using an instrumental case study (Yin 2014), I was able to investigate internationalization, as a phenomenon prevalent in Canada, with respect to Canada's citizenship and immigration policies.

This study was conducted as a research-intensive public university in Southern Ontario called Central University (pseudonym) that is dedicated to internationalization on campus by increasing the number of international students in both its undergraduate and

graduate programs. Data was collected in the summer of 2015, about four to five months prior to the 2015 Canadian federal elections. I collected my data through both policy analysis and interviews. First, I analyzed a series of policies that included Central University's Strategic Plan and its complementary International Action Plan for 2014-2019. Other policy documents included Canada's International Education Strategy, Canada's Citizenship Act, Bill C-24 of the Citizenship Act that introduced the restrictions places on international students, and Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Systematically reviewing these policies gave me a better understanding federal citizenship and immigration legislations, understand the nature of internationalization at Central University, and gave me a sense of if the federal government and the university made a link between citizenship, immigration, and higher education internationalization. A thorough understanding of the polices also guided what questions I would ask during my interviews with university administrators and international students.

Second, I interviewed ten university administrators and staff members who are responsible for internationalizing the university and ten international graduate students from across the various faculties and departments at Central University. All the interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in their nature, which gave me an opportunity to ask clarifying questions as the interview progressed. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes. While the university administrator perspective is invaluable, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address their views. As such, this article will focus primarily on the voices of the international graduate students I interviewed in my study and will highlight their experiences with Canada's citizenship and immigration policies.

Using Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Edwards and Fenwick 2014; Latour 2005; Law 2009) as a way to do Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) (Ball 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010), I used a critical-sociomaterial approach to understand the intended and unintended consequences of how citizenship and immigration laws impacted international graduate students and how these participants were assembled around Canada's citizenship, immigration, and internationalization policies. ANT attention to sociomateriality seeks to understand how material objects exert agency to affect the network of relationships between actors. At the heart of this research is a re-evaluation of what is "critical" in CPA. While CPA has been used to understand whose voices are championed and whose agendas are ignored, sociomaterial theories such as ANT opens the analysis

by exploring what is produced as a result of the connections between actors and actor-networks. Thus, using the critical-sociomaterial approach allowed me to explore citizenship, immigration, and internationalization policies in a relational context. As such, I was able to understand how international graduate students were affected by these policies and understand how much of their voice and concerns were reflected in policy documents.

International Graduate Students Find Canada Desirable for Study and Stay

International graduate students were attracted to Canada because of the quality and affordability of its higher education, the quality of graduate programs at Central University, and the existing personal connections they had in the country. Canada promised international graduate students a "world-renowned education" and the ability to work "with the best researchers in the world" shared Adam, a health science Masters student from the Middle East (personal communication July 7, 2015). Additionally, "when an international student selects a country they are going to study in, the immigration policy is [also] part of the factor" argued Chi, a Chinese international graduate student in mechanical engineering, who explained why he chose Canada (personal communication July 9, 2015). Irrefutably, the opportunity to transition from international student to permanent resident to Canadian citizen was a pull-factor for almost all the participants in my study. A 2013 survey of international students conducted by The Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) showed that close of half of 50% of those interviewed wanted to transition to permanent residency whereas roughly 25% of students planned to work in Canada for up to three years after graduation, before returning to their home countries (Humphries, Rauh and McDine 2013; Ortiz and Choudaha 2014).

International graduate students wanted to become Canadian permanent residents and citizens for a variety of reasons. Andrea, a PhD candidate in Hispanic Studies, argued that being able to stay in Canada after graduation would give her and her children a better life than what they had in Cuba. Time and time again, participants claimed that permanent residence would allow them to secure a job in Canada. For many, Canada was a land of opportunity. Isabella, a PhD candidate in Chemistry from Mexico, claimed that her peers "were getting good job opportunities" once they had transitioned from being an international student to permanent resident (personal communication July 10, 2015). Canada's citizenship and

immigration pathways gives preference to those who have job offers from Canadian employers.

Many participants felt that they were making positive contributions to Canadian academia, the labor market, and society. "International students bring diversity of knowledge into [the] university" with their "different opinions" and "new energy" shared Lei, a Chinese graduate student in the health sciences (personal communication July 7, 2015). Others felt that international students acted as cultural and communication bridges between Canada and their home countries, which in turn fostered greater cultural understanding. Almost all felt that their research contributions could benefit Canadian society. For instance, Sophia, a Masters student from Northern Europe, felt that her expertise and research in rehabilitation services could be transferred to communities in Northern Canada and support those who need occupational therapy. Others such as Ezekiel, a Ghanaian, who conducted policy research on renewable energy argued that his area of research and expertise would help address the various issues associated with wind energy implementation in Ontario. There is no doubt that international students, as a result of their studies in Canada, possess skills, knowledge, and expertise that can benefit Canada's industries and economy.

International Graduate Students Face Barriers to Immigration

Participants cited changing immigration policies, the inability to keep up with the latest policy changes, the lack of access to campus resources with respect to immigration, and systemic barriers within Canada's immigration pathways as challenges to becoming Canadian permanent residents and citizens. Most participants only became aware of how to become permanent resident once they saw themselves staying in Canada post-graduation. However, accessing the latest information was frustrating. Sophia argued that "one of the biggest hindrances, [was the] lack of information. You get information here and information there and maybe they don't match. So it's kind of misleading" (personal communication July 14, 2015).

Once participants got to know the process, they shared that they were getting mixed messages from Canada. On one hand, international students are courted by the federal government in policy documents and by universities to internationalize Canadian higher education. On the other hand, Canada's citizenship and immigration policies marginalize international graduate students from accessing both the Canadian labor market

and permanent residency. From the ten interviews with international graduate students in this study, it became clear that immigration was not the strongest pull factor for their decision to study in Canada. They were largely attracted by the reputation of Canadian universities, the high quality of the education provided at Canadian institutions, and the research opportunities afforded to them by the university. It is only after international students spend time in Canada do they realize they want to stay and continue living and working in the country. International graduate students in Canada can apply to become permanent residents through the federal government's Express Entry system, which ranks applicants according to criteria based on the applicant's educational and occupational backgrounds, language abilities, and whether or not they can make an economic contribution to Canada. Only those who acquire a designated threshold are invited to apply to become Canadian permanent residents. However, the pathway poses many systemic barriers. Participants noted that priority is given to those who have Canadian job experience and/or a job offer from a Canadian employer. However, "for international students...it is hard to find one" noted Chi (personal communication July 9, 2015). International graduate students shared that it was difficult for them to work full-time while completing graduate studies. Those who worked as teaching or research assistants on campus were unsure if their work counted as Canadian work experiences within the Express Entry system.

Others shared that many Canadian employers were hesitant to hire foreign employees. Participants shared that in order to hire a foreigner, Canadian employers had to file a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). The LMIA is in place to ensure that Canadian citizens and permanent residents get priority for jobs over foreigners. However, for international students, Canada's labor laws, in conjunction with Canada's immigration laws made it extremely difficult for them to become permanent residents. "So it becomes this, sort of catch-22 of, 'I can't get a job because I don't have status. I don't have status because I can't get a job'" lamented Karen, an American PhD student studying in Canada (personal communication June 30, 2015).

The money needed to apply to and be eligible for the Express Entry pathways was also a barrier to international graduate students. "Applying for permanent resident status...is...stupid expensive" exclaimed Karen (personal communication June 30, 2015). Express Entry applicants who want to apply as skilled workers need to have roughly \$12,000 in their bank account to demonstrate that they can support themselves. This

amount is extremely difficult for cash-strapped international students to save. Richard, a Ghanaian Masters student shared that international students do not make enough money as teaching assistants to save \$12,000. For students with a family like Sophia, this sum adds up to \$22,000. Other pathways within the Express Entry system such as the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP) costs \$1500. Student visa regulations dictate that international students can only work for a limited number of hours. They also have to focus on their studies and research instead of looking for employment outside of the university. Both these factors limit how much money students can save to apply to become permanent residents.

International students also have to pay for and take an English language proficiency test as part of the immigration application. Many participants felt that the English test was an unnecessary hassle seeing that international students were required to demonstrate adequate English language proficiency prior to studying in Canada. Moreover, after doing graduate work in English at a Canadian university, many participants questioned the government's rationale for requiring international students to take another English test. Participants claimed that the English test was an unnecessary, costly, and time-intensive requirement that placed an undue burden on their already stressful academic lives.

Barriers Make Students Feel Unwelcomed and Hinder Recruitment and Retention

These barriers made international graduate students feel unwelcomed, unwanted, and undervalued in Canada. "Irrespective of our skills and PhD degrees, we don't think [Canada] really want us here because everything is indicative of the fact that [Canada] want us to suffer more to stay here" shared Ezekiel who argued that it may be better for him to seek employment and career opportunities elsewhere. Others such as Karen argued that while "it is fine enough" to get a student visa under current regulations, the barriers meant that "retaining people...is going to be a lot harder" (personal communication June 30, 2015).

Some participants noted that Canada, in comparison to the United States and the United Kingdom, was easier to immigrate to as a student. However, others felt that systemic barriers within Canada's immigration pathways would make Canada an unattractive place for future international students to come and study. Moreover, participants expressed that frustrated Canadian-trained international talent would seek greener pastures

elsewhere if federal immigration policies continued to marginalize international graduate students. Students such as Charles, an international student from Indonesia, argued that international students are "pretty open to going somewhere else" if they "don't have...options in Canada" (personal communication July 8, 2015). Participants noted that Canada spent a lot of time, money, and resources on nurturing and training international students. However, the systemic barriers coupled with the lack of employment opportunities and the feelings of frustration with Canada's immigration system meant that many students were looking to return home or seek opportunities in Canada's competitor countries. As Richard boldly stated, "at the end of the day, [Canada] has lost" (personal communication July 17, 2015).

Conclusions and Implications for Canada

The implications of Canada's citizenship and immigration policies on higher education and specifically on international student recruitment and retention is significant. International students "are the ideal immigrants if you assume the perspective that you want immigrants who produce economic benefits for Canada" (Tamburri 2013). The sentiment is shared by the former Liberal immigration minister, John McCallum who championed a few changes to the Express Entry pathways after the Liberal government won the 2015 federal elections and reverted some of the restrictions placed by the former Conservative government. Under the new rules, international students will be given back their time credit for studying in Canada. Additionally, under the Express Entry's new ranking system, international students who have Canadian post-secondary degrees will be awarded 30 points, increasing their chances of being invited to apply to become permanent residents. Moreover, the revised Express Entry places less emphasis on having a job as a prerequisite for being immigration eligibility (Zilio 2016). While these changes are undoubtedly welcome news by international students, only time will tell how these new regulations will play out.

Despite the changes, the systemic barriers mentioned by the participants still exist. The costs associated with the application, lack of recognition of work done within the university, the lack of access to immigration support, changing regulations, and employers' reluctance to hire foreigners continues to add to the frustrations and struggles endured by international graduate students who are eager to make Canada home. This study clearly demonstrates that while international students are key actors in Canada's internationalization aspirations, they

nevertheless have little say in how federal citizenship, immigration, and through extension, labor policies affect them. Silencing their voices perpetuates the problematic normalized narrative that international students are merely objects and commodities to be used in Canada's internationalization project (Trilokekar & Kizilbash 2013).

The findings from this study show that the Canadian federal government is largely unaware of the struggles faced by international students. If Canada is serious about attracting the best minds from around the world and ensuring that it is competitive in today's knowledge-economy (as articulated in Canada's federal International Education Strategy), the Canadian federal government must examine citizenship, immigration, and internationalization in a relational context. They must uncover how sweeping reforms to immigration laws impacts international students on the ground. Doing so will not only ensure that Canada remains an attractive place to study but will also guarantee that Canadian-trained international talent will choose to make Canada home post-graduation. Only from the contributions of these skilled-workers to Canadian society, industry, and economy can Canada achieve excellence on the world stage.

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