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## The Diversity Business: Narratives of International Student Recruitment in Canadian Universities

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**ABSTRACT:** *The ways universities frame international recruitment reflect core institutional values and influence efforts toward equity and inclusion. Previous research on racial diversity in the US suggests that institutions tend to rely on instrumental rationales (i.e., justifying diversity in terms of institutional and economic benefits) rather than moral rationales (i.e., affirming diversity as an intrinsic value). We examined international recruitment narratives across 28 Canadian university websites and internationalization plans, yielding a total of 174 statements containing 338 rationales. We found that recruitment websites often featured diversity-related justifications, whereas internationalization plans primarily framed recruitment in terms of broader economic and academic motivations. Across recruitment websites and internationalization plans, instrumental rationales significantly outweigh moral rationales. Additionally, a negative correlation between instrumental and moral rationales suggests that institutions tend to prioritize instrumental rationales over moral ones. Canadian universities frame international diversity in ways that align with institutional and majority-group interests, raising concerns about structural inequities for international students.*

**Keywords:** Diversity rationales; International student; Internationalization; recruitment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Universities often feature diversity statements on their websites to publicly affirm their commitment to equity and inclusion. While such diversity branding can convey genuine values and a commitment to inclusion, it may also mask deeper institutional motives, raising important questions about authenticity and impact (De Meulenaere & De Boom, 2024). For example, universities often employ diversity branding to attract talent, citing that cultural diversity is important because it can foster innovation through unique perspectives (Starck et al., 2021). While acknowledging the positive impact, studies highlight its negative consequences for underrepresented students (Leslie et al., 2025). For instance, research examining American universities has found that the most prevalent rationales in diversity statements defend diversity with instrumental reasons (highlighting the benefit of diversity to the institution) rather than moral reasons (a matter of social responsibility and ethical standards). Moreover, universities that adopt instrumental rationales on their website tend to have lower graduation rates for underrepresented students (Starck et al., 2021). This difference emerges because instrumental (vs. moral) diversity statements reflect institutional culture that treats diversity as a means to enhance prestige or serve business purposes rather than genuine inclusion, and this can undermine belonging and trigger social identity threat (feeling of anxiety in situations where one's social identity is stigmatized/devalued) among underrepresented students (Froehlich et al., 2023; Wilton et al., 2015).

Many universities include diversity statements to signal inclusion and attract international students, but it remains unclear whether their recruitment efforts are driven by instrumental or moral reasons and whether they rely on “diversity branding” (i.e., signal inclusivity without necessarily committing to corresponding practices; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). To understand these questions, we aim to review both public-facing content (e.g., international student recruitment webpages) and internal-facing, publicly available strategic documents (i.e., internationalization plans) from Canadian universities. This question is important because Canadian universities heavily recruit international students, who make up more than 20% of the higher education enrollment in 2023, which marks one of the highest proportions among OECD countries (Statistics Canada, 2024). As Canadian universities are reliant on international student recruitment while simultaneously claiming commitments to inclusion, equity, and global engagement, it is important to examine the potential of pseudo-internationalization, an approach that emphasizes recruitment, branding, and

institutional benefits while giving less attention to ethical responsibilities, inclusion, or global equity (Buckner & Stein, 2020). If Canadian universities are more instrumentally than morally motivated on internal strategic documents than public-facing content, this may indicate a superficial commitment to diversity and deep instrumental ethos that can perpetuate inequality and undermine institutional credibility. This critical analysis can potentially deepen our awareness and understanding of the current state of internationalization in higher education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Diversity Statement: Why Instrumental Rationales Often Predominate Over Moral Ones**

The justification for racial and cultural diversity in educational contexts began from a moral standpoint rooted in principles of justice and aimed to combat racial discrimination (Dudziak, 1999). However, instrumental rationales for equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts have gained popularity (Moses & Chang, 2006; Starck et al., 2021). These rationales ironically emphasize diversity benefits for the majority group rather than minority groups (Hurd & Plaut, 2018). This emphasis on instrumental framing reflects a strategic alignment with majority group interests and broader institutional goals. In particular, instrumental rationales have gained traction because they resonate more strongly with dominant group members.

Instrumental rationales have gained popularity because they not only discuss tangible benefits for the majority group but also reduce concern with being labeled prejudiced. Starck et al. (2021) found that White students favored instrumental rationales due to a greater sense of belonging, perceived educational value, and reduced threats to their social identity. Instrumental rationales seem to appeal to the dominant groups for three reasons (Starck et al., 2021). First, they prioritize the benefits of diversity to White students over minority students. Second, they use abstract definitions of diversity that are inclusive of White people, offering them a sense of belonging within diversity that is not found within moral rationales. In contrast, moral rationales often celebrate racial diversity, which can invoke feelings of exclusion among White individuals (Plaut et al., 2011). Third, instrumental rationales reduce feelings of threat toward the dominant group by avoiding discussions of systemic racism, whereas moral rationales typically address racial discrimination and prejudice, which can invoke perceived threat in White individuals (Vorauer et al., 1998).

### **Diversity Rationales in Canadian Higher Education: The Case of Internationalization**

In Canada, the shift of rationales used for diversity, particularly regarding international student recruitment, mirrors these American trends, albeit within a distinct historical context. Originally, Canada's internationalization strategies were grounded in more moral commitments related to global justice, foreign aid,

and international cooperation (McCartney, 2021; Poitras, 2019). However, a profound shift toward economic and instrumental justifications occurred as Canada's foreign policy began prioritizing commercial and diplomatic interests. In the late 1970s, increasing tuition fees for international students sparked controversies, but such moral concerns diminished as economic rationales became normalized (McCartney, 2021). This is largely due to the intentional rebranding of international students as "economically advantaged," which also contributes to the "rich international student" stereotype (Bannerji, 2000).

This economic framing of international students was reinforced and intensified through policy developments. In the early 2000s, federal reports and policy documents increasingly depicted international students as contributors to Canada's economic prosperity, global reputation, and local demographic needs (McCartney, 2021). Revised immigration strategies and national branding campaigns positioned international students as ideal future immigrants who would bolster Canada's economy (Brunner, 2016; Stein, 2017). As a result, international education became one of Canada's important economic sources.

Global equity in access and student success, once central to Canada's international education agenda, became secondary as the economic benefits of internationalization took precedence. This shift is not coincidental; it reflects broader influences of neoliberalism in higher education globally (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Elken et al., 2023; Gao & Liu, 2023; Otto et al., 2021).

### **From Global Citizens to Revenue: Consequences of Instrumental Internationalization**

While the expansion of international student recruitment has been economically advantageous, it reflects a shift in the institutional values of higher education away from supporting international students as global citizens and toward recruiting them as revenue sources (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Elken et al., 2023). This pseudo-internationalization overly emphasizes recruitment while failing to meaningfully address ethical responsibilities or global inequality (Buckner & Stein, 2020; Elken et al., 2023). Moreover, as institutions prioritize recruitment volume over support, international students face increasing challenges in their learning experiences and well-being (Gao & Liu, 2023). Research has shown that international students often face prejudice, financial hardship, and food insecurity, countering portrayals of them as economically privileged (Cui et al., 2017; Giamos et al., 2017; Green et al., 2018; Malette & Ismailzai, 2020). These realities raise concerns that an institutional shift toward instrumental rationales has created an environment in which international students' vulnerabilities are not only overlooked but also structurally reproduced.

This rapid, economically incentivized expansion raises broader concerns about the long-term consequences of relying predominantly on instrumental rationales to justify international student recruitment. When institutions prioritize international students for the economic and reputational benefits they bring, such as tuition revenue, diversity optics, and global rankings, rather than valuing them as individuals with distinct needs and rights, they risk creating extractive

relationships that undermine well-being and exacerbate inequality (Buckner et al., 2022; Starck et al., 2021). This instrumental culture may contribute to policy gaps, inadequate support services, and exploitative recruitment practices. Furthermore, when public-facing diversity rhetoric masks internal economic motives, it may foster perceptions of insincerity and reduce trust among both international students and the broader campus community. Ultimately, this disconnection between stated values and underlying motivations can exacerbate social injustice and inequality (Starck et al., 2021).

### **The Present Study**

The content on international-student recruitment webpages and internationalization plans reflects the organization's underlying ethos (Davis et al., 2007; Palmer & Short, 2008). These texts serve as a mirror of universities' culture (Starck et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study analyzes these materials to address the following questions:

- RQ1: To what extent do international student recruitment webpages reflect moral versus instrumental diversity rationales?
- RQ2: To what extent do internationalization plans reflect moral versus instrumental diversity rationales?
- RQ3: Do universities rely more on general or specific diversity language in their rationales?
- RQ4: In internationalization plans, what types of benefits are attributed to international student recruitment, who is framed as receiving these benefits (e.g., domestic students, the institution, international students), and what is the specific nature of those benefits?

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

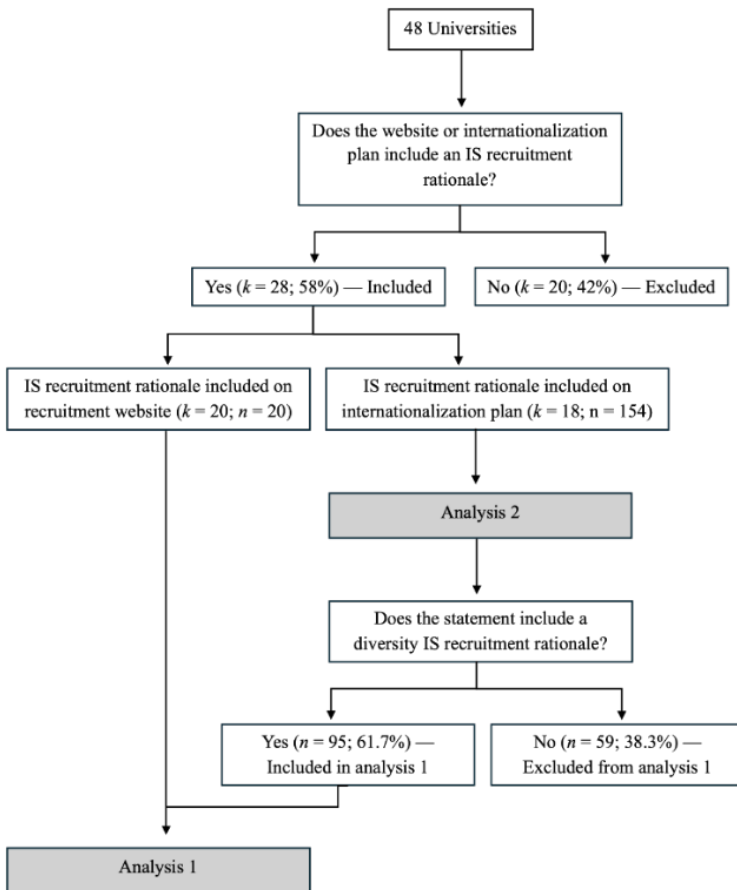
We conduct quantitative content analysis by systematically collecting materials (university public websites and internationalization plans), extracting relevant information (diversity statements and recruitment rationales), coding the data based on existing coding schemes (Starck et al., 2021), and quantifying the results (prevalence and comparisons).

#### **Sampling: Data Collection and Extraction**

We targeted our search within all national universities listed in Maclean's University rankings for the 2022/23 academic year, allowing us to gather data across three types (undergraduate, comprehensive, and medical/doctoral) of credible universities ( $k = 48$ ; Maclean's, 2023). We systematically searched these university websites between November 2023 and March 2024. To ensure relevance and comparability, universities were included in the analysis if they

presented at least one publicly available document outlining their rationale for recruiting international students (IS). Documents considered valid included internationalization plans, strategic plans with dedicated international sections, or webpages aimed at prospective IS. Institutions that did not publish such materials online or lacked explicit rationales were excluded. We systematically searched and collected text on the university web pages that expressed an IS recruitment rationale. As shown in Figure 1, of the 48 universities included in our search, 28 included an IS recruitment rationale, either within an internationalization plan or on a recruitment webpage.

**Figure 1: Search results for international student recruitment rationales**



*Note.* Decision tree showing how IS recruitment rationales were identified across 48 university websites and internationalization plans. Our content analyses are based on 20 university websites and 18 internationalization plan documents. Among these universities, 10 universities communicated their rationales through both student-facing webpages and policy documents, and 20 universities did not provide any IS recruitment rationales on either an internationalization plan or a recruitment webpage.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Recruitment webpages focused exclusively on diversity-related justifications, whereas internationalization plans presented a broader range of motivations for recruiting international students, including diversity, economic, and other strategic benefits. To address our research questions, we conducted two content analyses (see Figure 1), with analysis 1 focusing on diversity-related rationales and analysis 2 focusing on other details of internationalization plans. These analytic strategies were selected to allow both comparison of moral and instrumental emphases within the same content and a broader examination of how institutions justify international student recruitment across document types.

***Analysis 1: Coding Diversity-Related IS Recruitment Rationales***

In Analysis 1, we examined the extent to which IS recruitment rationales reflected moral (value-based) versus instrumental (benefit-based) diversity rationales. This included comparing rationales found in public-facing recruitment webpages (Analysis 1.1, addressing RQ1) to those in internal internationalization plans (Analysis 1.2, addressing RQ2). We also assess the prevalence of general versus specific diversity language across both sources (Analysis 1.3, addressing RQ3).

**Analysis 1.1:** The identified webpage-derived IS recruitment rationales were independently rated by the first author and a research assistant. Notably, none of these rationales referred to economic gain, institutional prestige, or revenue generation. Instead, the content emphasized a mix of instrumental rationales (i.e., benefits derived from diversity) and moral rationales (i.e., the intrinsic value of diversity; see Table 1 for examples). As such, webpage content was analyzed only for its degree of morality versus instrumentality.

**Table 1: Summary of Moral and Instrumental Rationales Coding**

| Category                | Definition   | Examples from universities in the current study  |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Instrumental Rationales | Present diversity (by recruiting international students) is beneficial to the institution, highlighting how international students contribute to the university. | - “.....International students represent an important component of the University’s efforts to internationalize. They enhance the cultural diversity of campus and bring a different and important array of perspectives to the classroom. In simple terms, they bring the world to (university) .....”<br>- “.....What value is there in bringing an international perspective to the work and function of the University? The short answer is that the world is becoming increasingly interconnected. What was once global is now local. Commerce, research, travel, and the fluidity of ever-broadening career choices present new opportunities for international movement and collaboration.....” |

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|                  |   |  |
|------------------|---|--|
| Moral Rationales | Present diversity as an intrinsic value, emphasizing fairness, equality, and the broader or ethical importance of hosting international students. | - “.....We are working together to prepare globally competent students, developing and disseminating knowledge, and making significant contributions to global initiatives that enhance peace, health, environment and prosperity both locally and internationally.....”<br>- “We believe that international and intercultural fluencies create a stronger, kinder, more inclusive, prosperous, and ultimately more resilient and sustainable society. Enabling such fluency will continue to be at the core of our work. All university of [X] students – both domestic and international—benefit tremendously from the opportunity. to engage with global communities, perspectives, and the diversity of knowledge gained on our campuses.....” |
|------------------|---|--|

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To determine the extent to which the collected statements reflect moral rationale versus instrumental rationale, the two coders follow the coding framework adapted from Starck et al. (2021). This framework involved rating each statement on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much) for both instrumental and moral orientations. Rating both dimensions independently allows statements to contain varying degrees of each rationale, rather than forcing them into mutually exclusive categories. We found that two coders show reliable coding for moral rationale rating (ICC = 0.77; good reliability) and instrumental rationale rating (ICC = 0.77)<sup>1</sup>. Based on the coding, we ran a pair-sampled *t* test to compare the rating between moral and instrument rationales. Paired-sample *t* tests were used because moral and instrumental ratings were derived from the same set of university statements, allowing for within-university comparison.

**Analysis 1.2:** For diversity-related statements identified within internationalization plan documents, we applied the same coding framework used for website content. Specifically, statements categorized as diversity benefits (*n* = 95; 61.7% of internationalization plan statements) were independently rated by the first author and a research assistant for moral rationale (ICC = 0.90) and instrumental rationale (ICC = 0.82). Similarly, we ran a pair-sampled *t* test and correlation to examine the differences and associations between the ratings of moral and instrument rationales.

**Analysis 1.3:** We further examined the specificity of diversity rationales within recruitment websites and internationalization plans. Coders documented the frequency of diversity-related language (e.g., terms such as “diverse,” “race,”

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, we used ChatGPT-4 to assist in additional pattern checking. The AI was prompted by the same coding scheme and subsequently feeding each IS recruitment rationale for coding. Together, the two human coders and the AI coder reached an ICC = .55 (moderate reliability) for moral ratings and ICC = .77 (good reliability) for instrumental ratings. This further shows that our coding protocol is reliable.

“language,” and “religion”). We performed a word count analysis to describe the frequency of references to specific forms of diversity. This analysis was used as a descriptive approach to identify patterns in how diversity is linguistically framed within the texts, particularly the extent to which institutions rely on generic versus specific terminology. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of how diversity rationales are articulated.

### ***Analysis 2: Coding for Types of Benefit within Internationalization Plans***

In Analysis 2 (RQ4), we conducted a more detailed examination of the rationales in internationalization plans. In addition to moral and instrumental diversity rationales (see Analysis 1.2), universities expressed a broader range of motivations for hosting IS in internationalization plans. Accordingly, a more comprehensive, multilevel coding strategy was created to capture (1) the type of benefit cited (i.e., diversity-related, economic, or other), (2) the intended beneficiaries (i.e., domestic students, international students, the institution, the local/national community, or the global community), and (3) the specific nature of each benefit (e.g., tuition revenue, intercultural competence, exposure to diverse perspectives, or research contributions). For example, a statement highlighting international students’ “foster intercultural understanding among domestic students” was coded as a (1) diversity-related benefit for (2) domestic students, with the specific benefit being the development of (3) intercultural competence. This multilevel coding approach was used to capture the complexity of institutional rationales beyond the moral-instrumental distinction, particularly in documents that included a wider range of justifications.

The first author and two research assistants followed this coding strategy to independently identify statements, achieving percent agreement above 80%. The last author addressed and reconciled any discrepancies, yielding a total of 154 statements (i.e., sentences or groups of connected sentences) encompassing 318 specific rationales (i.e., specific arguments for recruiting IS; some statements included multiple rationales).

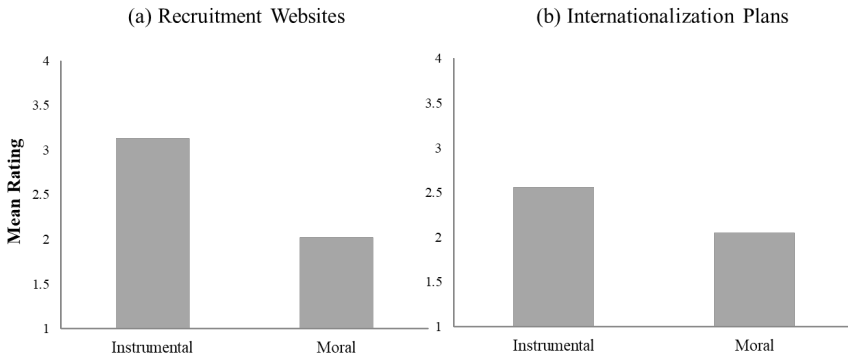
## **RESULTS**

### **Analysis 1**

#### ***RQ1: Diversity Rationales in University Recruitment Websites***

Analysis 1.1 included 20 webpage content featuring at least one IS recruitment rationale. We conducted a pair-sample *t* test to examine the degree of instrumental and moral orientations of the webpage IS recruitment rationales (see Figure 2a). We found that the rating for instrumental orientation ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) is significantly higher than that for moral orientation ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $t(19) = 2.77$ ,  $MDif = 1.12$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $g = 1.12$ , 95% CI [0.25, 2.06].

**Figure 2: Instrumental and Moral Ratings of Recruitment Rationales from (a) International Student Recruitment Websites and (b) University Internationalization Plans**



### ***RQ2: International Student Rationales in Internationalization Plans***

Compared to webpage content, internationalization plans offered a broader and more diverse set of rationales (see Analysis 2). Here, focusing on the rating of moral and instrumental diversity rationales ( $n = 95$  statements), the paired-sample  $t$  test showed (see Figure 2b) that the instrumental rating ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) is significantly higher than the moral ones ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = .81$ ),  $t(94) = 3.84$ ,  $MDif = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $g = 0.64$ ,  $95\%CI = [0.30, 0.99]$ .

### ***RQ3: Frequency of General vs. Specific Diversity References***

Within the recruitment websites ( $k = 20$ ), 8 universities mentioned “diversity” in a general way, and 6 universities explicitly referenced “cultural diversity” or used terms such as “multicultural” or “multiculturalism.” The remaining 6 universities mention diversity indirectly (e.g., international students bring global perspective), and not a single university mentioned specific dimensions of diversity, such as racial, ethnic, linguistic, or religious diversity. This pattern shows a clear preference for broad, generalized references over any detailed or nuanced discussion of diversity.

Similar to public-facing recruitment websites, IS recruitment rationales in internationalization plans emphasized broad terms such as “diversity” (49 mentions) and “culture” or “multicultural” (33 mentions). In contrast, more specific forms of diversity received little attention: linguistic or language diversity was mentioned only once, with no references to race, ethnicity, or religion. These findings reveal a consistent pattern in which universities prioritize generalized, nonspecific notions of diversity in their discourse on IS recruitment.

### **Analysis 2 (RQ4): Contents of Rationales in Internationalization Plans**

In addition to moral and instrumental rationales, universities expressed a broader range of motivations for hosting IS in internationalization plans. Based on our coding schemes, we identified 154 statements, yielding a total of 318 IS recruitment rationales. Below, we describe the content in terms of (1) benefit type (diversity, economic, other), (2) beneficiary (who benefits), and (3) relationships between the benefit type and different beneficiaries.

### ***Benefit Type Summary***

**Diversity Benefit:** Overall, 50.6% of all rationales ( $n = 161$  out of 318) were classified as diversity-related, meaning they discussed benefits related to diversity. Next, we breakdown the diversity benefits by beneficiary and specific rationale type. The majority of these diversity-related rationales (81.4%,  $n = 131$ ) described benefits for domestic students, the institution, or the local/national community that were derived from international students' diversity. Among these, domestic students were the most frequently cited beneficiaries ( $n = 113$ ), with common examples including exposure to diversity on campus ( $n = 41$ ) and increased opportunities to gain intercultural competence ( $n = 39$ ). Other recurrent themes for domestic students included exposure to diverse perspectives ( $n = 22$ ) and improved academic benefits through diverse perspectives ( $n = 7$ ). Institutional diversity benefits ( $n = 7$ ) primarily emphasized that international students' diverse perspectives and experiences enhance the quality and scope of research contributions. Local/national community benefits ( $n = 11$ ) focused on cultural development and community diversity.

The remaining 18.6% of diversity-related rationales ( $n = 30$ ) focused on how international students or the global community benefit from exposure to diverse peoples on campus or in Canada. For international students ( $n = 28$ ), the most frequently cited benefits included enhanced intercultural competence ( $n = 13$ ), increased exposure to diversity ( $n = 7$ ), and opportunities for relationship building with other students ( $n = 5$ ). Two rationales described benefits for the global community, such as international students applying their Canadian experiences and perspectives to address challenges or promote diversity in their home countries.

**Economic Benefit:** Economic benefits accounted for 31.8% of all rationales ( $n = 101$  out of 318). Next, we breakdown the diversity benefits by beneficiary and specific rationale type. Most of these economic rationales described benefits for the institution ( $n = 53$ ) or the local/national community ( $n = 30$ ), with smaller proportions referencing international students ( $n = 13$ ) or the global community ( $n = 5$ ). The institutional economic benefits most frequently emphasized attracting talented students ( $n = 15$ ) and generating tuition revenue ( $n = 12$ ). Other common examples included strengthening research capacity ( $n = 10$ ), increasing enrollment ( $n = 10$ ), and enhancing institutional reputation ( $n = 6$ ). For the local/national community, common benefits included strengthening the local economy through spending and job creation ( $n = 12$ ), contributing to broader economic development ( $n = 10$ ), and supporting demographic sustainability ( $n = 7$ ). Attracting ideal immigrants was mentioned once ( $n = 1$ ). Economic benefits

for international students were less frequently mentioned and included improved career opportunities ( $n = 5$ ), increased access to financial aid ( $n = 5$ ), and pathways to immigration ( $n = 3$ ). For the global community, economic benefits included the transfer of skills and knowledge ( $n = 4$ ) and indirect contributions to the economic development of students' home countries ( $n = 1$ ).

**Other Benefit:** Other benefits represented 17.6% of all rationales ( $n = 56$  out of 318). This included rationales that were neither related to diversity nor economic gain. It primarily described benefits for international students ( $n = 34$ ) or the global community ( $n = 20$ ), with only two rationales referencing the local/national community. For international students, the most common benefits were support services (e.g., academic, social, cultural, mental health;  $n = 31$ ) and opportunities to build relationships with Canadians ( $n = 3$ ). For the global community, rationales emphasized addressing global challenges ( $n = 14$ ) and advancing more equal access to education ( $n = 6$ ).

### **Beneficiary Summary**

As presented in Table 2, domestic students were the most frequently cited beneficiaries, accounting for 35.5% of all rationales ( $n = 113$  out of 318), all of which were classified as diversity benefits. International students were the second most common beneficiaries (23.6%,  $n = 75$ ), receiving diversity ( $n = 28$ ), economic ( $n = 13$ ), and other ( $n = 34$ ) benefits. Institutional benefits represented 18.9% ( $n = 60$ ), most of which were economic ( $n = 53$ ), with fewer diversity benefits ( $n = 7$ ). Benefits to the local/national community (13.5%,  $n = 43$ ) were primarily economic ( $n = 30$ ), with a small number of diversity benefits ( $n = 11$ ) and other benefits ( $n = 2$ ). The global community was the least frequently cited beneficiary (8.49%,  $n = 27$ ), which consisted primarily of "other" benefits ( $n = 20$ ) and included some economic benefits ( $n = 5$ ) and diversity benefits ( $n = 2$ ).

**Table 2: International Student Recruitment Rationale Beneficiaries for Internationalization Plan Data**

| <b>Beneficiary</b>     | <b>Definition</b>   | <b>Example</b>   | <b>Mentioned</b> |
|------------------------|---|--|------------------|
| Domestic Students      | Domestic students benefit from the presence of international students, particularly in terms of diversity, intercultural exchange, and academic enrichment. | Exposure to a diverse campus environment, development of intercultural competencies, and enhanced academic experience. | 35.5%            |
| International Students | International students gain from support services, integration efforts, and opportunities for educational, cultural, and                                    | Access to educational and mental health resources, career opportunities, and intercultural competence.                 | 23.6%            |

|                          |  |   |       |
|--------------------------|--|---|-------|
|                          | career growth while studying at the university.  |   |       |
| Institution              | The institution benefits from international students through revenue generation, academic excellence, research contributions, and student population growth. | Revenue generation, research contributions, and increase in student population.       | 18.9% |
| Local/National Community | The local/national community benefits from international students' contributions to the workforce, economy, and demographic sustainability.                  | Workforce contributions, economic impact, addressing aging population challenges.     | 13.5% |
| International Community  | The global community benefits from international students' roles in addressing global challenges and promoting equitable access to education.                | Tackling global challenges (e.g., climate change), promoting global education access. | 8.5%  |

*Note.* This table defines and provides examples of the five key beneficiaries identified in university internationalization plans. The definitions illustrate how universities justify the presence of international students, while the examples highlight specific rationales used in institutional discourse.

## **DISCUSSION**

What type of rationales are most commonly used by Canadian universities in their international student recruitment efforts and internationalization plans? Our findings indicate that while many universities offer at least one rationale for hosting international students, the framing varies significantly. For RQ1, recruitment webpages revealed a clear preference for instrumental diversity rationales over moral ones, with no mention of economic rationales in this public-facing context. For RQ2, similarly, internationalization plans also showed a clear preference for instrumental diversity rationales over moral ones. For RQ3, both webpages and internationalization plans relied mostly on generalized diversity language (e.g., “diversity,” “multiculturalism”), with few references to specific diversity dimensions such as race, language, or religion. Finally, addressing RQ4, internationalization plans presented a broader and more diverse set of rationales: Approximately 40% of statements emphasized non-diversity-related benefits (e.g., economic, demographic, academic benefits). Nevertheless, internationalization plans most often emphasized benefits for domestic students and institutions, with comparatively little attention to international students themselves and minimal mention of the global community.

### **Instrumental Diversity Trend**

Our findings of RQ1 and RQ2 reflect a broader trend in higher education: Western universities tend to prioritize instrumental over moral rationales in their diversity discourse. These findings align with Starck et al. (2021), who found that instrumental rationales, as opposed to moral rationales, dominate diversity discourse in American universities. Our study extends the extant literature by identifying this trend in international student recruitment discourse, in both public-facing websites and institutional strategic documents, and in a Canadian context. This is concerning because instrumental rationales are found to lead to disparate outcomes because they signal a weak institutional commitment to diversity and inattention to race or culture (Starck et al., 2021). While diversity statements can attract recruits by signaling inclusivity (De Meulenaere & De Boom, 2024), the opposite occurs when institutions appear to be engaging in this type of diversity branding. For example, underrepresented students tend to have lower graduation rates in universities that adopt instrumental rationales on their websites (Starck et al., 2021). Thus, while instrumental diversity rationales are prevalent to garner support for diversity initiatives from majority groups and decision makers, the efficacy of this practice warrants further examination.

### **The Ambiguity of Diversity Branding**

Our analysis for RQ3 indicated that both internationalization plans and recruitment webpages tend to discuss diversity in vague and generalized terms, with little to no mention of specific dimensions such as race, language, or religion. The notable absence of specific dimensions such as race extends previous findings suggesting that international student discourse is dominated by discussions of ‘diversity without race’ (Buckner et al., 2021). This ambiguity appears to be aimed at projecting an image of inclusivity while avoiding engagement with the specific challenges faced by underrepresented students and appealing to the preferences and comfort of majority-group audiences (Buckner et al., 2021). As such, institutions may be perceived as insincere, which undermines trust and can negatively impact marginalized students (Wilton, 2015). Moreover, such diversity branding may also diminish awareness of ongoing discrimination, weakening sensitivity to bias and ultimately decreasing support for meaningful diversity efforts (Dover et al., 2020).

### **The Instrumental and Economic Utility of International Students**

Regarding RQ4, our detailed analysis of internationalization plans showed that while international students are portrayed as central to Canadian higher education, this portrayal is defined largely by what they contribute to others. They are depicted as a bringer of diverse perspectives and a source of the campus’s intercultural competence deemed essential in a globalized world. These statements that celebrate their contributions often mask a reality that is far less inclusive. A closer look reveals that such praise is conditional: diversity is revered only in proportion to the benefits it provides. Over 40% of all internationalization plan rationales described benefits to domestic students, the institution, or the

local/national community that were explicitly derived from international students' diversity. This instrumental framing extends beyond diversity. Economic rationales were the second most prominent rationale type in internationalization documents, emphasizing tuition revenue, research capacity, enrollment growth, and contributions to national priorities such as job creation and demographic sustainability.

The focus on "contributions" often masks the systemic barriers international students face. While universities have become increasingly reliant on international student tuition as a source of operating revenue (McCartney, 2021), many students continue to face racism, discrimination, isolation, and financial precarity. Many of them also navigate significant debt and low-wage labor while contending with harmful, yet contradictory stereotypes of being "incompetent" and "wealthy" (Lou et al., 2025; McCartney, 2021). By centering the discussion on economic and instrumental contributions, these narratives sidestep the structural inequities, shifting responsibility away from institutions and onto those that are vulnerable.

Taken together, despite offering a broader range of justifications than recruitment webpages, internationalization plans continue to position international students primarily as instruments of institutional and national objectives rather than as participants entitled to equitable educational opportunities. This trend may continue to reinforce existing racial hierarchy and support practices that privilege whiteness (Suspitsyna, 2021).

### **Implications for Meaningful Internationalization**

Comparing recruitment webpages and strategic documents, we found that recruitment webpages often framed their diversity rationales more selectively. Unlike internationalization plans, which openly combined diversity arguments with references to benefiting the institute (e.g., financial gain, university ranking, and national growth), recruitment webpages avoided overt economic language and instead emphasized how international students contributed to a diverse and vibrant campus. Most statements utilized some instrumental diversity appeals, such as fostering intercultural competence among domestic students and strengthening the learning environment through diverse perspectives, while deliberately downplaying the economic self-interest made explicit in internationalization plans. In doing so, webpages function as a form of virtue signaling, implicitly reassuring prospective students that diversity is celebrated and that they will not face marginalization. However, the underlying logic still positions international students as a means to institutional and domestic benefit.

Our result highlights the need for a meaningful internationalization plan, one that values international students and the global community rather than leveraging them for institutional or national gain. Drawing on Mittelmeier et al. (2024), such a plan must be grounded in inclusion and connection and explicitly work against the tendency to reproduce Western-centric norms and priorities. A meaningful internationalization plan must instead start from a position of social responsibility to the global community (Jones et al., 2021), acknowledging how policy and

institutional decisions shape the lived realities of international students. In recruitment websites, for example, this involves replacing instrumental with moral rationales, general diversity-without-race rhetoric with specific information regarding dedicated cultural and linguistic resources, transparent data on cost-of-living and rationales for additional tuition fees, and clear pathways to mental health support tailored for international students. By shifting from “what they bring” to “how the university celebrates and supports international students,” universities can mitigate the risks of diversity branding while providing students with the information necessary to make informed decisions, fostering trust and student well-being.

Furthermore, developing a meaningful internationalization plan requires more than expanding mobility programs or diversifying marketing on websites. This is especially pressing in the context of recent social narratives about blame toward international students. Such scapegoating not only distorts the causes of these challenges but also influences public perception, positioning international students as opportunistic outsiders rather than contributors (Kudrnáč et al., 2023). International students are aware that they are being portrayed as “cash cows” in social and media narratives, which undermines their wellbeing and sense of belonging (Sheng & Lomer, 2025). Addressing the tension between recruitment and reality requires a shift from performative inclusivity. Instead of relying on vague diversity statements with an instrumentalist frame, universities should adopt a support-centered model to counter these economic narratives. Indeed, universities play a key role in supporting the safety and wellbeing of international students and resisting political norms (Lou & Chipongian, 2026; Sheridan & Tanaka, 2026; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024; Vakkai et al., 2020). For example, universities can raise awareness of the impact of different narratives and provide clear guidelines for instructors and staff on how to support students equitably (cf. Scheidt & Minescu, 2026). A recent meta-analytic study further indicates that institutional support is one of the strongest predictors of international students’ adjustment (Sari et al., 2026).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our analysis focused exclusively on publicly funded Canadian universities, excluding private institutions, some of which have been criticized as “diploma mills” (Dhillon, 2024). Some private institutions implicated in exploitative international recruitment practices may use different forms of diversity messaging, potentially more overtly instrumental or misleading. Future research could explore diversity rationales more broadly by comparing internationalization plans across a wider range of Canadian postsecondary institutions or even across countries. Second, our analysis relies on the interpretive coding of institutional text. Although we employed an established framework (Starck et al., 2021) and demonstrated acceptable interrater reliability, categorizing statements as moral or instrumental involves subjective judgment and may be interpreted differently across coders or contexts. Last, universities that met inclusion criteria by providing explicit

recruitment rationales may differ systematically from those that did not, which may bias the findings toward institutions that more actively or strategically frame their international student recruitment.

Future research is needed across several key areas. First, research should examine how these institutional narratives may have downstream implications. While prior studies have shown that instrumental diversity rationales can negatively affect underrepresented student populations, such as racialized students in the U.S. (Starck et al., 2021), little is known about whether international students respond similarly. Second, future research should investigate the relationship between institutional discourse and actual practices and student outcomes. Impact studies and ongoing monitoring of policies and messaging have been recommended to improve effectiveness and measure progress (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Such follow-up research is important for assessing whether the instrumental culture identified in institutional discourse contributes to inequality at the student level. Finally, future research could examine how diversity messaging evolves over time in response to policy changes and shifting public discourse, particularly in rapidly changing international education contexts.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This content analysis study examines diversity statements directed at international students in Canada and compares them to the rationales outlined in institutional internationalization plans. The findings revealed a predominantly instrumental motive, inattention to race or culture. By identifying the differences between public-facing recruitment websites and internal planning documents, this research highlights how institutions often employ diversity branding to signal inclusivity while masking underlying economic and pragmatic objectives. By applying the framework of pseudo-internationalization to the Canadian context, this study advances the understanding of how universities navigate global competition. While institutions publicly project a globally oriented image, their reliance on rationales that position international students primarily in terms of their institutional, economic, or diversity-related utility suggests a superficial engagement with equity. This rhetoric does more than just attract recruits; it protects institutional comfort and avoids the labor of addressing systemic barriers. These patterns are rooted in deliberate policy choices at federal, provincial, and institutional levels.

Moving forward, as Canadian universities continue to lead OECD nations in international enrollment, the discrepancy between recruitment rhetoric and institutional reality should not be ignored. This study underscores that achieving sustainable and equitable internationalization remains a critical challenge. To fulfill their promise to diversity and the global community, institutions must move beyond performative, instrumental narratives and embed authentic inclusion into the foundation of internationalization plans.

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