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Sustaining International Graduate Education: Policy Pressures, Institutional Leadership, and Lived Student Experience in Canada

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ABSTRACT

International graduate education in Canada is increasingly shaped by shifting immigration policies, rising living costs, and institutional sustainability pressures. While policy discussions emphasize enrollment and financial models, less attention has been given to students' lived experiences. This study examines how financial pressure, policy uncertainty, academic expectations, and institutional systems intersect in the experiences of 525 international graduate students. Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and integrated. The findings reveal that sustainability is experienced as a cumulative and relational condition shaped by financial precarity, immigration uncertainty, academic adjustment, social belonging, and trust in institutional support. The study extends adaptive leadership frameworks within immigration-constrained contexts and positions academic hospitality as a mediating leadership practice. It proposes a relational-policy leadership lens linking policy environments, institutional decision-making, and student experience, offering implications for leadership in complex international education systems.

Keywords: academic hospitality, higher education leadership, immigration uncertainty, international graduate education, policy mediation, sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, international education has become a defining feature of Canada's higher education landscape. Graduate programs in particular have experienced substantial growth in international enrollment, positioning Canada as a global destination for advanced study and professional preparation. This expansion has contributed significantly to institutional revenue, research productivity, and cultural diversity on campuses. Moreover, international education increasingly operates at the intersection of higher education and national immigration systems, where educational opportunity is closely linked to mobility pathways and long-term settlement prospects (Guo & Guo, 2017; Trilokekar & Jones, 2020).

In recent years, however, the balance between opportunity and restriction has shifted. Federal policy adjustments related to study permit allocations, work-hour regulations, and postgraduation pathways reflect broader efforts to respond to housing pressures, labor market concerns, and public debate about migration levels. While such policies are often framed in terms of system integrity and national capacity, their downstream effects are experienced most acutely by students and the institutions that host them (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Marginson, 2022). Universities that rely heavily on international enrollment must now navigate enrollment volatility, financial uncertainty, and evolving regulatory conditions while also responding to ethical responsibilities toward students whose educational trajectories are shaped by shifting policy environments (Jones et al., 2022; Stein & Andreotti, 2021).

Despite the growing public discourse on the economic contributions of international students, less attention has been given to how these systemic shifts are lived and interpreted by international graduate students themselves. Much of the literature examines internationalization at the level of policy, markets, or institutional strategy, while fewer studies focus on the day-to-day experiences of graduate students navigating financial strain, academic expectations, and immigration uncertainty simultaneously (Marginson, 2022; Guo & Guo, 2023).

Sustainability is framed as the long-term capacity of educational systems to equitably support diverse international students rather than offering short-term or cosmetic fixes. Arumhathas (2026) links sustainability to "global sustainability" by arguing that EDID (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Decolonization) work must be structurally embedded, continuously cocreated with racialized international students, and focused on durable forms of belonging, justice, and accountability rather than performative diversity gestures. Torres-Arends and Jacobsen (2024) similarly conceptualize sustainability as the creation of enduring institutional and instructional practices—such as reliable digital access, inclusive assignment and course design, and systematic, empathetic listening to student complaints and requests—that allow international students' learning to be consistently met so that they can persist and succeed over time.

Sustainability in this context therefore extends beyond enrollment numbers and revenue streams; it encompasses students' financial viability, psychological well-being, academic success, and sense of belonging within their institutions. In this study, sustainability is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing financial, ethical, relational, and systemic dimensions—capturing not only institutional viability but

also student well-being, belonging, and the alignment between policy environments and lived academic experience.

To examine how these intersecting pressures are experienced in daily academic life, this study focuses on international graduate students' voices. Drawing on survey data from 525 international graduate students at a Canadian university, this research explores how financial strain, work restrictions, policy uncertainty, academic demands, institutional systems, and social integration collectively shape students' educational experiences. By foregrounding student perspectives, the study contributes an empirically grounded lens to broader conversations about policy, leadership, and sustainability in international higher education.

To guide this inquiry, the study is structured around the following research questions:

- How do international graduate students experience and interpret the intersecting financial, academic, and policy-related pressures that shape their educational journeys?
- In what ways do institutional practices and national policy environments influence students' sense of well-being, belonging, and academic success?
- How can leadership within higher education institutions mediate these pressures to support a more sustainable and ethically grounded international graduate education model?

Positioning international education as a shared space shaped by public policy, institutional leadership, and students' lived realities, this study argues that sustaining Canada's graduate education model requires more than recruitment strategies or regulatory compliance. It advances the need for leadership approaches that are ethically grounded, relationally responsive, and attentive to the structural conditions shaping students' lives, recognizing international students not merely as economic contributors but as members of academic communities whose success and dignity are integral to the integrity of higher education itself (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Walker, 2015).

Existing scholarship on international graduate education has tended to examine key dimensions of student experience in relative isolation. Policy-oriented studies have focused primarily on immigration regulation, labor market access, and national competitiveness (Guo & Guo, 2023; Marginson, 2022), whereas institutional research has emphasized program delivery, student services, and financial sustainability (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Buckner, 2019). Moreover, a substantial body of literature has explored international student adjustment, well-being, and belonging at the individual level (Robertson, 2019). How these domains intersect through institutional leadership remains less well understood. In particular, how universities mediate national policy environments and translate them into lived academic and social conditions for international graduate students warrants closer attention (Middlehurst, 2013; Bryson et al., 2021). This study addresses that gap by integrating policy context, institutional systems, and student lived experience through a leadership lens, positioning leadership as the analytic hinge that connects macrolevel policy pressures with microlevel student realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization and Market Tensions

Internationalization has become a defining strategy in higher education systems worldwide. Universities increasingly position themselves within global markets for students, talent, and research partnerships, often linking international enrollment to institutional prestige, diversity, and financial sustainability (Knight, 2012; de Wit et al., 2015). In Canada, international graduate students play a particularly significant role in supporting institutional growth, contributing to research productivity and offsetting reductions in domestic funding (Guo & Guo, 2017). This expansion has been accompanied by narratives that frame international students as both knowledge contributors and economic actors whose tuition and postgraduate participation in the labor market support national prosperity (Stein & Andreotti, 2021). Rather than advancing a new leadership theory, this study draws on leadership scholarship as an interpretive lens to examine how institutional actors mediate policy pressures and translate them into students' lived academic and social conditions.

However, scholars have increasingly critiqued transactional and market-oriented models of internationalization, arguing that approaches focused primarily on recruitment, revenue generation, and institutional competitiveness risk overlook the relational, ethical, and developmental dimensions of international student experience (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Marginson, 2022). As institutions become more financially dependent on international tuition, the line between educational mission and market logic can blur (Marginson, 2022). Critics argue that internationalization often operates within a neoliberal framework that emphasizes recruitment and revenue generation while underestimating the support structures required for meaningful student success (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

The sustainability of this model has therefore been increasingly questioned, particularly as external factors such as immigration policies, labor market regulations, and housing constraints have reshaped the conditions under which international students pursue education abroad (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Jones et al., 2022).

Precurity, Mobility, and Structural Vulnerability

Research on international students has long highlighted the complex intersection of academic, financial, and social pressures faced by those studying outside their home countries (Arthur & Flynn, 2021). While international mobility is often framed as an opportunity for professional advancement and intercultural growth, it also entails significant risk and uncertainty, particularly within migration and policy contexts that heighten student precarity. Students must simultaneously manage financial obligations, employment demands, and responsibilities to family members in their home countries (Wilson et al., 2023). These layered demands extend beyond academic adjustment to include emotional and psychosocial strain, with implications for mental health, well-being, and sense of belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018; Wilkins et al., 2022; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Recent scholarship has increasingly conceptualized international student experience through the lens of precarity. Changes in immigration regulations, work-hour limits, and

postgraduation pathways can transform what was once perceived as a stable educational trajectory into a more uncertain and fragile experience (Guo & Guo, 2023; Robertson, 2019). These structural conditions amplify stress, limit long-term planning, and reduce students' sense of security and belonging (Zhang & Zhou, 2023). Research consistently shows that financial precarity and policy instability affect not only academic performance but also mental health and well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In this context, the international student experience cannot be understood solely within campus boundaries; it is deeply intertwined with national policy landscapes and global mobility regimes.

Academic Hospitality and Institutional Responsibility

In response to critiques of transactional models of internationalization, which often prioritize recruitment, branding, and economic metrics over student experience, scholars have advanced the concept of academic hospitality. This approach frames engagement with international students as an ethical and relational responsibility rather than a primarily instrumental one (Phipps & Barnett, 2007; Postiglione & Lee, 2018; Sutphen et al., 2024).

Academic hospitality moves beyond recruitment and service provision to emphasize relational care, dignity, inclusion, and the coconstruction of knowledge (Phipps & Barnett, 2007; Sutphen et al., 2024; Zhu & Chang, 2021). It recognizes students as guests and contributors within academic communities, whose presence invites institutions to examine how policies, practices, and pedagogies either foster or hinder belonging, participation, and well-being (Sutphen et al., 2024; Ploner, 2018).

Hospitality-oriented approaches highlight the importance of clear communication, cultural sensitivity, academic scaffolding, and flexible support structures (Glass et al., 2015). Hospitality is not a one-time gesture but an ongoing institutional posture that must respond to evolving student needs and conditions within the learning environment (Phipps & Barnett, 2007; Cruz et al., 2025; Imperiale et al., 2021). When institutions operate in policy environments that heighten student vulnerability, including shifting regulations, intensified scrutiny, and changing expectations related to students' work, housing stability, and postgraduation planning, the responsibility to provide relational and practical support becomes even more pronounced (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Spring & Vosko, 2025; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024). Academic hospitality thus offers a lens through which to examine institutional leadership in times of systemic strain, emphasizing relational, ethical, and context-responsive institutional action rather than episodic support (Sutphen et al., 2024; Imperiale et al., 2021).

Policy, Leadership, and Sustainability in Complex Systems

Higher education institutions operate within complex and evolving policy ecosystems shaped by government priorities, economic conditions, and public discourse, particularly in relation to immigration, labor markets, and national workforce strategies (Marginson, 2022; Buckner & Stein, 2020; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025). Policy decisions related to international student recruitment, employment eligibility, housing, and postgraduate

pathways can have profound implications for institutional planning and for students' lived experiences. While such policies are often designed at the national level, their consequences are mediated through universities, which must adapt academic programs, student services, and communication strategies in real time, often under conditions of uncertainty and constraints (Bryson et al., 2021; Pottic-Sherman et al., 2024).

In this context, leadership involves navigating the following competing demands: maintaining institutional viability, honoring students' ethical commitments, and responding responsibly to policy environments that may intensify student precarity. Adaptive leadership emphasizes mobilizing institutions to respond to complex, systemic challenges that resist technical or linear solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Complexity leadership theory further highlights the importance of flexible, relational, and distributed leadership practices that enable learning and adaptation within dynamic systems (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Arena et al., 2022). Ethical leadership frameworks foreground decision-making grounded in equity, care, and long-term responsibility, particularly when institutional actions have significant consequences for vulnerable populations (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Shields, 2023). Sustainability, therefore, must be understood as multidimensional, encompassing not only financial stability but also student well-being, academic success, and institutional trust.

In this study, these leadership frameworks are not treated as competing explanatory models but rather as complementary lenses that collectively inform the analysis. Adaptive leadership provides a foundation for understanding how institutions respond to complex and evolving policy challenges; complexity leadership offers insight into the relational and distributed dynamics through which adaptation occurs; and ethical leadership grounds decision-making in consideration of equity, care, and responsibility toward students. Taken together, these lenses enable a more integrated examination of how leadership mediates the intersection of policy environments, institutional practices, and the lived experiences of students in international graduate education.

Beyond institutional practices and student-level experiences, higher education sustainability is increasingly shaped by national and supranational policy environments that govern access, funding, mobility, and technological infrastructure (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Marginson, 2022). Policy plays a central role in embedding sustainability within higher education systems by setting priorities, directing resources, and establishing accountability mechanisms that align institutional missions with broader societal and economic goals (Guo & Guo, 2023; Jones et al., 2022).

Effective policy frameworks articulate clear objectives, measurable targets, and monitoring structures that coordinate institutional responses to external regulatory environments, including immigration policy, labor market access, and student mobility (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Marginson, 2022). Such frameworks must remain adaptable to shifting policy conditions, particularly as universities navigate enrollment volatility, changing visa regulations, and evolving postgraduation pathways within increasingly internationalized higher education systems.

Sustainability-oriented policy in this context emphasizes the institutional capacity to respond ethically and strategically to policy constraints while maintaining equitable access and support for international students. This includes aligning recruitment practices, academic programming, and student services with the realities of immigration policy and

work restrictions that shape students' lived experiences (Bryson et al., 2021; Guo & Guo, 2023).

Importantly, policy does not operate in isolation but is mediated through institutional leadership. Universities play a critical role in interpreting, implementing, and communicating policy in ways that directly influence students' academic trajectories, financial stability, and sense of belonging. Therefore, leadership decisions become the key mechanism through which policy environments are translated into lived educational experiences, particularly within immigration-dependent graduate programs.

Positioning the Present Study

Although the literature has examined international student adjustment, academic hospitality, and the policy dimensions of student mobility, few studies have integrated these strands to examine how national policy shifts, institutional systems, and student lived experiences intersect at the graduate level (Buckner, 2019; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024). Much of the scholarship on international graduate education operates either at the macro level, focusing on policy regimes, economics, and institutional internationalization strategies, or at the micro level, emphasizing student adjustment, well-being, and belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018; Marginson, 2022; Wilkins et al., 2022; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Fewer studies explicitly connect these domains through a leadership lens that examines how institutional decisions, practices, and values mediate student experience, particularly during periods of systemic and policy uncertainty (Bolden et al., 2014; Brunsting et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Middlehurst, 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

By centering on the voices of international graduate students, this study contributes an empirically grounded perspective to contemporary discussions of sustainability and leadership in international higher education. It illuminates how financial pressures, policy uncertainty, academic expectations, and social integration collectively shape students' educational realities, and it calls for leadership approaches that respond to these interconnected challenges with clarity, relational care, and long-term ethical responsibility (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024; Brunner & Cervantes-Macias, 2025; Stein & de Andreotti, 2024; Sutphen et al., 2024).

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods survey design to explore how financial pressure, immigration-related uncertainty, institutional systems, and social integration shape the sustainability of international graduate education. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns across the full sample, while qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to contextualize and deepen the interpretation of the quantitative findings. Mixed-methods survey research is particularly well suited for capturing patterns of experience at scale while preserving participants' interpretations of their lived experiences and voice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson et al., 2007).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred through a convergent parallel design, in which both strands were analyzed independently and then brought together during the interpretation phase. Specifically, the findings were integrated using a

side-by-side comparison approach, where key quantitative patterns (e.g., levels of financial strain, work limitations, and perceived institutional support) were directly compared with qualitative themes that illustrated how these patterns were experienced in students' daily lives. In addition, qualitative data were used to explain, elaborate, and, in some cases, nuance or complicate the quantitative results. This integrative process enabled the development of a more comprehensive understanding of how structural conditions are both measured and experienced, aligning with the study's focus on linking policy environments, institutional practices, and student lived realities.

Participants and Context

The participants were international graduate students enrolled in a large leadership-focused graduate program at a Canadian university. At the time of data collection, the program served students from more than 35 countries, representing diverse professional, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Although the institution is faith-based, the international graduate student population reflects a wide range of religious and nonreligious identities.

The survey was distributed electronically to approximately 1,000 international graduate students across three program streams, business, health care, and education, representing a census-based, voluntary response sampling approach. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and students were invited via institutional email to contribute their perspectives on their academic and lived experiences. A total of 525 students responded, yielding a response rate of approximately 52.5%, which is considered robust for voluntary survey research in higher education contexts. The respondent pool was predominantly female, reflecting overall enrollment patterns within the program.

The survey instrument consisted of 43 items, including Likert-scale and open-ended questions. All analyses were conducted at the aggregate level; no subgroup-specific analyses were performed. A subset of this dataset ($n = 103$) has been analyzed separately in prior work focusing on Muslim graduate student experiences; in contrast, the present study examines the full sample using a system-level analytic framework centered on sustainability, policy, and leadership.

Data collection

Data were collected in late fall 2023, amid evolving federal policy conditions affecting international student enrollment, employment, and postgraduation pathways in Canada. Data were collected through an online survey instrument designed to capture both structured and open-ended responses. Survey items addressed financial pressures, employment demands, academic adjustment, social integration, institutional communication, and awareness of immigration and policy-related issues. Several open-ended questions invited students to describe their challenges, needs, and suggestions in their own words, generating rich qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings. The survey remained open for a defined period during the academic year to allow broad participation.

As with all voluntary response surveys, the potential for response bias must be acknowledged. Students experiencing higher levels of stress or stronger opinions may have been more inclined to participate, while others may have opted not to respond. However, the relatively high response rate and broad representation across program streams suggest that the data provide a meaningful and credible reflection of the overall student experience within the program.

Ethics

This study received approval from the institution's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) prior to data collection. All procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR] et al., 2022). Survey responses were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was linked to individual responses. Participants provided informed consent electronically and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time prior to submission.

Positionality

The authors are faculty members within the graduate leadership program in which this study was conducted. While both teach within the department and have interacted with some students, they do not have direct instructional or evaluative relationships with the full participant group. To mitigate potential power dynamics, participation was voluntary, anonymous, and not connected to course requirements or academic evaluation. The survey was distributed program-wide rather than through individual instructors, and no identifying information was collected. The authors approached the analysis with reflexive awareness of their institutional roles, prioritizing accurate representation of student voice and avoiding institutionally protective interpretations. The findings were interpreted with attention to students' lived experiences within broader structural and policy contexts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns related to financial strain, employment demands, academic adaptation, and access to institutional support. Descriptive analysis is typically used in large-scale survey research to summarize trends and contextualize student experience without inferring causality (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). These findings provide an overview of the key pressures shaping international graduate student experience.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible and widely used method for identifying patterns of meaning across a dataset while keeping participants' voices central (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement. Initial codes were developed inductively from recurring topics raised by students and were subsequently organized into broader themes reflecting financial precarity, policy uncertainty, infrastructure challenges, academic adaptation, social integration, and relational trust in institutional structures and processes. Representative

excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme, ensuring that students' voices remained central to the presentation of findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

To enhance analytic rigor, multiple strategies were employed. Coding was conducted iteratively by the research team, with ongoing discussion to refine the code definitions and ensure consistency in interpretation. Rather than formal intercoder reliability metrics, a collaborative coding approach was used to achieve interpretive agreement and strengthen thematic coherence. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytic process, documenting coding decisions, theme development, and revisions. In addition, the researchers engaged in reflexive practice, acknowledging their institutional roles and remaining attentive to potential biases in interpreting student responses. These strategies align with established qualitative standards for credibility, dependability, and transparency in thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Together, the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a comprehensive view of how systemic, institutional, and personal factors intersect to shape the experiences of international graduate students in the context of Canadian higher education, which is consistent with established approaches to mixed-methods research in education and social policy studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021).

RESULTS

Together, these themes illustrate how sustainability is experienced not as a single constraint but as a layered set of pressures that intersect across students' academic, economic, and relational lives. Analysis of survey responses (N = 525) revealed six interconnected themes shaping international graduate students' experiences: financial precarity, policy and immigration uncertainty, infrastructure and daily logistics, academic adjustment, social belonging, and relational trust in institutional systems and support. Quantitative patterns reinforce students' narrative accounts, showing that sustainability is experienced not as an abstract institutional concern but as a daily negotiation across financial, academic, social, and emotional dimensions of life.

Students' reflections on financial strain, work limitations, and housing challenges align with broader research documenting the economic precarity faced by international students in high-cost countries. Concerns about postgraduation pathways and policy changes echo studies showing that immigration uncertainty contributes to heightened stress and long-term planning difficulties (Zhang & Zhou, 2023). The findings here extend this literature by illustrating how these pressures intersect with academic expectations, social integration, and perceptions of institutional support.

Descriptive patterns across key survey indicators are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates the frequency and intensity of challenges reported by students across financial, academic, social, and institutional domains.

Table 1. Key Descriptive Indicators of Student Experience (N = 525)

Domain	Indicator	Summary Pattern
Financial Precarity	Difficulty meeting living expenses	Majority of students reported frequent or consistent financial strain
Employment Pressure	Working while studying	Most students indicated regular engagement in part-time work alongside studies
Policy Uncertainty	Concern about immigration/postgraduation pathways	High levels of concern and uncertainty were reported across responses
Academic Adjustment	Balancing work and academic demands	A substantial proportion reported ongoing difficulty managing both responsibilities
Housing/Logistics	Transportation and housing challenges	Frequent concerns regarding commuting and access to affordable housing
Social Belonging	Participation in campus life	Mixed engagement; some students reported difficulty participating in events
Institutional Trust	Perception of institutional support	Generally, positive, but with notable concerns regarding communication and responsiveness
Well-being	Stress related to study-life pressures	Many students reported recurring stress associated with financial and academic pressures

Financial Precarity and Economic Pressure

Financial strain emerged as one of the most pervasive concerns. More than two-thirds of the respondents reported working while studying, with many indicating that employment was necessary to meet basic living expenses. In addition, a majority of the students reported that financial pressures interfered with their academic focus and well-being (see Table 1). One student noted, “The cost of living is very high. I have to work many hours to support myself and my family back home.” Another shared, “It is very stressful trying to manage tuition, rent, and daily expenses while studying full-time.” Financial precarity was not described as a temporary inconvenience but as a persistent condition shaping students’ academic engagement and well-being.

Policy and Immigration Uncertainty

A significant proportion of students expressed uncertainty about immigration policies and postgraduate pathways. Survey responses indicated widespread concern about work-hour limits, permit regulations, and future eligibility for employment or residency. One respondent noted, “There is always stress about visa rules and whether they might change.

It makes planning for the future very difficult.” The quantitative responses show that immigration-related uncertainty is closely tied to students’ sense of stability and long-term planning, extending the educational experience beyond the campus into national regulatory systems.

Infrastructure and Daily Logistics

Daily logistics, particularly commuting, shaped students’ experiences. Nearly half of the respondents reported commuting more than one hour each way to campus, limiting opportunities for extracurricular engagement and contributing to fatigue. “The commute is very long, and sometimes I feel exhausted before I even begin studying,” one student shared. Transportation costs and time constraints therefore function as hidden but important factors in students’ ability to fully participate in academic life.

Academic Adjustment and Hidden Curriculum

Many students reported difficulty adjusting to Canadian academic norms, particularly with respect to writing expectations, participation styles, and assessment practices. A notable proportion of the respondents indicated that they required additional academic support services to navigate unfamiliar academic conventions. One student shared, “Academic writing is very different from what I am used to, and I need more guidance on expectations.” These findings suggest that academic adaptation involves navigating implicit expectations that are not always made explicit, reinforcing the importance of structured academic support.

Social Belonging and Integration

While most students reported positive interactions with peers, a meaningful minority indicated difficulty in forming deeper social connections, especially with domestic students. Commuting time and work obligations further limited opportunities for relationship-building. One student noted, “I wish there were more chances to connect with Canadian students and not just other international students.” Therefore, Belonging emerged not as an automatic outcome of enrollment but as an area where intentional institutional facilitation is needed.

Relational Trust and Institutional Care

Students consistently emphasized the importance of faculty understanding, flexibility, and empathy. Survey results revealed strong appreciation for professors who demonstrated relational support, which was closely associated with students’ sense of being valued and supported. As one student noted, “When professors are understanding and flexible, it makes a big difference in how supported I feel.” These relational experiences were also associated with students’ trust in the institution and their overall sense of security.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how international graduate students experience sustainability within Canada's graduate education system at a time of heightened policy, financial, and institutional uncertainty. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative narratives, the analysis provides an empirically grounded account of how sustainability is lived at the intersection of academic expectations, immigration regulation, financial precarity, and relational institutional support (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024; Wilkins et al., 2022). These findings align with scholarship emphasizing the interconnected nature of policy environments, institutional practices, and student well-being in international graduate education (Brunsting et al., 2018; Buckner & Stein, 2020; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

In doing so, this study moves beyond alignment with existing frameworks to offer a more explicit theoretical contribution. First, it extends adaptive leadership theory by demonstrating that adaptation in international graduate education is not solely an institutional or technical challenge but also a relational and ethical process mediated through students' lived experiences of policy uncertainty, financial precarity, and academic pressure. In this context, adaptation is experienced unevenly and requires leadership responses that are responsive to human vulnerability, not simply system demands.

Second, the findings refine complexity leadership theory by illustrating how complexity is not only organizational but also embodied at the student level, where policy, institutional systems, and personal realities intersect in daily life. This positions students not only as recipients within complex systems but also as active sites where complexity is experienced, negotiated, and interpreted, thereby expanding the unit of analysis within complexity-informed leadership research.

Third, the study advances the concept of academic hospitality by operationalizing it within conditions of structural constraints. Rather than framing hospitality as an abstract ethical ideal, the findings demonstrate how it is enacted—or constrained—through institutional policies, faculty practices, and communication systems, particularly in contexts shaped by immigration regulation and economic pressure. In this way, academic hospitality emerges as a critical mediating practice between policy environments and student well-being.

Together, these contributions position sustainability in international graduate education not only as a policy or institutional challenge but also as a leadership practice that must be adaptive, relational, and ethically grounded in the lived realities of students navigating complex and shifting systems.

Sustainability as Lived Experience Rather Than Institutional Abstraction

Rather than functioning as an abstract institutional construct, sustainability emerges as a lived and cumulative condition shaped by the intersecting financial, academic, relational, and policy pressures students navigate in daily life. Much of the discourse on sustainability in international education has focused on enrollment trends, revenue diversification, and institutional risk management (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Buckner, 2019; Marginson, 2022). While these considerations are important, the findings of this study suggest that sustainability is ultimately experienced at the level of students' daily lives. Financial strain,

commuting demands, academic adaptation, and uncertainty related to immigration status converge to shape students' capacity to persist, engage, and succeed (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2023).

The quantitative data reinforce this interpretation, revealing that a substantial proportion of students juggle employment alongside full-time study, experience long commuting times, and report difficulty balancing academic and personal responsibilities. These patterns align with prior research on international student precarity and constrained agency (Dinis et al., 2021; Robertson, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2022), but the present study adds nuance by demonstrating how these pressures are not isolated challenges. Rather, they form a cumulative burden that affects well-being, learning, and students' sense of stability within the academic system (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2018; Maharaj et al., 2025; Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

From a leadership perspective, these findings challenge institutions to reconsider narrow definitions of sustainability that prioritize financial resilience while overlooking students' capacity to endure and thrive. Findings from this study suggest that sustainable graduate education, as experienced by students, depends, in part, on the alignment between institutional structures, policy environments, and the lived realities of students' everyday lives, calling for leadership approaches that foreground care, coherence, and ethical responsibility (Sutphen et al., 2024; Stein & de Andreotti, 2024).

Policy Mediation and the Expanding Role of Institutional Leadership

A central contribution of this study lies in highlighting the mediating role that universities play between national policy environments and student experience. Immigration regulations, work-hour limits, and postgraduation pathways are established at the federal level, yet their consequences are felt most immediately within institutional contexts. Students' narratives of uncertainty, stress, and confusion illustrate how policy shifts translate into emotional, academic, and relational strain (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024; Robertson, 2019).

These findings align with scholarship emphasizing the growing policy and governance burden placed on higher education institutions operating within increasingly complex and volatile regulatory environments (Bryson et al., 2021; Trilokekar & Jones, 2020; Buckner & Stein, 2020). Universities are increasingly expected to interpret policy, communicate changes clearly, and support students through regulatory transitions, often without additional resources, formal authority, or stable policy timelines (Brunner & Cervantes-Macias, 2025; Shields, 2023).

In this context, leadership requires adaptive capacity. Adaptive leadership theory emphasizes mobilizing people and systems to respond to challenges that lack straightforward technical solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Kegan & Lahey, 2016). The findings suggest that sustainability in international graduate education depends not only on institutional compliance with policy but also on leaders' ability to respond relationally, anticipate student concerns, and create support structures that buffer the effects of external uncertainty. This is particularly salient for students navigating precarious immigration, financial, and academic conditions (Sutphen et al., 2024; Stein & de Andreotti, 2024).

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership functions less as a position or set of individual competencies and more as a mediating practice within complex systems (Uhl-

Bien & Arena, 2018). Institutional leaders are shown to interpret and translate national policy shifts, communicate uncertainty to students, and shape the relational environments through which those policies are experienced. These functions influence how policy pressures are absorbed or amplified within students' everyday academic lives (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Academic Hospitality as an Ethical and Strategic Leadership Practice

Students' emphasis on faculty understanding, flexibility, and care underscores the importance of academic hospitality as both an ethical stance and a strategic leadership practice. Consistent with Phipps and Barnett's (2007) conception of academic hospitality, students valued experiences where they felt recognized as whole persons navigating complex transitions—not merely as recipients of instruction.

Importantly, the hospitality in this study was not limited to affective gestures. Students linked relational care to concrete outcomes: reduced stress, improved academic confidence, and a stronger sense of belonging. These findings resonate with research demonstrating that faculty engagement and culturally responsive teaching practices are central to international student success (Glass et al., 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

In this way, academic hospitality emerges not only as a relational ethic but also as an ethical and strategic leadership practice within complex institutional structures and processes. As universities face heightened policy volatility and financial constraints, hospitality-oriented leadership requires the intentional alignment between institutional values, decision-making structures, and the lived realities of students (Sutphen et al., 2024; Stein & de Andreotti, 2024). Such an approach positions care, dignity, and relational trust not as ancillary support but as central components of sustainable leadership practices, particularly in contexts where students experience precarity shaped by forces beyond institutional control (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Shields, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the findings suggest that sustaining Canada's graduate education model requires a shift from transactional approaches toward integrative leadership strategies that align policy awareness, institutional systems, and student well-being (Buckner & Stein, 2020; Marginson, 2022). International graduate students are navigating multiple, overlapping systems, including education, employment, immigration, and family responsibility. These systems leave students with little margin for error, a reality increasingly documented in research on student precarity and constrained agency (Guo & Guo, 2017).

Policy discussions that focus solely on regulating student numbers or work eligibility risk overlook the cumulative and compounding effects of these systems on student experience (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025). Institutions, meanwhile, face the challenge of maintaining financial and operational viability while responding ethically to students whose presence supports the very sustainability they seek to protect, positioning universities as critical mediators between public policy and lived student realities (Trilokekar & Jones, 2020; Bryson et al., 2021).

While grounded in the Canadian context, these findings reflect increasingly evident dynamics across international graduate education systems facing heightened policy volatility, fiscal pressure, and shifting public narratives around student mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2023; Marginson, 2022).

This study contributes to leadership scholarship by positioning sustainability as a relational and ethical construct rather than a purely economic construct. It calls for leadership practices that are adaptive, transparent, and grounded in care. The long-term credibility of international graduate education depends not only on institutional survival but also on the lived experiences, dignity, and trust of those it serves (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Sutphen et al., 2024; Stein & de Andreotti, 2024).

A related study by the authors examined a subset of this dataset ($n = 103$), focusing specifically on the experiences of Muslim graduate students and the role of faith-sensitive leadership practices (Mohamed & George, 2025). While both studies draw from the same broader dataset, they differ substantively in terms of their analytic focus, coding strategy, and theoretical framing. The prior study employed a subgroup analysis with coding oriented toward religious identity, belonging, and faith-based experiences within academic contexts. In contrast, the present study analyzes the full sample ($N = 525$) using a system-level coding framework that centers financial precarity, policy uncertainty, institutional systems, and relational trust as intersecting dimensions of sustainability.

Conceptually, the earlier study contributes to scholarship on faith, identity, and inclusion in higher education, whereas this manuscript advances broader leadership and policy-oriented analysis, positioning sustainability as a multidimensional construct mediated through institutional leadership and regulatory environments. This shift from identity-specific analysis to system-level interpretation allows for a more comprehensive examination of how diverse international graduate students collectively experience and navigate structural pressures within contemporary higher education systems. Taken together, the two studies should be understood as complementary rather than duplicative, with each illuminating distinct dimensions of international graduate student experience through different analytic lenses.

CONCLUSION

While rooted in the Canadian context, these findings raise urgent questions about the ethical responsibilities of governments and institutions in shaping international graduate education. For many international students, postgraduate work pathways—particularly access to predictable and stable postgraduate work permits—are central to decisions to study in Canada. These decisions often involve significant financial, professional, and personal sacrifices (Guo & Guo, 2017; Zhang & Zhou, 2023). When immigration and labor-market policies shift abruptly or retrospectively, students experience not only material disruption but also a profound erosion of trust, finding themselves caught between institutional commitments and national regulatory decisions beyond their control. Consistent with prior research, this study demonstrates that policy volatility and limited coordination between governments and universities undermine student well-being and weaken the long-term sustainability of internationalization itself (Guo & Guo, 2017; Jones et al., 2022).

Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, this study invites leaders and policymakers to reconsider how sustainability is understood and enacted within international graduate education systems, foregrounding ethical responsibility, relational care, and institutional trust.

Reframing sustainability as a multidimensional and lived phenomenon highlights the need for leadership that is both strategic and relational (Marginson, 2022; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Financial planning, policy communication, academic scaffolding, and inclusive programming are not peripheral services but central conditions for sustaining diverse learners within increasingly complex systems (Bryson et al., 2021; Glass et al., 2015). Policymakers, in turn, must recognize that decisions made at the national level reverberate through institutional practices and individual lives, shaping the conditions under which international graduate education can remain credible, ethical, and humane.


Ultimately, sustaining Canada's graduate education model requires moving beyond a transactional understanding of internationalization toward a more ethically grounded and relational approach (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Buckner & Stein, 2020). International students are not merely contributors to institutional revenue or national economies; they are members of academic communities whose success, well-being, and sense of belonging are inseparable from the integrity of higher education itself.

Beyond Canada, these dynamics reflect broader global trends in which national policy priorities increasingly structure the conditions of international mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Marginson, 2022). In the context of policy volatility, leadership becomes consequential not through control but through how institutions choose to interpret, communicate, and respond to uncertainty in ways that either erode or sustain student trust.

Sustaining international graduate education cannot rest on student resilience alone. It requires leadership and policy frameworks that are coherent, trustworthy, and ethically accountable to those whose lives and futures are shaped by them. Decisions made at the policy level reverberate far beyond regulatory texts, affecting students' livelihoods, institutional stability, and the broader social and economic ecosystems in which universities operate. When alignment between policy intent, institutional capacity, and student reality fractures, the burden of uncertainty is disproportionately carried by those with the least margin for error.

The findings of this study indicate that when leadership fails to acknowledge the lived realities of international students—particularly in areas of financial strain, policy uncertainty, and institutional communication—student trust is significantly strained. Without leadership that responds with transparency, care, and responsibility, internationalization faces challenges not only to its moral legitimacy but also to the trust that sustains it. These findings suggest that the future of international graduate education depends less on student resilience alone and more on the capacity of institutional leadership to align policy, practice, and care.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools with a limited capacity to support language refinement, clarity, and structural organization. AI tools were used to assist in editing and

polishing select sections of the manuscript, including portions of the abstract, introduction, and discussion; however, no original content, data, or analysis was generated by AI.

All content was subsequently reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The conceptual framing, research design, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and scholarly conclusions are entirely the work of the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the manuscript.

A portion of the dataset used in this study has been analyzed in a previously published article focusing on Muslim graduate students; however, the present manuscript addresses a distinct research question, analytic focus, and interpretive framework.

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