Article

Exploring the Lived Experiences of South Asian International Students in Canadian Higher Education: Implications for Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT: *Canada has emerged as a key destination for international students, including a significant population from South Asia. This qualitative study explores the multifaceted experiences of South Asian international students in Canadian higher education from a social work lens. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with seven international students from four South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), this study reveals critical themes, including challenges in cultural adaptation, academic pressures, financial strain, and the ability to navigate support systems. The findings highlight the crucial role of social support networks and culturally informed services in fostering student well-being and academic success. This study urges culturally responsive social work interventions and policy reforms to better support international students, promote their integration, and mitigate potential mental health challenges. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique needs of South Asian international students, offering valuable insights for higher education institutions and social work practitioners.*

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INTRODUCTION

Canada has increasingly positioned itself as a leading destination for international students, recognizing their significant contributions as valuable economic assets and a crucial component of its human capital strategy (CUPE, 2025; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). The global landscape of international higher education has experienced dramatic growth since the mid-1990s. In 1997, an estimated 1.5 million students pursued higher education outside their home countries. By 2022, this figure had surged to approximately 6.9 million, marking more than a threefold increase since 2000, with roughly four million of these students enrolled in institutions across Europe and North America (UNESCO, 2025). Institutions in the "Big Four" destination countries—the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia—collectively hosted approximately 44% of the global total, or approximately 3 million international students in 2023 (ApplyBoard, 2024a). Within this global context, Canada has experienced rapid growth in its international student population, hosting approximately 1,040,985 individuals with valid study permits by the end of 2023 (ApplyBoard, 2024b; ICEF Monitor, 2024). This substantial population positions Canada as the third-largest host country globally, following the United States and the United Kingdom (ICEF Monitor, 2024). International students have diverse language skills, educational backgrounds, and work experiences, enriching the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society while providing substantial economic benefits. In 2022, international students contributed an estimated $37.3 billion to Canada's economy through tuition fees, accommodation, and discretionary spending, representing a $30.9 billion contribution to the national gross domestic product (GDP) and supporting over 361,000 jobs (CASSA, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2024). This economic impact places education among Canada's top export sectors (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Furthermore, studies have shown that nearly half of international students choose to remain in Canada after graduating, many of whom eventually transition to permanent residency, thereby addressing critical labor market gaps and contributing to long-term immigration goals (CUPE, 2025; Choi et al., 2021).

Among this diverse international student population, South Asian students constitute a significant and rapidly growing demographic in Canadian higher education. Students from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka constitute a substantial share of international enrollments, often driven by factors including strong academic reputations, postgraduate employment opportunities, and diaspora communities (Erudera, 2024). While sharing common experiences with other international students, South Asian international students may encounter unique challenges related to cultural adjustment, language barriers, specific family expectations, and distinct socioeconomic pressures that warrant

focused investigation. Despite being actively sought after for their economic and demographic contributions, international students in Canada frequently experience profound marginalization and vulnerability due to their temporary status (Hunter et al., 2025; Till & Taimoor, 2025). This precarious legal and social positioning is often exacerbated by evolving and unpredictable immigration policies, which can deeply disrupt their plans and stability (Howe et al., 2025). Recent policy changes, including stricter study permit caps introduced in 2024 and further tightened in 2025, have dramatically reduced the number of new international students, signaling a challenging environment for both students and educational institutions (Mann, 2025; CTV News, 2025; Hunter et al., 2025). These shifts, often justified by claims of easing pressure on housing and public services, can inadvertently damage Canada's image as a welcoming destination (CUPE, 2025; Till & Taimoor, 2025).

The temporary and often precarious legal status of international students heightens their vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination. Employment restrictions – most notably limits on off-campus work hours – constrain their ability to manage rising living expenses and substantially higher tuition fees, which in 2024/25 averaged more than five times those paid by domestic undergraduates (Coustere et al., 2023; Matsumoto, 2024; Hunter et al., 2025). Exclusion from social welfare programs and limited access to financial support further exacerbate their economic precarity (OCASI, 2024). In addition to these structural barriers, studies indicate that international students frequently encounter academic pressure, financial strain, and obstacles to career advancement, even as safety, affordability, and accessible postgraduation immigration pathways continue to attract them to Canada (Brunner et al., 2024; Shokirova et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2025). The challenges extend beyond economic and structural barriers. Research indicates that international students are disproportionately affected by housing discrimination, rent gouging, and even sexual harassment, with many living in substandard or overcrowded conditions due to unaffordable rental markets (Gupta & Su, 2023). Discriminatory practices, sometimes based on gender and ethnicity, are observed in rental advertisements, highlighting a systemic issue (Gupta & Su, 2023). Furthermore, the narrative that unfairly associates international students with housing and healthcare crises, alongside an increase in hate crimes targeting certain student populations, contributes to their dehumanization and exacerbates feelings of isolation, alienation, and social loss (Su, 2025). This constant state of precarity, coupled with the sense of social loss and confusion from being away from familiar environments, makes international students more vulnerable to psychological distress, which impacts their confidence and overall well-being. This background sets the stage for a deeper exploration into the specific challenges faced by South Asian international students in Canada and the critical role of social work in addressing these vulnerabilities.

While international students, in general, experience vulnerabilities, those from South Asian countries face distinct precarities shaped by their specific sociocultural contexts and migration pathways. Studies on South Asian and Chinese students in Canada reveal that they encounter significant academic,

financial, and social obstacles during their settlement and integration processes (Mandell et al., 2022). Financial precarity, in particular, is a major factor, with many students facing high tuition fees and unexpected costs (Mandell et al., 2022). In their struggle for survival, some students, especially women, have been found to enter precarious employment situations, which can lead to a drastic divergence from their educational backgrounds and skills (Akhter & Mahmood, 2024). These challenges are compounded by a reliance on informal social connections, such as family and other students from similar ethnic backgrounds, to navigate settlements and access emotional support (Mandell et al., 2022). Research has underscored that while these social networks are crucial, they are not always sufficient to overcome systemic barriers, such as the devaluation of their prior experience or challenges with credential recognition (Akhter & Mahmood, 2024). This qualitative study aims to explore the lived experiences of South Asian international students in Canadian postsecondary institutions, specifically examining the multifaceted challenges they encounter across transitional, academic, social, and emotional domains and articulating how social work interventions, guided by anti-oppressive and strengths-based frameworks, can foster well-being and contribute to positive public health outcomes within this population.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, enabling in-depth exploration of the nuanced and complex lived experiences of South Asian international students in Canadian postsecondary institutions. A qualitative approach, particularly one rooted in phenomenological inquiry, is widely recognized as appropriate for understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, seeking to uncover the meaning and significance they hold (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). This design was deemed most appropriate for capturing the richness and depth of participants' perspectives on the challenges they encountered.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across four distinct postsecondary institutions located in British Columbia, Canada. These institutions were selected to provide diverse representations of the international student experience within the province. A total of seven international students (n=7) participated in the study. In qualitative research, the goal of sampling is not to achieve generalizability to a larger population but rather to purposively select participants who can offer deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation. As noted by Liamputtong and Ezzy (1999), the primary objective is to understand the processes underlying a phenomenon rather than its statistical distribution. A sample of seven South Asian international students from four universities in British Columbia was appropriate for this study, enabling the exploration of diverse experiences within this group. The sample size was deemed sufficient to yield rich, in-depth data and to explore

the diverse experiences within this specific population, consistent with qualitative research principles for achieving thematic saturation.

Participants were eligible if they were (a) born in a South Asian country (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), (b) held active international student status, and (c) enrolled in a postsecondary institution in British Columbia. The participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods, both of which are nonprobability techniques frequently used in qualitative research. In purposive sampling, the researcher intentionally chooses specific cases that are most relevant to the research questions (Bellefeuille, 2021). Purposeful sampling involves the intentional selection of individuals with relevant characteristics or experiences to provide in-depth, information-rich insights into the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach ensured that the selected students meaningfully contributed to understanding the complex challenges faced by South Asian international students. Snowball sampling was also employed, in which initial participants referred to others within their networks who met the study criteria and were willing to participate. The first author met a student at a cultural event at a faith center in Surrey. Following a discussion about the research project, this student agreed to take part in an interview. After the interview, the participant facilitated contact with two additional students within his network. These students, who met the established selection criteria, participated in the study and made additional referrals through their networks. The participants' nationalities included three students from India, two from Nepal, one from Bangladesh, and one from Sri Lanka.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through individual, in-depth interviews, a method that enabled the researchers to obtain rich, detailed narratives of the participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the challenges they encountered as international students in Canada (Palinkas et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted over a three-month period, from May to July 2024. A semi-structured format was used, incorporating open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to speak freely and in their own words. The discussions explored key themes, including transitioning to life in Canada, daily adjustments, academic experiences, social and cultural integration, and emotional well-being. Ethical approval for the study protocol was secured from the University of the Fraser Valley. Prior to their participation, all prospective participants were thoroughly informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits and their absolute right to withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice. Both written and verbal informed consent were obtained from each participant before the commencement of any data collection activities, ensuring their voluntary and informed participation.

The first author conducted all the interviews. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. To ensure consistency across interviews, an interview guide was used that contained semi-structured questions focused on participants' experiences in Canadian higher education, particularly regarding academic

difficulties, settlement challenges, and overall health and well-being. These questions elicited rich, contextual data that supported the study's research objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed shortly after each session. Although various transcription software tools are available to expedite this process, we opted for manual transcription. This involved carefully listening and relistening to each audio recording and typing the content into a Word document. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), immersing oneself in the data through manual transcription enhances familiarity with both the depth and nuances of the content. While time-consuming, this approach can lead to greater accuracy and a deeper understanding of the data. The final cleaned transcripts were used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed via thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This widely adopted method in qualitative research focuses on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, referred to as "themes", within qualitative data (Caulfield, 2023; Qualtrics, 2024). The six steps include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As noted by Liebenberg et al. (2020), thematic analysis involves recognizing recurring patterns in the data and interpreting them to uncover deeper meanings.

In this study, an inductive (data-driven) approach to thematic analysis was employed, which allowed themes to emerge directly from the data without the influence of preexisting frameworks or theoretical assumptions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this sense, the analysis was grounded entirely in the participants' narratives, aligning with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 331) assertion that inductive analysis allows the data to "speak for itself" rather than seek to confirm preestablished ideas. To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, the analysis was conducted through a reflexive and iterative process. This involved continuously comparing codes and emerging themes across interview transcripts. Themes were refined through ongoing critical dialog between the research team, ensuring a coherent, nuanced, and comprehensive representation of participants' lived experiences. In the subsequent sections, we present the major themes that emerged in the data analysis.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the qualitative study, detailing the multifaceted challenges experienced by South Asian international students in Canadian postsecondary institutions. The analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes and their associated subthemes, which are summarized in the subsequent sections.

Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

The study included seven South Asian international students, aged 23--31 years, with an average age in the mid-20s. The sample predominantly comprised young adults, which is consistent with typical age patterns observed among students enrolled in undergraduate and early postgraduate programs. Males constituted the majority of the sample (71%), whereas females comprised 29%, indicating a substantial gender imbalance in the sample. India was the most represented country of origin (43%), followed by Nepal (29%), with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka each accounting for 14% of the sample. The participants were enrolled in a range of academic programs, including Master's degrees in business administration, biotechnology, and public health, as well as Bachelor's degrees in nursing, arts, and computer science. At the time of their interviews, the students had been in Canada for periods ranging from 9--25 months (Table 1).

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Participant ID	Age (Years)	Gender	Marital status	Country of origin	Months in Canada (at the time of the interview)
S1	31	Male	Married	Nepal	11
S2	29	Male	Married	India	15
S3	26	Female	Married	India	25
S4	24	Female	Single	Bangladesh	19
S5	23	Male	Single	Nepal	12
S6	23	Male	Single	Sri Lanka	18
S7	23	Male	Single	India	9

Overview of Themes

The challenges faced by international students were categorized into five overarching themes, each encompassing several key subthemes, as detailed in Table 2. These themes reflect the interconnected nature of their experiences and difficulties.

Table 2: *Themes and Key Subthemes of International Student Challenges*

Number	Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1	*Struggle with Transition Shock*	Initial disorientation and adjustment; Navigating cultural differences; Adapting to new academic systems; Loss of confidence and familiarity
Theme 2	*Adjustments to Everyday Life*	Financial hardship (cost of living, tuition); Housing challenges (discrimination, access); Employment barriers (job search, employer preference); Language barriers; Healthcare access; Transportation; Weather adaptation
Theme 3	*Adapting to Academic Life*	Pressure of assignments and exams; Difficulty with teaching styles (lecture vs. participation); Group work and writing demands; Institutional expectations; Time management; Internship access; Understanding academic rules (plagiarism, citation)
Theme 4	*Navigating Social and Cultural Integration*	Difficulty connecting with host culture; Understanding social norms and communication (nonverbal, slang); Feelings of loss and deprivation (family, friends, home culture)
Theme 5	*Emotional and Psychological Adaptation*	Loneliness and isolation; Anxiety and depression; Homesickness; Feeling powerless/hopeless/helpless; Stigma of mental health; Impact on physical health; Difficulty seeking help

DETAILED THEMATIC FINDINGS

The following sections provide a detailed description of each theme, illustrated with direct quotes from participants.

Struggle with Transition Shock

Participants frequently described a profound sense of "transition shock" upon arrival in Canada, characterized by loss, disorientation, and an overwhelming need to adjust to an entirely new environment. This aligns with Bennett's (1998) definition of transition shock as "a state of loss and disorientation precipitated by a change in one's familiar environment that requires adjustment" (p. 216). Students reported confronting significant shifts in basic life and living norms, alongside pronounced cultural differences. One participant articulated this initial disorientation:

> *Coming to Canada as an international student was an enormous transition for me. There was so much to adjust to, such as understanding a new*

environment, navigating cultural differences, the academic system…the adjustment period was definitely not easy…it's shocking, everything feels different. (S1)

Another student vividly conveyed the depth of this feeling, highlighting a loss of self-confidence and familiarity:

Back home, I felt confident and understood—like I knew who I was and how things worked. However, here in Canada, everything's unfamiliar…even small things such as making eye contact or joining group conversations feel overwhelming. The culture is polite but distant. I overthink every word I say. Even the silence in class feels heavier, like I'm supposed to know what to do, but I don't. I didn't expect to feel so lost doing things that once felt so natural—eating, talking, just being myself. It's like I'm starting from zero again. (S2)

Adjustments to Everyday Life

Beyond the initial shock, participants consistently reported significant challenges in adjusting to the practicalities of daily life in Canada. These adjustments encompassed fundamental needs such as food, housing, and transportation, as well as adapting to different weather conditions, managing finances, and navigating the healthcare system. A pervasive issue that exacerbated these challenges was the language barrier, which added considerable stress to their general life transition. The level of English language proficiency often hinders their ability to adjust effectively and secure initial necessities in their new surroundings, impacting everything from personal interactions to professional opportunities. A participant underscored the pervasive nature of financial strain:

Financial hardship is a major struggle for me right now. It feels like I'm always struggling to make ends meet. Finding a job here has been so difficult, especially because many employers just won't hire international students. On top of that, everything is getting more expensive: the rent, groceries, transportation, and everything. (S3)

Another student highlighted the difficulties in securing stable accommodations and employment:

I found it very challenging to find housing; many landlords did not want to rent to international students because of short leases or a lack of local credit history. In addition, obtaining a part-time job was impossible. Employers often preferred local students; I felt like these things were beyond my control. (S4)

Adapting to Academic Life

Transitioning to a new living environment and navigating communication barriers significantly affected international students' academic adjustment. The

participants explained that adapting to the Canadian academic system was often a complex and overwhelming process. Challenges included navigating teacher–student relationships, adjusting to different educational styles, understanding grading systems and assignments, managing coursework, meeting institutional expectations, and effective time management. These findings suggest a strong correlation between life stress and academic stress, with elevated life stress contributing to increased academic pressure. One participant shared their academic struggles:

> *…school and classes are my biggest sources of stress…the pressure of keeping up with assignments, exams, and just staying on top of everything feels overwhelming sometimes. However, another major challenge was finding an internship. Many local agencies are hesitant to take on international students as interns. It's frustrating because I know I have the skills and the drive, but the status of international student makes it so much harder even to get a foot in the door. (S5)*

Another student reflected on the fundamental shift in pedagogical approaches:

> *Back home, the teaching style was more lecture-based and exam-focused, but here, there is more participation, group work, and a lot of writing, you know. At first, I struggled to keep up with the pace and expectations; I felt like I was always behind, even when I was putting in so many hours. Understanding academic rules, such as plagiarism rules, and how to properly cite sources. It felt like I was not just learning the subjects but also learning how to learn all over again. (S1)*

Navigating Social and Cultural Integration

In addition to academic adjustment, international students face considerable hurdles in social and cultural integration within their new environment. The participants found it challenging to adjust and interact effectively with the host culture and its people, struggling with Canadian values, customs, norms, nonverbal communication, idiomatic expressions, and slang. This often results in a profound sense of loss and deprivation, stemming from being geographically separated from one's family, friends, and familiar sociocultural surroundings. One participant described the constant effort required for social navigation:

> *I constantly struggle to navigate a completely new social and cultural landscape. It's hard to connect with people sometimes because I don't always fully understand what they mean or how to respond. There is a constant feeling of loss, being thus far away from my family and friends and from the cultural norms I grew up with. (S7)*

Emotional and Psychological Adaptation

The cumulative effect of these challenges manifested in significant emotional and psychological distress among international students. Being away from established social support and the ongoing process of acculturation into a new environment contribute to various symptoms of psychological distress, including depression and anxiety. These issues were attributed to culture shock, difficulties with social and academic adjustment, communication barriers, and pervasive feelings of isolation, alienation, loneliness, homesickness, powerlessness, hopelessness, and helplessness. One student directly linked their struggles to loneliness: "*The biggest challenge I've faced is loneliness, which has had a significant impact on my mental and emotional well-*being" *(S6).* Another participant highlighted the toll on their health:

> *Balancing school and life here has been truly tough in my health. Sometimes I skip meals or do not sleep enough because of all the work. I also feel a lot of stress and anxiety, but it's hard to talk about it or ask for help, especially being far from home. (S7)*

The seriousness of these challenges was exemplified by a recent incident shared by another participant, in which a student experiencing severe mental health difficulties was compelled to return home, prompting the community to collectively provide financial assistance for his repatriation.

> *Just a month ago, one of the students in our community had to return home because he was dealing with severe mental health issues, such as depression. He couldn't stay in Canada any longer. Our community came together and raised funds to help cover his flight back home. (S5)*

A final reflection emphasized the pervasive feeling of isolation, as highlighted by one of the participants:

> *At first, I felt very lonely. I didn't know anyone, and it was hard to make friends. People were busy or already had their own groups. I missed my family a lot, especially during holidays. Sometimes I even wondered if coming here was the right choice. (S3)*

DISCUSSION

This study explored the multifaceted challenges faced by international students in Canadian postsecondary institutions, providing an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences across transitional, everyday, academic, social, and emotional domains. The findings illuminate the profound struggles encountered by these students and emphasize the critical role of social work interventions guided by anti-oppressive and strengths-based frameworks in fostering their well-being. The participants' accounts of "transition shock," characterized by disorientation, loss of confidence, and overwhelming

adjustments, align with Bennett's (1998) definition and are a foundational aspect of the international student experience. The reported challenges in daily life, including financial hardship, housing discrimination, and employment barriers, are further corroborated by recent reports. The escalating costs of living and tuition fees, alongside stricter policies that limit work hours and eligibility for postgraduate work permits, exacerbate these vulnerabilities (CASSA, 2024; Hunter et al., 2025; Mann, 2025). The findings underscore how these structural and policy-driven barriers directly contribute to students' precarity and impact their ability to secure basic necessities, often leaving them susceptible to exploitation (Gupta & Su, 2023). This is particularly salient given the recent dramatic reduction in new international student permits and approval rates in 2024 and 2025, coupled with increased proof-of-funds requirements, which create a more challenging environment for prospective and current students (Mann, 2025; Hunter et al., 2025).

In terms of academic adaptation, the correlation between life stress and academic stress identified by Misra et al. (2003) is evident in participants' struggles to adapt to Canadian academic norms, manage coursework, and secure internships. The findings highlight that the challenges extend beyond typical academic pressures to include systemic barriers, such as employers' hesitation to hire international students for part-time jobs or internships. This suggests a disconnect between the economic contributions international students are expected to make and the practical support structures available to enable their success. Social and cultural integration challenges often manifest as difficulties in forming meaningful connections with the host culture and navigating unfamiliar social norms (Karki, 2016). These disruptions, compounded by separation from established support networks, reflect well-documented patterns of acculturative stress (Lari et al., 2025). The emotional consequences – loneliness, isolation, and homesickness – remain central themes in research on international student well-being (Brunner et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Howe et al., 2025). Our findings parallel these concerns, illustrating how psychosocial strain is intensified by overwhelming academic and financial pressures. This constellation of stressors closely aligns with the concept of migratory stress described by Rahim (2025), whose study of Bangladeshi students in Canada identified language anxiety, homesickness, inadequate financial preparation, and systemic discrimination as key contributors to psychological vulnerability. Both bodies of work demonstrate that, despite strong academic potential, international students' integration and well-being are impeded by insufficient social connections and limited access to culturally informed mental health support.

The cumulative impact of these challenges—as evidenced through anxiety, depression, feelings of powerlessness, and a reluctance to seek help due to stigma—emphasizes the severity of emotional and psychological adaptation struggles. Recent research has confirmed that international students experience higher levels of psychological distress than their domestic peers do, a pattern exacerbated by cultural differences in conceptualizing mental health and persistent hesitancy to engage with formal support services (Lari et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2023). The account of a student returning home due to severe mental

health challenges illustrates the profound consequences of unaddressed distress and reinforces the imperative for institutions to prioritize comprehensive, culturally responsive support systems alongside academic programming. To conceptually anchor these implications, it is useful to draw on models that articulate institutional responsibilities beyond narrow academic provisions. Alfattal (2016) offers a particularly relevant framework through his eight-dimensional international student needs model, which extends the traditional 7P marketing mix—Program, Place, Price, Promotion, Process, People, and Physical Facility—by adding *Peace* as a critical dimension. This expansion captures the holistic nature of international students' experiences, emphasizing safety, belonging, and emotional well-being as essential components of student success. When viewed through this lens, the psychosocial challenges identified in our study highlight significant gaps in institutional practice and underscore the need for integrated, multidimensional support strategies that address not only academic functioning but also the relational, emotional, and environmental factors shaping international students' lives.

This model introduces "peace" as the eighth dimension, defined as the student's need for safety, security, and psychological well-being. This conceptualization directly aligns with and reinforces our findings regarding the substantial emotional and psychological distress faced by South Asian international students, demonstrating that their mental health needs are not peripheral but are a core component of their educational experience and retention. Furthermore, the model suggests that needs within these dimensions (e.g., price for tuition and place for housing) often do not align with those of domestic students, underscoring the critical need for a professional practice framework capable of driving culturally responsive and targeted policy adjustments in Canada. Indeed, recent mixed-methods research among international students in Canada confirms that acculturative stress is greatly intensified by "contextual stressors," which explicitly cite structural issues such as unmet expectations and uncertainties related to immigration policies (Torres-Arends et al., 2025). The necessity for such reform is further validated by qualitative accounts of South Asian graduate students in Canada, which directly highlight that academic success and adaptation are highly contingent upon the adequacy of institutional and government support services (Zabin, 2022).

The Role of Social Work Interventions

Social workers play a crucial role in supporting international students within Canadian postsecondary institutions. Drawing on integrated frameworks such as Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) and the Strengths-Based Approach (SBA), social workers can intervene at both the micro and macro levels to support students in navigating unfamiliar educational, cultural, and bureaucratic landscapes. AOP enables practitioners to identify the systemic inequities embedded within internationalization policies, tuition structures, and immigration regulations that shape students' lived experiences. Social workers, informed by this framework, collaborate with students to challenge discriminatory practices, advocate for equitable access to campus services, and dismantle institutional barriers that

contribute to social isolation or academic marginalization (Su, 2025; Khan et al., 2023). SBA complements these efforts by highlighting the assets and resilience students bring with them, such as cultural knowledge, linguistic skills, and transnational support networks. Rather than perceiving students through a deficit lens, SBAs recognize their capacity for adaptation, problem solving, and persistence (Firang & Mensah, 2022). Social workers can build upon these strengths by connecting students to community organizations, peer groups, and cultural associations that foster belonging and enhance coping mechanisms.

Collaboration is central to this integrated approach. Social workers often function as bridges between academic departments, international student offices, mental health services, and settlement agencies, ensuring that support is culturally responsive and accessible. As illustrated in Figure 1, integrating AOP and SBA helps social workers challenge intersectional oppression while simultaneously empowering students through personalized, culturally grounded interventions. This dual framework enhances academic integration, supports emotional well-being, and promotes a more equitable postsecondary environment for international students.
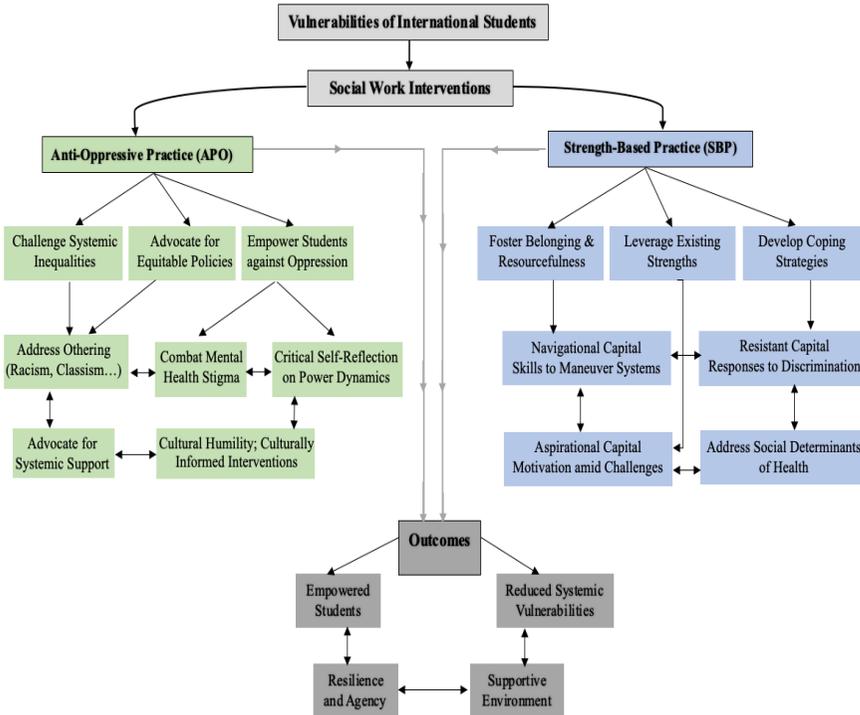

Figure 1: *Integrated anti-oppressive and strengths-based practice framework for supporting international students*

Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP)

The experiences of discrimination, housing exclusion, employment exploitation, and cultural marginalization reported by many international students highlight the critical importance of Anti-Oppressive Practice in higher education settings. AOP positions social workers to confront these systemic inequities by analyzing the power dynamics that shape students' interactions with academic institutions, landlords, employers, and immigration authorities (Su, 2025). Through an AOP lens, social workers advocate for policies that ensure fair treatment, challenge racist or xenophobic assumptions, and promote equitable access to academic and mental health resources (Khan et al., 2023). In social work practice, this may involve supporting students in navigating complex bureaucratic systems, such as appealing discriminatory housing decisions or understanding their labor rights under federal immigration regulations. Social workers can also deliver workshops on recognizing and responding to microaggressions, collaborate with faculty to enhance cultural inclusivity in classrooms, and assist institutional leaders in revising policies that disproportionately disadvantage international students.

AOP requires practitioners to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection, recognizing their own positionality and potential biases (Morgenshtern & Schmid, 2025). This reflective practice ensures that interventions do not reproduce oppressive dynamics but instead foster client empowerment and agency. Cultural humility is essential, especially given that mental health stigma is prevalent in many international students' cultural contexts. Social workers must therefore adopt flexible, culturally attuned approaches that validate diverse understandings of well-being and healing. By centering on justice, equity, and empowerment, AOP allows social workers to move beyond individual-level support toward structural advocacy (Karki et al., 2022). In doing so, they help create institutional environments that not only respond to international students' immediate challenges but also proactively dismantle the barriers that impede their full participation and well-being in Canadian higher education.

Strengths-Based Practice

Strengths-based practice offers a complementary lens that foregrounds the resilience, adaptability, and cultural capital that international students demonstrate as they navigate complex academic and social environments (Firang & Mensah, 2022). Despite facing substantial pressures—including financial insecurity, isolation, and discrimination—many students exhibit navigational (skills for maneuvering unfamiliar environments), aspirational (motivation despite difficulties), and resistant capital (responses to discrimination). These forms of capital reflect their capacity to articulate long-term goals, maneuver through unfamiliar systems, and persist in the face of structural inequities. Social workers guided by the SBA intentionally shift away from deficit-based interpretations of international student experiences. Instead, they identify and amplify strengths such as multilingualism, transnational knowledge, family resilience, and prior academic accomplishments. Through strength-based assessments, social workers can codevelop coping strategies that enhance

students' sense of competence and agency. For example, they may help students leverage community networks, form study groups, or join cultural organizations that reinforce a sense of belonging.

SBA also situates individual well-being within broader social determinants of health. Social workers recognize that challenges such as housing instability, limited job opportunities, and financial strain are not merely personal problems but structural issues that require systemic advocacy (Osei & Tettey, 2025). This perspective enables practitioners to support students while simultaneously advocating for institutional reforms that improve access to financial support, culturally informed mental health services, and equitable academic practices. By integrating SBAs into their work, social workers foster student empowerment, encourage adaptive coping, and strengthen resilience. This approach affirms international students as resourceful individuals whose lived experiences enrich the campus community while ensuring that support is responsive to the complexities of their migration, settlement, and academic journeys.

LIMITATIONS

This study, while providing rich, in-depth insights, has several limitations inherent to its qualitative design. First, the small sample size (n=7) and purposeful sampling, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader international student population in Canada. The experiences of students from other countries of origin or with different educational levels might vary. Second, the study was conducted in British Columbia, and regional differences in policies, social support structures, and cultural contexts could influence student experiences. Therefore, the findings may not be directly applicable to other Canadian provinces. Third, qualitative research is inherently subjective, relying on participants' self-reported experiences and the researcher's interpretation. While efforts were made to ensure rigour through thematic analysis, interviewer bias could implicitly influence data collection and analysis. Finally, the study captures a snapshot in time; the rapidly evolving immigration policies and socioeconomic conditions in Canada mean that the challenges faced by international students are dynamic and require ongoing investigation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study's findings provide a critical foundation for understanding the profound vulnerabilities experienced by South Asian international students in Canada, highlighting key areas for both future research and immediate action by stakeholders. Future research should build on these qualitative insights by employing quantitative and mixed-methods designs with larger, diverse samples across various Canadian regions to more broadly ascertain the prevalence and severity of the identified challenges. Longitudinal studies are crucial for tracking students' experiences from pre-arrival through post-graduation and evaluating the long-term impacts of evolving policies and support interventions. Furthermore,

intervention-focused research is needed to rigorously assess the effectiveness of social work services and campus programs explicitly designed around anti-oppressive and strengths-based frameworks, with a particular focus on how these foster social connection and mental well-being. Academic inquiry should also delve into the experiences of specific vulnerable subpopulations within the international student community who may face exacerbated challenges.

In addition to these findings, the findings strongly point toward immediate policy and intervention-related recommendations for various stakeholders. Governments must critically reassess recent immigration policy changes, including study permit caps, proof-of-funds requirements, and post-graduation work permit restrictions, ensuring that policies are ethical, predictable, and supportive of international students' well-being rather than solely focusing on economic metrics. Educational institutions should enhance comprehensive, culturally responsive support services that integrate financial literacy, housing assistance, and equitable employment navigation, actively challenging discriminatory practices and fostering inclusive campus environments. Social work practitioners and allied professionals are uniquely positioned to implement interventions that explicitly recognize and challenge systemic oppression, leverage students' inherent resilience and strengths, and adopt a holistic approach that considers both individual needs and broader systemic factors. This includes prioritizing anti-oppressive and strengths-based frameworks for mental health support, actively working to destigmatize help-seeking, and advocating for policies that prioritize the human rights and well-being of international students. Collaborative efforts among the government, educational institutions, and community organizations are essential to creating a truly welcoming and supportive ecosystem for international students, ensuring that their struggles are not only recognized but also addressed with comprehensive, sustainable solutions.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence of the profound and multifaceted challenges international students face in Canadian postsecondary institutions, ranging from the initial shock of transition and practical adjustments to everyday life to the complexities of academic integration, social and cultural navigation, and significant emotional and psychological distress, particularly with respect to their mental health. Despite their substantial economic and social contributions to Canada, these students frequently encounter systemic barriers, discrimination, and a sense of precarity that profoundly impacts their overall well-being. By deeply exploring these lived experiences, this research underscores the critical and unique role of social work. Adopting anti-oppressive and strengths-based frameworks, social workers are ideally positioned to address not only individual mental health concerns and distress but also the structural inequities that create and perpetuate these vulnerabilities, thereby contributing to improved public health outcomes for this population. Moving forward, all stakeholders, governments, educational institutions, and social service providers must recognize the "invisible struggles" of international students and commit to

implementing "visible solutions." This study calls for a collective re-evaluation of policies and practices to foster truly inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments, ensuring that Canada remains a welcoming and just destination where international students can thrive rather than merely surviving.

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