

In Search of Information

**INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS IN CANADA ON IMPROVING
ACCESS TO IMMIGRATION INFORMATION**



World
Education
Services

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Executive summary

Canada welcomes international students because they enrich the classroom and campus environment, bringing fresh perspectives and strengthening Canadian ties to countries across the world. International students also make significant contributions to cultural diversity as well as the Canadian economy.

To obtain the full benefits of their investment in a Canadian education, international students need clear and accurate information about the value of studying in Canada. They particularly need access to reliable information about immigration, including work permits and eligibility for permanent residence. However, the availability, integrity, and accuracy of such information is in question.

This qualitative study, based on focus groups with 80 international students at the college, undergraduate, and master's degree levels, documents international students' experiences seeking and making use of immigration information.

The study found that international students engage in extensive research on immigration options even before they choose to study in Canada, and they stay closely attuned to policy developments throughout their time in the country. However, students reported that no single source provides clear, reliable, up-to-date guidance. International students must triangulate across an array of information sources. Many described the effort required to find and verify accurate information as “overwhelming” and feeling like “more than a full-time job.”

International student participants identified six key areas to ensure availability and accessibility of immigration information. They called on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and post-secondary institutions (PSIs) to:

- **Increase stability of immigration policies**, with greater notice and better communication before implementing policy changes
- **Improve the IRCC website** to ensure accurate, up-to-date information in plain language
- **Enhance PSI support services**, particularly access to international student advisors and immigration support
- **Provide better employment support**, including information about work permits, job opportunities, and employment rights, as well as work with employers to open up more employment opportunities for international students and graduates
- **Hold education agents and consultants accountable**, both in Canada and overseas, for preventing misinformation and fair, affordable services
- **Elevate international student voices** to enable decision-makers in government and in PSIs to consider international student perspectives and increase positive public portrayals of international student contributions

Introduction

Canada has long celebrated its international student system and inclusive immigration policies, recognizing the mutual benefits of welcoming students from around the world. International students significantly benefit Canadian colleges and universities and enhance cultural diversity and the Canadian economy. International students have also become essential to the financial sustainability of the post-secondary sector, as PSIs have come to rely on revenue from international students' tuition fees.¹

However, international students often have a less than optimal experience in Canada. They have to juggle competing and sometimes confusing priorities, for instance, keeping up with academics and searching for employment, while also adjusting to life in Canada. These issues are compounded by the difficulties of accessing accurate information regarding critical issues, including immigration.

To understand international student experiences seeking accurate information, World Education Services (WES) conducted 12 focus groups with 80 international students, as well as 14 interviews with people who work with international students. The study investigated the experiences of international students nearing the completion of their degree or diploma programs, as well as recent graduates in Canada, with a focus on how they access immigration and work permit information. Details about the scope and methodology of the research can be found in Appendix A.

The study found that access to reliable, timely, and clear information is not merely helpful—it is essential. Immigration information directly shapes students' academic, personal, and professional decisions. Yet this information is often complex, poorly communicated, or inaccessible. Moreover, because of numerous changes in immigration and international student policy, available sources of information frequently became out-of-date before international students could use it.

To mitigate the risks of making important decisions based on incorrect or outdated information, prospective international students often cross-reference multiple information sources, demonstrating a proactive and careful approach to decision-making. Despite their efforts, these students often face considerable challenges navigating Canada's immigration landscape. Official sources such as Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and PSIs provide immigration information, but the way the information is presented can make it inaccessible or confusing. Additionally, even information provided by official sources is sometimes outdated. This creates a structural information gap and leaves international students more likely to rely on education agents and informal networks, which tend to provide information that is clearer and more accessible. However, information from these sources may be inaccurate, misleading, or overly optimistic.

¹ https://higherstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-04-04_SPEC-2024_v6_Publications-1.pdf

Without robust support structures, international students are left on their own to navigate complex systems and overwhelming requirements. International student participants reported experiencing significant emotional and financial strain. Disillusioned by their experiences, some students said they had shared their concerns with peers in their home countries, many of whom are now choosing to study elsewhere. This word of mouth has likely contributed to the decline in international student enrolments and damaged Canada's reputation as a safe and welcoming country for international students, diminishing its competitiveness as a world-class education destination.

The context: Rising international student recruitment

In 2023, Canada was home to over 800,000 international students at the post-secondary level—a 286 percent increase since 2013.² Aside from a temporary decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, international student enrolment has consistently increased, with growth accelerating in 2022 and 2023.³ This surge has been driven by both global and domestic dynamics: a strong demand for international education, as well as efforts to promote Canadian education abroad.⁴

Canadian colleges and universities have invested significant resources into campaigns to recruit growing numbers of international students. Federal and provincial governments likewise encouraged growth through international education strategies and marketing initiatives that emphasized immigration opportunities after graduation. In recent years, Canada distinguished itself from other study destinations by positioning the country as a place where students could “study and stay” by earning a degree, acquiring work experience, and transitioning to permanent residence (PR).

Growth without guardrails

Rapid growth has exacerbated gaps in oversight and policy coordination. Some PSIs and education agents—including subcontracted agents and agent “aggregators”⁵—have prioritized revenue generation over strong educational outcomes. A focus on recruiting international students to provide additional revenue then incentivized actors to provide misleading or incomplete information about education programs, potential immigration outcomes, and the realities of life in Canada. These issues were enabled by insufficient regulatory frameworks, oversight, and enforcement related to critical areas such as recruitment practices, the number of international students enrolled by program or institution, the quality of education programs, and the level

² <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/01/canada-hosted-more-than-1-million-international-students-in-2023/>

³ <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/01/canada-hosted-more-than-1-million-international-students-in-2023/>

⁴ <https://www.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/0225-spr-international-student-policy-brief-digital.pdf>

⁵ An aggregator is a company that links large numbers of post-secondary institutions, typically across a variety of study destinations, with a large pool of education agents.

of PSI support provided to international students. For example, in 2021, the Auditor General of Ontario found that most programs offered through public-private college partnerships would not be independently reviewed until 2026.⁶

Rapid expansion in international student enrolment has occurred at a time when Canada is facing infrastructure and affordability challenges. This confluence of events has contributed to decreased public trust in immigration policy. As a result, many members of the public have supported a reduction in the number of new entrants to Canada, including international students.

International students themselves have borne the costs of unregulated recruitment practices, limited oversight of education programs, and declining public support for immigration. Many students arrived with unrealistic expectations about student life, living costs, work opportunities, housing availability, and the likelihood of obtaining PR. A significant number were funneled into PSIs or programs of questionable value, and many had limited opportunities to engage with Canadian peers, diminishing the value of their expected international experience.⁷

Public scapegoating of international students for economic challenges, as well as an increase in documented experiences of racism and abuse, have contributed to heightened stress levels among international students.

Meanwhile, access to PR, a key motivation for many international students, has become increasingly limited and competitive. The Canadian Bureau for International Education reported that over 57 percent of international students planned to apply for PR in 2023, with an additional 30 percent considering it.⁸ However, only a small fraction ultimately succeeds. As the number of international students in Canada grew, competition for limited spaces intensified, making it even more difficult for students to secure a pathway to stay.

Policy reforms to course correct growth

Amid negative attention to international student policy, the federal government introduced reforms, including caps on study permits, changes to eligibility for post-graduation work permits (PGWPs) and other work permits, and reductions in immigration levels. These reforms sought to manage student intake levels, aligning them with labour market needs.

An unintended consequence of the course corrections has been the introduction of new challenges for international students seeking timely and accurate information about immigration. While some policy reforms applied only to future students, others have limited international students' ability to transition to PR. This means that the

6 https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_PublicColleges_en21.pdf

7 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/international-student-program-2010.html>

8 <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CBIE-2021-International-Student-Survey-National-Report-FINAL.pdf>

study options with the greatest likelihood of leading to PR have changed. As a result, many study participants reported that they closely monitor all immigration policy developments to understand their work and immigration prospects—a challenge, given the difficulty of obtaining clear and reliable information from official sources.

This study

International student voices and perspectives remain underrepresented in discussions about international student policy. This report centres those voices by highlighting students' challenges, insights, and recommendations.


Key findings from this study reveal that international students urgently need stable immigration policies, as well as more support from their college or university. They also need reliable, consistent information in order to navigate immigration pathways with confidence. Since international students consider IRCC and PSIs to be the primary trusted sources, ensuring accurate, timely information and providing robust support within these systems has the potential for significant, wide-reaching impact.


International students' recommendations for improvement are integrated throughout the report, which is structured as follows:


- **Section 1** explores international students' information-seeking behaviours, from why and how they chose Canada, to their main information needs related to immigration.
- **Section 2** examines key sources of information, including IRCC, colleges and universities, overseas agents, social media and informal networks, and legal professionals, such as consultants and lawyers.
- **Section 3** explores the multifaceted challenges international students encounter in accessing reliable immigration and employment information while managing academic, financial, and personal pressures.


Study, work, and stay: Why international students chose Canada


International students often compare Canada to other popular study destinations, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Focus group participants chose Canada for several key reasons, often influenced by a combination of factors:

 Relative affordability of education

 Canada's reputation as being safe, diverse, and welcoming

 Pathways to permanent residence

 Family and community ties

 Quality of education

Different groups of students weighed the factors differently. College students were drawn to co-op programs, work placements, and post-graduation employment opportunities, whereas university students emphasized the quality of education and scholarships. Mature students considered opportunities for their spouses and children, valuing the ability of families to work, study, and settle together. Some younger students saw study in Canada as a path to independence and relief from social pressures at home. In general, students appreciated the opportunity to improve their English through study and work. Students also reported that education agents promoted Canada as a superior option, sometimes suggesting guaranteed success with regard to career prospects and immigration.

One of the most frequently cited factors was affordability, especially compared to the U.S. Many students were also drawn by what they perceived at the time of application as clear and accessible “study and stay” immigration pathways.

“If you compare any good university [globally], this was the [most affordable] program. Then [there was] the presence of a postgraduate work permit, and a pathway for permanent residency. So those were my reasons to choose Canada. [Since the policy changes] it's a different story. But at that time those were clear reasons for me.”

—International student

“I did research about the after-study implications for my path that I will have while I'm in Canada. Immigration was one of the major factors in me deciding to study in Canada.”

—International student

“ If you’re investing that much money, you would want to know that there’s something that comes out of it afterwards. The decision entirely was based on, ‘Could I stay afterwards?’”

—International student

Many selected their programs strategically to qualify for longer PGWPs.

“ For me, the work permit played an important role... I needed some work experience in order to be more competitive here, or even in my own home country. So I [found] a program that was eligible for a three-year [post-study work] opportunity.”

—International student

Information-seeking and decision-making

“ I had been doing my research for three years before I came to Canada.”

—International student

The international students in our focus groups emphasized that no source of information is sufficiently comprehensive or reliable. This leads students to use multiple channels to make informed decisions. They described the process of evaluating and verifying the credibility of various sources as time-consuming and laborious—comparing it to a “full-time job.”

Their sources of information included IRCC, colleges and universities, social media, informal networks, overseas agents, and immigration consultants and lawyers. Yet having a wide variety of sources was not necessarily an advantage. International students said they found the options overwhelming, and sometimes contradictory. Moreover, they were often uncertain about the accuracy or reliability of information from each source.

Many students spent hours researching, tracking policy changes, and organizing details into spreadsheets. The lack of formal support, especially for information related to immigration issues, was a recurring concern. As one student put it, “It is a very complicated policy landscape, and something that you have to figure out on your own.”

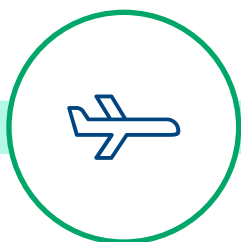
After arriving in Canada, students often struggled with conflicting or outdated information from multiple sources, further complicating their experience. Some international students became so knowledgeable about immigration rules and processes that they pursued certification as regulated Canadian immigration consultants (RCICs).

Information needs of international students

“ I had been doing my research for three years before I came to Canada.”

“ You’re expected to still work, continue functioning as a normal person in society, and at the same time try and figure out if you’re going to be able to stay or not.”

“ These [policy] changes have triggered my fears and my anxieties about my potential future. I don’t know: would I be able to get my citizenship if I stayed in Canada?”



PHASE 1:

Pre-Arrival

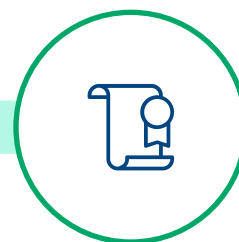
- Research on all aspects of study, life, and immigration
- Application process
- Study permit process
- Planning to move



PHASE 2:

Arrival and Study

- Housing
- Campus life
- Academic life
- Part-time work
- Permit renewals



PHASE 3:

Graduation and Beyond

- Post-graduation work permit
- Employment
- Pathways to permanent residence

Experiences seeking immigration information

Students viewed the IRCC website as the most authoritative source of information, along with PSI websites.

Personal networks, both in Canada and abroad, also played a critical role. Students often relied on what others said about their own experiences to validate information. While they appreciated hearing stories and advice, many maintained a critical lens when evaluating peer-shared information.

“ After my research, I try to connect with my relatives who used to live over there to solidify the information.”

—International student

“ I used all sources. I consulted with an agent, but I cross-checked the information with the IRCC website. I also checked with a couple of my friends who lived here and went on social media to start looking for like immigration companies that were public and have accounts on social media. So I was comparing all the information.”

—International student

“ I seek out help from my friends or relatives who have gone through it.”

—International student

In their home countries, prospective students often seek information about study options through recruitment fairs, local consultant advertisements, and education agents. Students recounted that educational fairs are frequent and widespread. One said, “Every weekend, every Sunday in a big hotel, you have an education fair going on almost around the year.” Another student noted how overseas ads sell a highly idealized image: “There was a billboard in one of the streets in Delhi that said, ‘Make your first million before 30.’”

Both before and after arriving in Canada, students actively use social media, often following influencers with immigration expertise or from their own language and diaspora communities. Many also seek direct insights by connecting with alumni and other students via LinkedIn, watching YouTube videos, and joining peer groups on Reddit, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook.

Once in Canada, students continue relying on these digital networks, while increasingly turning to in-person connections within their classes, cohorts, and local communities. These networks help students to navigate specific situations, promoting practical advice and how-to knowledge based on lived experience. Immigration consultants and lawyers are typically consulted at a later stage, particularly for support with PGWP and PR applications, in complex cases, or to validate earlier research.

Some stakeholders expressed concern about students' reliance on informal research.

“ They're just doing their own research on Google. And when they're doing their own research, they're getting confused. And then, at the last resort, is when they'll reach out to someone.”

—Stakeholder

“ The student was complaining that ‘my friend told me this.’ But it turns out that their study permit didn't have a condition that allows them to work off campus, so I advised them, but they didn't believe me because someone else they trusted said they could.”

—International student advisor

SECTION 2

Sources of information about immigration

International students' main sources of information were IRCC, colleges and universities, social media, informal networks, overseas agents, and immigration consultants and lawyers. Despite having a wide variety of sources from which to find information on immigration, international students said they found the options overwhelming and sometimes contradictory, and not always reliable.

The following section outlines international students' experiences and recommendations related to various sources of information. It is structured according to the relative importance of each source, as identified by the students themselves.

International students reported seeking information from the following sources:

- | | |
|---|---|
|  IRCC, particularly the website |  Family and friends |
|  Post-secondary institution websites |  Personal networks |
|  International student offices |  Social media |
|  Overseas agents and recruiters |  Post-arrival connections and networks |
| |  Immigration consultants and lawyers |

IRCC website

The IRCC website is the most accessed and relied upon source of immigration information for study participants. Both students and information providers turned to it for trustworthy, comprehensive immigration information. However, the IRCC website also has notable limitations, with students citing issues with its usability, clarity, and accuracy.

Students expressed frustration that information was often out-of-date, incorrect, or contradictory, making it difficult to rely on the IRCC website as a place to verify all other information. They also find it poorly worded and hard to understand, and the site itself to be fragmented and difficult to navigate. Available information, they said, lacks sufficient detail, with students describing it as “correct, but not complete.”

“ Students need streamlined communication and transparency, because policy language is very hard to dissect.”
—Stakeholder, student support

IRCC information about pathways to PR is particularly opaque and decentralized, and it does not provide clear guidance to international students on how to weigh the options available to them. As one student observed, “There’s a lot of information, but it’s tough to connect the dots.”

These issues are especially problematic amid recent policy changes. IRCC is often slow to update its website and, at times, incorrectly portrayed new regulations, causing confusion and even panic among students who were trying to access accurate guidance quickly.

“ IRCC made a mistake when they updated their website, so that triggered a lot of confusion and concern from students, and our staff as well. But fortunately, that was just a mistake, and that was quickly fixed. But this issue and lack of clarification from the IRCC impacts us. We need to do damage control after.”
—Stakeholder, international student office

What students want

Clear information on immigration pathways. Students called on IRCC to organize existing information in a centralized, comprehensive online space that clearly explains the different pathways to PR, including PGWPs, Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs), and Express Entry (EE).

Visual tools to explain complex immigration processes. Students noted that video explanations, flowcharts, and infographics on the IRCC website would help them navigate their specific circumstances more effectively. Where possible (and when information can be regularly updated), IRCC should create short how-to videos that provide step-by-step guidance.

Clear and realistic timelines. Students noted that IRCC could clearly outline the steps international students or applicants need to take at each stage of the process, along with specific timelines for when they should apply or prepare. They noted that they would benefit from honest and realistic processing timelines on the website so they could plan effectively to meet deadlines.

IRCC client support centre

Students and other interviewees described the experience of accessing information support from IRCC phone agents as frustrating because of inadequate assistance, long waits, and inconsistent information. They described IRCC agents as inaccessible and improperly trained, often providing contradictory information.

“ You get information today [from the IRCC phone agent]. Call again tomorrow. You’ll probably get a different agent and see what they say—because people are being told different things.”
—Advocate

“ To get a hold of a phone agent is absolutely insane. You would call 50 times a day! In the end of waiting, ‘Oopsie. All the agents are busy. Call again later!’”
—International student

Sometimes IRCC agents simply referred international students back to the IRCC website. These interactions often caused more confusion and eroded trust in IRCC generally.

Students often sought written responses from IRCC, as they considered having something in writing to be more accurate and potentially useful to support their case. However, it could take months to receive a reply, generally rendering the replies irrelevant.

What students want

Trained IRCC phone support staff and accurate, consistent, up-to-date information. If adequate training cannot be provided to ensure high-quality support, students recommend discontinuing the service, as inconsistent or inaccurate assistance only adds to their frustration.

AI and other technologies that increase speed and efficiency of information delivery. AI-powered chatbots or virtual assistants could provide immediate, accurate responses to common questions, ensuring that users receive the information they need quickly while minimizing human error and the risk of inaccurate or incomplete details.

Colleges and universities

Most international students said that their college or university was another primary source of immigration information.

“ Your university is practically the only thing you know. Right? It’s the first thing you know when you come to Canada, and it’s where you spend most of your time.”

—International student

But the focus groups revealed divergent experiences when seeking support from their PSI. International students generally felt well-supported during the admissions and enrolment process, but once enrolled, many felt that services and support for international students was inadequate or fragmented.

Many international students noted that international student offices are stretched thin, offering limited personal interaction and sometimes providing generic or outdated advice. International students felt that the level of staffing and support was far from adequate for the growing number of international students on most campuses. This view was supported by PSI staff.

“ Most of the international student fees goes towards the university’s operating budget, and only a very small percentage of that goes towards creating actual resources and support systems for international students.”

—Student support worker

What students want

Expanded capacity to provide comprehensive, individualized support to international students. Ensure adequate staffing levels, including professionals with specialized expertise, to assist international students within colleges and universities.

Enhanced orientation and information sessions. In addition to campus tours and pre-arrival orientations, provide a comprehensive overview of students’ rights, available resources, and essential processes—in virtual and on-campus sessions. Include guest speakers on important topics such as immigration, community services, navigating campus life, and employment.

Proactive sharing of information, reminders, and updates. Provide regular updates on immigration policy changes, practical how-to information, and reminders about key deadlines, requirements, and actions students need to take; for example, when to apply for a PGWP or begin exploring future immigration pathways.

Provision of in-house immigration support and on-campus legal clinics. Extend support beyond regulated international student immigration advisors (RISIAs) and RCICs to cover the entire immigration experience, from study permits to work permits to PR options. Provide access to affordable legal clinics where students’ immigration questions can be addressed.

International students said that regardless of where they sought support within the college or university, they were frequently redirected to the international student office.

Some students expressed frustration and wished that support for international students was more available across all student services within PSIs. Other students noted that they received specific support and guidance outside the international student office, from professors and other staff who took the time to guide and support them individually. Overall, university students reported receiving more support from international student offices compared to their counterparts at colleges.

Generally, students felt that international student office staff played a crucial role—particularly for university students—in helping them navigate campus life, academic concerns, and work permit procedures. Students appreciated when schools organized information sessions with external representatives, such as immigration lawyers, consultants, IRCC representatives, and other services and support in the community.

Staff noted that holding information sessions on campus was also important.

“ The best place to provide support is in the colleges and universities, because it’s hard to catch international students outside of those spaces. They’re so busy with work, with family. They barely have time for themselves.”

—Stakeholder, settlement agency

Although international students valued support and information from international student offices, interviewees working in PSIs expressed frustration that students often do not engage with the resources provided. As one staff member put it, “No one reads emails!”

This made it challenging for staff to effectively communicate with students, as most PSIs have the capacity to send mass communications, but can’t provide individual follow-up and check-ins, given the high number of students.

Interviewees who work with international students also highlighted the challenges of providing individualized support due to capacity limitations, varying levels of expertise, and their scope of services. While international students often sought personalized guidance from legal representatives in international student offices, many students were frustrated by the limited scope of assistance available.

“ International students need help with PR transition. They want to know, ‘How do I do this? How does this work?’ [Within PSIs] the firm instruction has always been to not provide that advice as they’re worried about liability. They’re worried about overstepping their traditional bounds and resources. Meanwhile, the [international student’s] money keeps flowing in—but [PSIs] don’t want to support them...It’s a disgrace.”

—Former education agent

Support typically focused on study permits and PGWP applications. Immigration-related matters beyond that, such as other types of work permits, family immigration issues, or pursuing PR, was largely considered by colleges and universities to be beyond their scope.

“ The farthest that they would go is to explain PGWP to you, because that’s the most immediate right after you graduate. How do you apply for PGWP? What are the requirements? That’s it. No more help.”

—International student

While some international students did receive help with complex issues, such as academic integrity cases or breaks in study, the majority wanted more support related to immigration, work, and their own immigration journeys. Too often, such support is unavailable.

“ PSIs are covering themselves and sometimes, even when students have a right to work, the regulated international student immigration advisor will tell them, ‘Well, you don’t want to jeopardize your status and be noncompliant with the rules. So, you actually can’t work.’”

—Advocate

International students also noted a significant gap after graduation. After this point, guidance on finding employment, transitioning to PR, or making informed decisions about their future in Canada becomes scarce. One student described how “universities and colleges in Canada will invest to get you here but will not invest to keep you here.”

The absence of support leaves graduates unsure about the next steps in their career and in their immigration plans and unsure of who can support them in this phase of their lives.

“ Just luring them with the promise of PR is not enough. You also have to make sure there are the support systems available [during studies and after graduation].”

—International student office worker

Some international students described realizing too late that they should have chosen a different program or brought specific documentation to Canada to better support their PR pathways.

“ I am trying to find [all the information]. On top of all of that, [I’m] expected to still work, continue functioning as a normal person in society, and at the same time try and figure out if [I’m] going to be able to still stay or not... and no one is helping.”

—International student

Some international students had a more positive experience, because their PSIs employed dedicated immigration legal staff—either RCICs or RISIAs—and offered one-on-one advising.

University students in some smaller communities, especially on the East Coast, noted that they felt supported with immigration and work options and that they received more personalized assistance.

“ They were very on top of everything and made sure I was able to show them my document and ask them for advice. ‘How does this work? What’s going to happen?’ And they took the time and were very helpful.”

—International student

However, in other small communities, particularly at colleges, some students reported insufficient support for international students, despite a substantial need for assistance.

Others expressed frustration that staff in international student offices were often unfamiliar with the specifics of recent immigration policy changes, offering advice that was overly general or outdated. One student remarked, “They had a printout of the IRCC website” and used it as their primary source of guidance. Similarly, PSIs that relied on chatbots, templated responses, or mass emails frequently failed to address students’ individual circumstances.

While most initially sought help from their PSI’s international student office, they often faced delays accessing support, found the support too general, or were told that staff could not provide advice or help—especially in regard to PR pathways or issues specific to their circumstances. As a result, many turned to or were referred to external immigration professionals.

Social media and informal networks

Social media and informal networks—both online and in person—play a major role in how international students gather information about immigration.

“ I never looked at social media as a first source. I would always try to refer to sources with trusted information from RCICs and the official website of the government. But it’s still helpful for the whole picture.”

—International student

Many followed content creators who provide real-time updates online, including RCICs and immigration lawyers, often in their native language.

Influencers from specific diaspora communities (for example, Brazilian, Indian, and Nigerian) are noteworthy, with platforms like Ask Kubeir frequently mentioned as trusted sources. Students, especially those in Canada, turn to these sources to understand IRCC information and policy changes.

A couple of students said that following these accounts ultimately led them to retain the services of content creators who were also immigration consultants.

“ Because PSIs were not delivering [adequate] guidance, private practitioners stepped up. We see this now through social media, influencers are learning to monetize, giving advice. We see current and former international students often becoming influencers through their own accounts, and they are then giving advice to future international students.”

—Education agent

Others noted that they used these sources despite the risk of misinformation.

“ The reason people go to social media for information is just because of how engaging it is. But some of this information is not valid, right? We know that, but it’s real-time responses and information.”

—International student

Platforms like Reddit, Quora, WhatsApp, and Facebook are used to engage in peer-to-peer conversations with classmates or community members to exchange advice and share personal experiences. Students said that often the information and resources shared on these platforms seemed not only timely but more accurate and context-specific than the information from agents.

“ I used a lot of Facebook groups. So, they have different Facebook groups for, like study permits, PGWP, and all the processing stuff, and then also for permanent residency. Each has their own Facebook groups. So, I thought those were really helpful.”

—International student

In cultures where relationships and shared stories are highly valued, international students tend to depend on others for guidance. These networks also offer practical assistance, such as tips for filling out forms or navigating complex procedures.

“ My main source [of support and information] has actually been a lot of Facebook groups. Specifically, within our community. Filipinos are super active on Facebook. So, there’s a lot of resources and advice we share over there.”

—International student

However, international students are aware of the issue of false information on social media and of unscrupulous individuals who seek to exploit international students’ precarity. Students noted that the quality of content online and the information

shared by others varies widely. Students often encounter polarized narratives—either overly positive or extremely negative—with little nuance.

“ One challenge is that I’m concerned about the information that floats on social media. Half of it is by the ghost consultants or unauthorized representatives, people who are not authorized to provide immigration advice.”

—International student

One student said, “Realistic information is lacking. Information is being masked.” International students highlighted that false, incomplete, or clickbait information is common, and fake accounts sometimes post misleading content or promote scams.

Others noted the abundance of information and posts from those who pose as immigration consultants or offer immigration advice and services but are not authorized representatives. Students mentioned encountering scams alongside useful information, and the challenge of sorting out what is reliable online.

“ There are sketchy immigration people trying to get you to pay them \$500 for a half hour consultation. It turns out that it’s just a rural or agricultural immigration pathway or something like that, not relevant to international students. Social media is flooded with stuff like that and that makes it a little hard to navigate.”

—International student

Many international students noted that they had developed the ability to identify trustworthy sources and posts on social media, but expressed concern that some international students might struggle to tell the difference.

Stakeholders such as immigration consultants, university staff, and other professionals often find themselves stepping in to correct misinformation shared on social media and in informal networks. This can involve assisting international students with the consequences of incorrect applications, misunderstood policies, or actions taken based on faulty advice, as well as spending time convincing them that the information they received was inaccurate.

“ International students are receiving all this other incorrect information. By the time we actually provide them with the correct information we have to undo and get them to unlearn whatever they heard. And that takes a lot of time.”

—International student advisor

Overseas agents

Overseas recruitment efforts and agents play a significant role in shaping international student decisions. Students noted that agents helped them understand their study options and information about immigration, as well as how to apply to college or university and obtain study permits. Many expressed satisfaction with the support they received. They appreciated not having to pay service fees directly, as these were covered through commissions paid by PSIs. Some students valued agents for simplifying complex information and processes, often handling applications on their behalf. Those who worked with an agent appreciated having a direct and accessible point of contact throughout the process.

However, many recruiters and agents promoted a simplified and often misleading vision of studying in Canada—promising easy PR, guaranteed jobs during studies and after graduation, and low living costs. Agents portrayed smaller Canadian cities or specific PSIs in an overly appealing light. They suggested that these options would lead to the easiest path to employment and PR.

In contrast to what international students had been told, however, many experienced limited contact with Canadian students, isolation in remote communities, or inability to access campus housing.

“A dream that’s sold by the agent where the agent’s like, ‘You’re gonna go to Canada and you’re gonna live a life like this. You’re gonna have a car!’ Like, ‘You’ll be drinking coffee every single day!’ Like, this is what your life is.”

—International student

When international students voiced concerns about studying in Canada based on negative media coverage or stories from acquaintances, overseas agents often dismissed these worries with flattery, such as, “You’re so smart, you’ll be fine.”

This approach minimized well-documented challenges and created a false sense of security, leading students to believe they were exceptions to the broader systemic issues they were likely to face.

Students and stakeholders pointed to the challenge of overseas agents and the aggregator model for outsourced recruitment, where there is a significant distance between the PSI and the prospective student. One stakeholder highlighted the concern as follows: “There is no ability to review the conduct and character of agents, there is no ability to [have] oversight. We just don’t know.”

What students want

An end to the practice of hiring overseas agents to recruit students for Canadian schools. At a minimum, Canada should enact stricter regulations to hold overseas agents accountable for misleading students coming to Canada, particularly agents who falsify information or engage in unethical recruitment practices.

Since agents make their money through commissions from PSIs, students said that agents did not appear to have students' best interests in mind. Some students reported feeling pressured by agents to choose specific PSIs and programs, often being told they would be most successful in certain regions or pathways—and, in some cases, warned that they would fail if they pursued other options.

“ The recruitment agent is more focused on a business transaction, not on making sure that there is quality advising in terms of career prospects and academic success and immigration processes and outcomes [for the student].”

—Stakeholder, former agent

Several students reported that they were advised to use an agent for the study permit application, without being informed that agents who give immigration advice and services must be licensed (see below for more detail). Others opted to ask their agent for help with their study permit to avoid any mistakes.

Some participants reported that students were simply asked to submit documents like acceptance letters, after which the agents would take over the entire study permit process. Those students were then unclear what the agents actually submitted on their behalf.

This opened the possibility for agents to falsify documents or language test results. While none of the international student participants reported that their agent submitted false documents, participants were aware that such practices were common. It is unclear whether this group of students genuinely did not encounter these situations or felt uncomfortable disclosing them in a focus group.

Interviewees who worked with international students, whether in international student offices or through advocacy roles, emphasized the significant role agents play in spreading misinformation and the growing sophistication of fraudulent practices. Many interviewees noted that with the introduction of AI tools, agents can now produce fake documents that appear real.

Similarly, international student participants had heard stories about severe consequences for students whose agents gave them fraudulent documents.

“ People think that they've got their visa stamped on the passport, but those visas and stickers and everything are fake.”

—International student

Consultants and lawyers

International students had mixed experiences with immigration consultants and lawyers, with most noting that they used these services while in Canada. They typically sought help from a consultant or lawyer when they encountered questions they couldn't resolve on their own, or when they were concerned about their work and options for PR.

Many students spoke positively about their experiences with reputable consultants and lawyers in Canada. Although the financial investment was often significant, some international students felt it was worthwhile to alleviate stress, reduce the burden of navigating complex immigration rules, and allow them to focus on their studies and work.

Several students mentioned having one or two consultations to validate their own plans and pathways, which gave them confidence to handle the paperwork and process independently. Having a knowledgeable professional review their unique situation to ensure that nothing was overlooked proved especially valuable.

Still, many students found consultations expensive and of limited value. Some participants received information they already knew, or worse, incorrect advice. A few participants reported being offered lower rates for paying in cash: “\$1,000 cheaper if you pay in cash.”

Others were told they needed costly legal services to secure PR, only to later discover that their case was straightforward and did not require such support.

“ Their service fees are really different. And then, even though this is just a simple application and no complications, one person could charge \$500, whereas the other person could charge like \$5,000. I've seen cases where the fee structure is pretty different, and sometimes students are charged more. There should be more fairness.”

—Stakeholder, international student office

“ I contacted the same lawyer who filed the case for my friend. I paid him like \$800 consultation fee, which is a lot of money for a person like me. He asked me about my background, and then he said to me, [...] ‘You are less likely to be accepted as a PR with a normal path. That's why I think we need a specialized person to work on your case.’ Then he said, ‘It will cost you \$10,000.’ And I heard a crack in my heart because I didn't have the money.”

—International student

What students want

Stronger enforcement against unethical consultants and lawyers. This includes individuals acting fraudulently in these roles within Canada, especially those who overcharge for services.

A limit on the fees that can be charged for immigration services—particularly for simpler processes—to ensure fairness, affordability, and transparency.

Lack of knowledge about licensing requirements increases international students' vulnerability to unscrupulous providers. Indeed, a key concern raised during the focus groups was that some students were unaware that immigration consultants and lawyers are regulated, or that there are official ways to verify their credentials and status.

“Someone said to me, ‘Why don’t you find those immigration consultants that the government checks to help them with answering questions like yours.’ No one had mentioned RCICs or anything in the school, no one mentioned this during any of my visits from the International House or when they support international students. No one except this person.”

—International student

Information-seeking in a broader context

Obtaining reliable information is just one of many challenges international students face. While they dedicate significant time and energy to researching immigration pathways and information, these efforts often compete with a host of other demands. Students are simultaneously managing academic workloads, employment, financial pressures, housing instability, and the emotional strain of adjusting to life in a new country.

These demands are often interlocking. Stress related to finances, housing, and immigration make it difficult to focus on schoolwork and succeed academically. Finding work commensurate with their education and experience is often key to eligibility for PR; however, post-study career supports are often lacking. Seeking and verifying information is yet another time-consuming requirement, especially in a turbulent policy environment where students fear losing their immigration status and forfeiting the cost of their considerable investment in studying in Canada.

Focus group participants reported that these information-related challenges were most pronounced in three key areas:

- Impact of ongoing policy changes
- Challenges accessing accurate employment information
- Inadequate wraparound supports

Impact of policy changes happening in real time

Frequent immigration policy changes have left many international students feeling overwhelmed, confused, and unfairly treated. Students invest considerable time, energy, and resources into researching their options and planning their academic and professional future. Many told us they thought they understood what they needed to do to have an opportunity to get PR. Instead, they now find themselves in a policy landscape marked by regulatory changes that often feel arbitrary and poorly communicated.

As one student put it, “[There is] never a day I don’t check IRCC updates,” underscoring the vigilance needed to stay informed.

“Every week there were continuously so many updates coming. It was so very overwhelming every single week, more news. Okay, they were doing something. They were taking it back. Then, again. [...] It kind of created a ruckus, you know, for the entire system.”

—International student

“ It’s very challenging because you’ve moved to a new country. You’re trying to focus on your studies. You’re trying to adapt to a new environment and having these changes constantly thrown at you, it’s very difficult. If at the time of you moving here, you made a decision based on the information available—now it’s all changed.”

—International student

The personal toll is significant. Many students face family separation, disrupted plans, and financial and emotional strain as they navigate an increasingly complex system. Several described experiencing severe anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and even trauma.

“ These changes have triggered my fears and my anxieties about my potential future. I don’t know: Would I be able to get my citizenship if I stayed in Canada?”

—International student

“ Looking back, I wish I could have made a different decision. I would have gone elsewhere. But because I couldn’t anticipate these changes, I utilized the information that I had at hand.”

—International student

“ You cannot plan for the future—my future is uncertain.”

—International student

The constant churn of immigration updates—often introduced, withdrawn, and reintroduced—has created what another student participant described as “a lot of chaos within the system,” with far-reaching impacts.

Challenges accessing accurate employment information

The international students we spoke to identified key areas where improvements in employment information and support are essential both for financial security and achieving the work experience needed to qualify for PR.

Survival jobs and derailed PR plans

Many expressed frustration that they could only secure low-wage survival jobs, which hindered their ability to attain relevant professional experience or meet PR requirements. Students said that securing employment in their field of study or at the required skill level for PR was a persistent challenge. Many international students were discouraged that co-op and job opportunities promoted by PSIs were often restricted to Canadian citizens or PRs.

“It was very hard for me to find jobs in my field that fit the contract requirements, and also weren’t only open for Canadian citizens or permanent residents. A lot of the jobs in a lot of fields are tagged like that.”

—International student

Students stressed that having clear, accurate, and upfront information about the limitations and the realities of the labour market could have helped them make more informed choices. Instead, they had received assurances from agents, peer networks, and marketing materials that work would be readily available and sufficient to cover tuition and living costs.

Employer confusion and information gaps

Confusion among employers adds to the challenge. Stakeholders and students noted that even employers willing to hire international students were often unclear about

What students want

Clear, accessible, and realistic pre-arrival information regarding employment in Canada. This should include information about work and co-op permits, hour limitations, eligibility, employment rights, typical living costs, and workplace expectations—empowering international students to plan effectively, manage finances, and understand their rights.

Improved employer education and information about hiring international students. Provide employers with clear guidance on work permits, implied status, and the immigration system, ensuring that PSIs and government bodies also support this understanding to reduce confusion and lower barriers to employment.

A public education campaign so employers understand work eligibility rules that pertain to international students and graduates. Highlight the unique benefits of hiring international students, including their Canadian education, diverse perspectives, and valuable skills to help reduce stigma, break down hiring barriers, and promote greater employment opportunities for international students.

work hour restrictions, permit rules, and PGWP processes. This lack of clarity leads to missed opportunities, vague or insecure job offers and contracts, and difficulty meeting PR criteria. Some students also reported receiving conflicting information from PSIs about when and how to apply for PGWPs, further contributing to delays and uncertainty in their job search process.

“ I landed a few job interviews, and then I cleared like three rounds, but when it came to hiring I didn’t have any work permit in hand and the employer hesitated to hire me. I had to let go of a few good opportunities because of that.”

—International student

Missing information, risky jobs

Even when international students do find work, many face precarious and sometimes exploitative conditions. Stakeholders note that some students are misinformed or pressured into violating work limits, while others who, unaware of their rights, avoid reporting mistreatment for fear of risking their immigration status. Students highlighted that there is a lack of information and support in regard to understanding worker rights and workplace norms in Canada.

Need for holistic supports

Students highlighted that another challenge is the lack of holistic supports or capacity to serve international students. This issue plays out both within and beyond their PSI.

Underresourced international student offices

In international student offices, one advisor is often responsible for hundreds of students. The caseload makes offering individualized, timely support nearly impossible. Many international students struggled to get an appointment for guidance. As one student noted, “We pay all this money, and there are almost no services for us.”

Many international students reported that this situation has worsened in recent months, particularly with budget cuts impacting student services. Stakeholders working in these offices emphasized that the workload was often unsustainable before the recent cuts; it has now become virtually impossible to meet the needs of international students.

What students want

Holistic support. Ensure a comprehensive on-campus support system to address students’ overall well-being. In addition to immigration support, offer academic counseling, peer support networks, mentorship opportunities, career development services, and mental health services designed to address the unique pressures international students face.

Several international students said they were hesitant to raise concerns about the lack of resources, information, and services available to them in Canada, as well as the negative experiences they faced both on and off campus. They feared that speaking with PSIs or in public settings could jeopardize their current immigration status or prospects of transitioning to PR. When they did speak up, some encountered dismissive responses within their PSIs, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability and isolation.

“ We also need to understand that when students are also coming here, they’re uprooting themselves from all the resources in the community that they had ... in their home country. And now they’re implanting themselves in a totally different country, with no [prior] access to support or connections or community.”

—Stakeholder, student support

Gaps in community support for international students

Outside of PSIs, international students reported difficulty with settlement and employment services. Those who sought help from employment or immigrant-serving agencies were turned away or found ineligible for federally funded programs. The gaps in available information and community support further limit students’ ability to find skills-commensurate jobs, secure housing, or navigate their legal and immigration issues effectively.

In the absence of a robust support system, international students and recent graduates reported feeling abandoned. The emotional toll of navigating complex challenges without adequate support has deeply eroded international students’ trust in a system that once promised a clear pathway to stay in a welcoming community.

Conclusion

International students are integral to Canada's future. Canada has long recognized that attracting top students ensures its global competitiveness. Yet successive transitions in the post-secondary sector and in international student policy have put many international students at risk, leading to widespread stress and confusion. This damages Canada's reputation as a good place to study, and it dampens international students' ability to reach their full potential.

WES is committed to helping society recognize newcomers' skills and talents, including those of international students. As part of this commitment, WES has engaged in consultation with international students. It has become apparent that international students need clear, accurate, and timely information about the visa and immigration rules that affect them. This qualitative study was conducted to assess whether the landscape of immigration information is meeting the needs of current and recent international students.

The study found that international students invest substantial effort in planning and navigating a complex and unpredictable immigration system. Study participants were aware of which sources of immigration information were most likely to be trustworthy, and they tended to look first to official sources, such as the IRCC website and information provided by their PSI. However, they also reported that information from official sources can be insufficient, contradictory, and difficult to interpret. Resource limitations and narrow mandates at many colleges and universities restrict the amount of guidance and immigration-related support PSIs can offer.

As a result, international students often rely on informal networks and social media to access timely information and guidance, but these sources provide inconsistent or inaccurate information. Others seek professional help from immigration lawyers and consultants. Their experiences with legal representatives varied. Some receive the support they need and find relief from navigating the system alone. For others, legal representation was a significant financial strain and did not produce meaningful results.

These information gaps, combined with unethical recruitment practices and recent immigration policy changes, have fueled confusion, frustration, and disillusionment among international students. Many feel misled by promises of employment after graduation and a straightforward pathway to PR, only to face growing barriers and uncertainty. This challenge is intensified by high international student enrolment, which has diminished many students' chances of securing PR.

Recent policy shifts aim to reduce new enrolment and fail to address the systemic issues that have enabled exploitative practices to flourish. These changes have increased confusion and obstacles, leaving many students anxious about their future plans.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action from governments, PSIs, and community organizations to improve transparency, expand access to support

services, and deliver consistent, accurate information to international students. Improving the information and support IRCC and PSIs provide could lead to meaningful and widespread benefits, given that IRCC and PSIs are the sources international students trust most.

Student Recommendations for IRCC and PSIs

Ensure consistent immigration policies.

Increase stability of immigration policies, with greater notice and better communication before implementing policy changes.

- Develop a more stable policy environment that reflects longer-term priorities.
- Engage stakeholders, including international students and PSIs, in consultations before major policy shifts.
- Implement clear, phased timelines for any new policies and regulations and when they will come into effect.
- Provide plain-language explanations of how changes will impact international students prior to changes being implemented.

Improve the IRCC website.

Ensure accurate, up-to-date, user-friendly information.

- Redesign the IRCC website to enhance usability, clarity, and accuracy.
- Establish plain-language standards and user testing protocols for IRCC communications.
- Introduce better navigation tools, visual aids (flowcharts, timelines), and multilingual resources to help users understand key processes such as study permit renewals, PGWPs, and PR pathways.
- Post timely, clear, and coordinated information across all pages whenever policies change. This will help to avoid confusion and ensure that users understand next steps.

Enhance PSI support services.

Expand support services to international student advisors and immigration support.

- Ensure that international student offices are staffed sufficiently to be able to meet the needs of the international student population in a timely manner.
- Invest in individual immigration advice, whether through in-house RCICs or by offering legal clinics on campus.
- Involve staff across the institution in international student support to broaden the support available to international students.
- Provide holistic support, such as guidance on housing, transportation, budgeting, health care, and cultural adjustment, to enable student well-being.
- Continue to partner with and promote off-campus services to address student and graduate needs.

Increase employment support.

Provide clear information about work permits, job opportunities, and employment rights, as well as work with employers to open up more employment opportunities for international students and graduates.

- Provide international students with clear, accessible information about off-campus work rules, co-op placements, job search strategies, and workers' rights.
- Reduce delays in study-related and PGWP approvals to allow smoother transitions into the workforce.
- Increase employer awareness of the benefits of and immigration rules about hiring international students.
- Remove citizenship and PR restrictions on co-op and public sector job opportunities.
- Help international students find jobs that match their skills and qualifications—both within PSIs (including after graduation) and in the broader community.
- Expand eligibility for federally funded employment and settlement services to include international students.

Hold agents and consultants accountable.

Create stronger regulations for agents and consultants, both in Canada and overseas, to prevent misinformation and to ensure fair, affordable services.

- End reliance on the aggregator model.
- Limit the use of overseas education agents for recruitment.
- Invest in strengthening PSI-led recruitment efforts, and establish direct, transparent connections and share accurate information with prospective students abroad.
- Enforce clear standards on pricing transparency, qualifications, and ethical practices with RCICs and lawyers.
- Provide clear guidance on finding trusted RCICs and immigration lawyers to help students avoid scams and navigate immigration confidently.

Elevate international student voices.

Create structures that ensure that decision-makers in government and in PSIs hear and consider international student perspectives, and increase positive public portrayals of international student contributions.

- Actively highlight international students' social and economic contributions in public discourse, and respond promptly to negative or misleading narratives to foster a more welcoming environment.
- Support the creation of independent advocacy bodies or advisory councils that include student voices to represent student interests in government policy development.
- Include international student representation in PSI governance and decision-making bodies.
- Invest in research and data collection to inform future policy decisions affecting international students.

Appendix A: Scope and methodology

Reach and participation

This study involved qualitative research with two groups:

- Virtual focus groups with international students in Canada who began undergraduate (college or university) or master’s programs between 2018 and 2025
- Virtual interviews with people who provide information and support to international students

The table below provides more demographic information on research participants.

Focus Groups	80 international students
Composition of groups	12 focus groups total: 4 mixed groups (university, college, current students and graduates), 2 university, 2 college, 2 current students, 2 graduates
Gender	45 women, 35 men
Region of origin	Asia (50), Africa (8), Latin America (7), Other (7), Middle East (6), Europe (1), North America (1)
Graduation year	2020 (4), 2021 (9), 2022 (12), 2023 (19), 2024 (18), 2025 (18)
Locations of study	ON (42), BC (15), NL (13), NS (3), QC (2), SK (2), NB (1), AB (1), MB (1)
Level of study	University: MA (36), BA (15) College: PG Certificate 8+ months (23), Diploma/Certificate (6)

Interviews

14 information providers and advocates

Student Groups/Associations (2)

Legal Representatives (3)

Settlement/Support Services (4)

Post-Secondary Staff (4)

Education Agents (1)

International students were asked to reflect on sources they used for information about immigration options both prior to and after coming to Canada, how they weighed different sources of information, how information differed depending on the source, and how information sources they used and trusted may have varied across the duration of their study journey. They were also asked about instances of misinformation or disinformation, information that was difficult to find, and information sources that were particularly useful.

To complement the data collected through focus groups, we interviewed people who are in a position to provide information and support to international students. The findings from these interviews are interspersed throughout the report. However, the focus of this research is the experiences and perspectives of international students themselves, and what they would like to see change as it relates to immigration information in Canada.

Ethics

In advance of conducting data collection, a complete ethics application for this study was approved by the Community Research Ethics Office. All international students who participated in focus groups or interviews were compensated with a \$100 gift card.

Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited digitally, leveraging social media, as well as social networks through partners and stakeholders who participated in interviews. Interested participants were invited to complete a brief eligibility survey, and responses were monitored and managed carefully. Eligible participants were then reviewed, grouped into key segments, and invited to participate in scheduled virtual focus groups.

Study parameters and limitations

This study does not seek to generalize the experiences of all international students, but it highlights key themes and shared experiences that emerged from the diverse group of participants. The following outlines some of the study's limitations.

This study was intended to capture experiences with a particular focus on major international student destinations such as Ontario and British Columbia. The data collection was in English, so the study doesn't represent the range and nuance of experiences of Francophone students.

The study relied primarily on online outreach in English, which means participants were more likely to be digitally literate and proficient in English. This then means that participants may have had better access to information and resources related to studying in Canada.

Those who participated were not necessarily individuals facing exploitation, language barriers, or enrolment in fraudulent PSIs. Throughout the research, both students and stakeholders referenced "other students" who experienced serious hardships, including exploitation by unscrupulous recruiters, poor working conditions, and significant language barriers. While these accounts suggest that such challenges are real and troubling, this study cannot determine how widespread they are, as international students who participated in this study generally did not report experiencing these issues firsthand.

Focus groups as space for reflection

The focus groups for this study provided a much-needed space for open dialogue, where many international students expressed that it was a welcome opportunity to connect with others who shared similar struggles. Some shared how emotionally exhausting the experience of accessing information and support has been, clearly signaling that many international students feel isolated in their frustrations and have limited outlets to express their concerns and feel heard. Several students felt that there were no clear advocates speaking out on their behalf.

Appendix B: Focus group guide

Icebreaker

We will start with a question just so we get to know who is in the room. I will ask two questions. You can answer one or both.

1. We will go around the room, briefly share: What is something you like about the city or town where you live and what's your favourite season?

Before arrival

I want you to think back to before you came to Canada to study.

1. What about studying in Canada interested you?
2. Did you try to find out whether you would be able to stay in Canada after study, either to work or to become a permanent resident? Was this a factor in your decision to study in Canada?
3. Where did you first get that information?

Follow-ups: Was the information easy to find; were there other sources you got this information from; did different sources have conflicting information; which sources did you find the most useful and why?

4. Before you came to Canada, what did you expect, in terms of whether you would be able to work and stay in Canada after graduation?
5. Do you think you got any incorrect or misinformation about opportunities to work in Canada or become a permanent resident in Canada after your study?

If yes, probe for sources of misinformation.

During study

Now I am going to ask you similar questions, but related to **while** you were studying in Canada.

1. During your studies, did you actively look for more information about immigration pathways, like working in Canada after your studies, or about permanent residence?

If yes: Which sources did you use that were the same as before? Did you use any new or different sources of information? Was the information clear? Was it useful?

2. How helpful was your college or university in explaining your options for staying in Canada after graduation? What was useful, what would have been more useful?

3. Do you think you got any incorrect or misleading information about opportunities to work in Canada or become a permanent resident in Canada after your study?

If yes, probe for sources of misinformation.

4. Immigration, work permit, and study rules have changed for international students. Has this impacted you? If so, how? When did you find out about this and how?

End of studies

For those who have graduated, I am now going to ask about what happened after you finished studying.

1. Did you have the information you needed to understand your options in terms of work permits and immigration?

If yes, what information did you have? If not, what did you need? What made it difficult to access that information? How did you try to get that information? Who helped?

Final questions

1. Who do you think has been most useful in giving you information about staying in Canada after graduation and your immigration options? What was useful about that source and the information they provided?
2. In terms of giving international students information about staying in Canada and immigration options, when is it ideal to receive this information? Before applying to come to Canada, while studying, or after graduation?
3. Imagine it was your job to make sure international students got information about work permits and immigration. What would you suggest be done differently?
4. Where would this information be available (websites, social media, information sheets, or other sources)? Who would provide the information and when?
5. We will be sharing our findings with people who work with international students, including people who work for the government and people who work for colleges and universities. Is there something you think they need to know about the information students need about immigration?
6. Is there anything else we didn't ask that you would like to share about immigration information needs and experiences of international students?
7. Knowing what you know now and given the policy changes, would you come now?

Appendix C: Stakeholder interview guide

Participant's job and experience

1. Can you tell me about your current position and the organization you work with? What experience do you have working with international students or on issues relating to international students?

Information needs

1. What kind of information do international students need to understand issues relating to visas and permanent residence?
2. Where do you think international students primarily obtain information about visas and immigration?
3. What is your role in supporting international students to access and understand information about visas and permanent residence?
4. In your opinion, what aspects of your role work well in helping international students with information about visas and permanent residence?
5. Thinking about what information about visas and immigration international students need and when, are there specific parts of this system that you feel do not work well?
6. What are the main challenges you see international students facing when it comes to information needs related to visas and PR?

Identifying the issues

1. Have you encountered international students who were given incorrect information or misinformation about visas and immigration after graduation (for example, work permits after study and permanent residence)?
2. Where did that incorrect information come from and when did people receive it?
3. From your observations, how common are issues with incorrect information? How do students become aware and when? What is the impact for students?
4. Do you think trust plays a role in what information people are accessing and absorbing?

Suggestions for improvement

1. Have you in your role, or within your institution, been able to take actions to prevent or address incorrect information? (Possible addition: Have you seen other attempts to combat mis/disinformation?)
2. What are some ways that other actors in the system could reduce instances of international students coming to Canada with incorrect information about visas and immigration? Who do you think is responsible for this work?
3. If you could make changes to the current information systems available to international students, what would they be?
4. Are there any best practices or innovative approaches you've observed in the sector that you believe could enhance how international students receive information?
5. How do you think collaboration between various stakeholders (for example, universities, immigration services, government bodies) could be improved to better support international students' information needs?

Closing questions

1. Is there anything we talked about today that you think is particularly important?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't ask you about that is important for this study?
3. As we are hoping to speak with several experts and practitioners as part of this study, can you recommend any others who you think we should reach out to?

