

“The Government had Made me Ineligible”: Punjabi International Students’ Post-Graduation Trajectories in a Time of Policy Turmoil

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Abstract

In recent years, Canada's international education system has undergone substantial restructuring, significantly altering pathways from post-secondary education to employment and permanent residency. This paper examines the early post-graduation trajectories of Punjabi international students in British Columbia during a period of rapid policy change. While existing work on Punjabi international students has documented recruitment pathways and in-program experiences, less attention has been paid to what happens at the point of exit, particularly under conditions of rapid policy changes. Drawing on mixed methods data, including a survey of 212 students and 14 in-depth interviews across four public post-secondary institutions, we analyze how students navigate shifting eligibility requirements and labour market expectations at the point of exit from post-secondary education. Using the lenses of governmentality and biopower, we conceptualize the post-graduation transition as a governed site where students are continually sorted through changing administrative criteria and where responsibility for managing volatility is displaced onto individuals. The findings reveal that students' post-graduate decisions are influenced more by changing immigration and eligibility rules than by job prospects, because these policies often reclassify their work/credentials as (in)eligible. By centering post-graduation transition as a critical yet underexamined site of governance in the education–migration system, this study contributes to scholarship on international education and migration and underscores the need for more stable and just policy frameworks that better align international education, labour market outcomes, and immigration objectives.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Canada has positioned international higher education as both a revenue stream and a feeder into the labour market (Brunner, 2021). However, this portrayal of “internationalization” has been shattered with growing critiques of misalignment between education programming and migration pathways, universities becoming overdependent on international students for revenue, and a growing number of cases of exploitation and harm of international students (Coustere et al., 2024; Author A, 2022a). At the same time, a housing crisis and an overburdened healthcare system have contributed to recent changes to migration policies, reducing the number of international students and increasing obstacles to permanent residency (PR; Government of Canada, 2024; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024a). What appears to be mostly overlooked is the impact on international students, who are at the receiving end of these changing policies. Punjabi international students (PS) are at the centre of this education–migration crisis.

In the last decade, as Canadian colleges and universities pursued new “recruitment markets,” PS were aggressively recruited mainly into lower-tier institutions and concentrated in diploma programs that rarely translate into professional mobility in Canada (Author A, 2022a; Author A & [name omitted], 2024). For example, in 2017, colleges in British Columbia (BC) had only a handful of international students, often in their English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Heslop, 2025). Within a few years, the number of international students, many from India, accounted for 30–75% of the colleges' revenue

streams (Todd, 2019). This growth, however, was marked by multiple systemic barriers. For example, exploitation by education and migration agents, landlords, and employers (Kahlon, 2021); tuition fees up to five times higher than for domestic students; fewer institutional supports than domestic students (Author A, 2022a; Brunner, 2021). Still, research suggests that many PS may be heavily invested in the opportunity to have a better life trajectory in Canada (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2024). This vulnerable positioning has become even more precarious under the recent restructuring of Canada's International Student Program, including intake caps and new restrictions on post-graduation work permits (PGWP; IRCC, 2024b).

Research focused on PS in Canada has documented how aggressive recruitment through agents, unregulated tuition, and the funnelling of PS into generalized credentials and low-wage work, have created a gap between PS' aspirations and their reality in Canada (Author A, 2022a, 2022b; Author A & [name omitted], 2024). However, this literature has focused primarily on PS' admission, course, employment, and life experiences during the timeframe they are in school. Research has only minimally explored PS students' transition out of post-secondary education, particularly for those impacted by the recent change in policies (Smith, 2023). This paper examines the early post-graduation trajectories of PS enrolled at four public teaching-focused institutions in BC. Our analysis focuses on how students navigate the transition from student visa to PGWP in the context of a rapidly shifting policy environment that has tightened pathways and restructured eligibility. We draw on Foucault's (1991, 1997/2003) concepts of governmentality and biopower to analyze how shifts in immigration policies shape what kinds of mobility are possible and for whom. Governmentality provides a lens for understanding how governance is exercised at this transitional moment by structuring the conditions under which certain futures become possible, deferred, or foreclosed, while biopower highlights how students are sorted into shifting categories of desirability within population management regimes.

Data was collected via a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey and qualitative interviews. The survey provides demographic data and an overview of participants' experiences and perceptions as they neared graduation, including their financial conditions, work patterns, and immigration intentions. The interviews offer a more granular account of how students attempted to translate their credentials and work experience into permanent status, including the compromises they made, the challenges they encountered, and the personal and familial dilemmas they faced as they decided whether to stay in Canada or return to Punjab.

This paper asks: How do PS imagine and pursue their futures in Canada during the final stages of their studies and in the first year after graduation? How do recent policy changes shape their perceptions, and what strategies do they use to navigate these changes? The findings show that PS are required to embody the role of model economic migrants willing to pay high tuition and take on low-wage work while bearing the risks of policy volatility and shifting public discourses (Author A et al., in press). At the same time, they continue to be invested in the promise of a future in Canada, negotiating resistances and compromises.

In what follows, we describe the theoretical frame, followed by the literature review. We then explain the methodological design of the study, followed by the findings section. We end with recommendations for policymakers and higher education (HE) institutions.

Theoretical Frame

Foucault's concept of governmentality provides a lens for explaining how governing operates beyond formal law or sovereign command. Governmentality refers to the rationalities, policy instruments, institutional practices, and discourses through which conduct is shaped, and populations are managed (Foucault, 1991, 1997/2003). Rather than relying primarily on coercion, power is exercised by structuring the conditions under which particular choices become thinkable, desirable, or necessary. In this sense, power is not possessed but exercised; it "exists only in action" (Foucault, 1997/2003, p.14). Within governmental regimes, individuals are not simply constrained by policy but are positioned as responsible subjects who are expected to actively manage their own risks and trajectories in line with state objectives (Foucault, 1975/1995, 1997/2003).

Biopower further clarifies how governance operates at the level of population management. For Foucault, modern power works through the intersection of disciplinary techniques that shape individual bodies and regulatory mechanisms that manage populations through classification, measurement, and intervention (Apatinga, 2017; Foucault, 1978, 1980, 1997/2003). Through biopower, groups are constituted as governable categories that can be evaluated, sorted, and managed in relation to economic productivity, risk, and desirability. Power is utilized "on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). Power, in this sense, works not by excluding outright, but by differentiating, stratifying, and reallocating opportunities across populations. This is crucial for understanding PS post-graduation trajectory, where students are continuously sorted into eligibility categories.

Literature Review

Canada is one of the world's leading destinations for international students, with the number of study permit holders rising from 122,620 in 2000 to over one million by 2023 (Institute of International Education, 2020; IRCC, 2023; Knight & de Wit, 2018). Ontario and BC hosted over 70% of all international students (Erudera, 2023). The numbers have drastically fallen after the recent policy changes (Brunner, 2025).

This dramatic expansion reflects broader transformations in the internationalization of HE, shaped by intersecting academic, economic, social, and political rationales (Buckner et al., 2020; Knight, 2004, 2021; Seeber et al., 2016; Stier, 2004). The rationales that drive internationalization overlap, compete, and shift as institutions and governments respond to changing policy landscapes, public opinions, and global pressures.

Across destination countries, the economic rationale has become the dominant driver of internationalization, and also the most contested (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2023; Brunner, 2022; Buckner et al., 2022; Lomer, 2017; Lomer & Yang, 2022; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Scholars are increasingly noting the ways international students are instrumentalized within the global knowledge economy as both fee-paying consumers and potential migrant workers. In the Canadian context, Buckner et al. (2023) highlight how HE marketing has centred Asian, and particularly South Asian, students as profitable recruitment targets, while Lomer and Yang (2022) identify gaps between inflated tuition fees and limited institutional supports. International students from the Global South, such as PS, often enter teaching-focused institutions and generalized diploma programs which have not been adapted to their interests or needs. While they are recruited through promises of mobility and wealth, they are often routed into conditions of precarity in both education and labour markets (Author A, 2022a, 2022b).

Rather than treating international education as a “win-win” pathway to professional and life opportunities, research at the intersection of education and migration examines how both policies and institutions shapeshift depending on social and economic considerations (Altbach & Reisberg, 2013; Brunner, 2022). Revenue has been a central motivation for Canadian HE institutions facing reduced public funding and frozen domestic tuition. Since the 1980s, institutions have heavily relied on international student fees to stabilize budgets (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018). These patterns mirror wider historical shifts. Following mid-20th-century aid-based international education models (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013), Canada—like Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—moved toward a market-oriented approach utilizing the knowledge economy and education as a commodity (Adams & de Wit, 2010; Luke, 2010). At the same time, international student tuition became essential to institutional survival, especially as domestic enrolments stagnated (Canadian Association of University Business Officers, 2024; Statistics Canada, 2023 2025), making universities complicit in this process. This is evident in Canada’s recent efforts to tighten international student pathways, described by government actors as necessary to “protect a system that has become so lucrative that it has opened a path for its abuse” (Cable Public Affairs Channel, 2023, 15:54). The IRCC’s recent efforts to change policies and rein in what it portrays as “bad actors” in the sector (Government of Canada, 2024), downplay the systemic failures of education-migration, the onus of which is often assigned to the students.

Within this broader landscape, research on PS puts them in a precarious position of being impacted by international migration policies, marketization of HE, and limited economic opportunities in Punjab. Their migration decisions are influenced by the perception of better work opportunities in Canada, coupled with immigration pathways. Recent academic discourse characterizes this movement as a “transnational project” driven by the agrarian crisis in Punjab and the attraction of Canadian PR (Bhu, 2022). Unlike traditional international students, Punjabi youth often utilize the “edugration” or “study-work-immigrate” pathway as a collective family strategy, frequently funded by the sale of ancestral agrarian land (Walton-Roberts, 2021). Thus, Punjabi families invest substantial financial resources to send students abroad, contributing significantly to Canada’s international education economy while exposing students to

financial precarity. Reliance on recruitment agents and market pressures leads students into low-quality programs with adverse academic and labour outcomes (Author A, 2022a).

More recent work emphasizes how Canadian immigration incentives (such as post-study work prospects) and an extensive network of overseas education agents actively channel students from Punjab into Canadian institutions (Kaur and Mehra, 2025). Sharma and Peng (2025) demonstrate that PS migration has become a "culturally defined project" where the "Canadian dream" is socially constructed as a rite of passage. Canadian public colleges have become dependent on international students' higher tuition fees to offset domestic funding gaps. This economic reliance contrasts sharply with the students' lived realities. Finally, research indicates that, amidst the changing policies restricting international education in Canada, PS face "precarity by design," navigating a landscape of exploitative labour in the "gig economy" and substandard housing (Wong & Sohi, 2025).

Overall, scholarship demonstrates that PS are often recruited through agent networks into tuition-driven programs and routed into precarious labour and housing conditions, creating gaps between aspirations and outcomes. However, research has only minimally examined the post-graduation transition as a distinct phase of governance, especially during periods of rapid policy change when eligibility criteria are recalibrated mid-trajectory. This study addresses that gap to examine how students attempt to convert education and work into post-study mobility under shifting rules.

Methodology

This article relies on the first phase of a longitudinal mixed methods study examining PS studying at four public teaching-intensive universities and colleges in BC, all with high enrolment of PS. Two schools are in Metro Vancouver, one is in the Fraser Valley, and one is in the Kootenays, representing both city centres and more rural locations. In this paper, we focus on two components: (a) a survey data from 212 PS respondents and (b) interviews with 14 PS students using a subset of interview questions focused on their post-graduation transition.

Survey

The purpose of the survey was to reach a large number of students and to explore their transition-out experiences. The stage of transition-out of post-secondary and the size of the survey address important gaps in the literature, since most studies of Indian international students (most of whom are PS) consist of relatively small samples and qualitative accounts (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2024; Author A, 2022a, 2022b). The survey examined PS' educational trajectories, work experiences, well-being, and post-study plans in Canada. It collected demographic and background information, including migration history, enrolment status, and family characteristics. Respondents reported on their educational pathways, prior credentials, current program of study, reasons for program selection, and anticipated graduation timelines, as well as factors influencing their decision to study in Canada.

The survey also assessed sources of stress and coping strategies, experiences with paid employment and volunteer work in Canada, and perceived cultural differences encountered in educational and workplace settings. Finally, participants reported their short- and long-term career aspirations, preparedness for the transition from study to work, intentions regarding PR, and perceptions of the feasibility of obtaining PR.

Prospective respondents were identified with the support of research and international student services offices at the four institutions, based on institutionally held student data. We requested permission to email the survey link to all students whose country of origin was listed as India. Because institutions could not reliably identify students from Punjab, a qualifying question at the outset of the survey asked respondents whether they self-identified as Punjabi. Recruitment was supplemented by posters at the participating institutions. Several open-ended survey questions were analyzed using an inductive descriptive coding approach. Specifically, six items were coded: (a) organizations or programs with which students volunteered in Canada; (b) the job title of the longest-held paid position in Canada; (c) the sector or type of business in which that job was located; (d) intended job or career three years after program completion; (e) intended job or career ten years after program completion; and (f) the minimum salary students would feel satisfied with three years after graduation. Responses to these items were first reviewed in full to identify common patterns and recurring response types. Based on this review, data-driven categories were developed for each question to group substantively similar responses (e.g., cashier and sales associate coded as retail; food bank and Red Cross coded as community service). To enhance coding reliability, categories were reviewed and refined through discussion among the research team, and ambiguous responses were resolved through consensus. Once finalized, participants' written responses were replaced with their corresponding categorical codes in the dataset to enable quantitative summarization and analysis.

Survey data were collected via a university-licensed survey application between November 2024 and March 2025, with a draw for a \$100 honorarium as an incentive. Participants were also invited to an optional follow-up interview for which a \$50 honorarium was offered. The honoraria aimed to honour the participants' time and knowledge, as well as to acknowledge the economic barriers some might face. Survey participation was voluntary, with the option to skip questions or withdraw at any time. In total, 224 participants completed the survey. After restricting the dataset to respondents who self-identified as Punjabi, 212 cases remained for analysis. Data was exported as a spreadsheet and reviewed for accuracy and consistency (e.g., checking text and numerical responses, verifying item order, and standardizing formats), and then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0. We conducted descriptive statistics and crosstabulations.

Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews with PS who were approaching graduation or had recently completed their programs at the four participating institutions. It aimed to delve deeper into their education and migration trajectory and included questions about their

background, motivation to study in Canada, experiences in Canada (including education, work, life), and plans for the future. The interviews offer an opportunity to examine how the structural patterns identified in the survey materialize in students' post-graduation decision-making and lived experiences. Survey respondents were invited at the end of the questionnaire to indicate whether they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

All students who indicated a willingness to be interviewed in the survey and provided their email address at the end of the survey were contacted by one of our team's researchers. While more than half of the participants ($n = 131$) left their emails, only 14 engaged in interviews. This may be due in part to students changing emails post-graduation. However, it might also indicate that some participants were worried about disclosing their identity at a precarious time. The research team contacted all the participants who indicated they were interested in a follow-up interview. Students were interviewed by one or a pair of the research team members. For participants' overview, see Table 1.

Table 1
Interview Participants Overview

Pseudonym	Institution	Gender	Program	Graduation year	Visa Status
Pardeep	KPU	M	Accounting	2026	International student
Dhameet	Selkirk	M	Associate of Arts and Sciences, Major in Psychology	2025	International student
Manvir	Selkirk	M	Post graduate diploma, Accounting Business	2025	International student
Shaan	KPU	M	Computer Information Science	2025	International student
Mahi	KPU	W	Green Business Diploma	2026	International graduate diploma
Sumit	Langara	W	Nutrition and Food Service Management Diploma	2025	International student
Sukhpreet	KPU	W	Business Management Diploma	2025	International student
Isha	UFV	W	Computer Information Systems, bachelor's degree	2025	International student
Kamal	UFV	W	Computer Information Systems, bachelor's degree	2025	International student
Seema	KPU	W	Criminology Diploma	2025	International student
Indrpal	KPU	W	Associate of Arts in Psychology	2026	International student
Vrushti	KPU	W	Marketing	2025	International student
Dilpreet	Langara	W	Criminology Diploma	2025	International student
Sumreet	Langara	W	Health Sciences Diploma	2026	International student

Interviews were conducted in English via video conferencing. All participants received an information letter and signed a consent form before the interview. The interview protocol had questions about the students' overall trajectory, including a section about the students' experiences of the final stages of their studies and their early transition into the labour market. It included questions about employment during and after studies, Canadian work experience, plans regarding PR, and responses to recent

immigration policy changes. The protocol also invited participants to reflect on how they define success and how their understandings of success have shifted over time. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Analysis followed an iterative thematic approach drawing on the participants' voices and the theoretical frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire research team (Author C from [information omitted], Author E and Author F from [information omitted], Author D from [information omitted], Author B from [information omitted], and Author A from [information omitted]) met for a few coding sessions and coded the interviews together, developing thematic codes around key domains. For this paper, we draw on a subset of the interview data that focuses on the transition from study to work, including future plans, labour market experiences, and immigration trajectories. The qualitative findings are organized by three interrelated themes: education and professional trajectories, motivations and dilemmas about staying in Canada, and the impact of recent policy changes.

Before presenting the findings, it is important to acknowledge several limitations in the methodology. First, recruitment relied on institutionally identified students with India as country of origin and then a self-identification question for Punjabi identity; as such, the sample may overrepresent students more willing to disclose identity or engage research staff and may underrepresent students who were more precariously positioned. Second, while 131 respondents indicated interest in interviews, only 14 participated, likely reflecting post-graduation contact changes and the heightened sensitivity of discussing immigration trajectories during policy instability. Third, findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable; rather, the mixed methods design strengthens analytic transferability by combining broad descriptive patterns in the survey with detailed accounts that illuminate decision-making and meaning-making during transition-out.

Findings

Survey Findings

The survey provides a snapshot of PS nearing graduation across the four institutions. Of the 224 respondents, 151 reported age (over 80% were born in the year 2000 or later), 158 reported marital status (over 80% never married), and 158 reported parental status (over 90% had no children). Almost 70% of the total sample ($n = 109$) identified as a woman and just over half ($n = 82$) indicated that they were raised in rural areas or villages with a population below 5,000. Among the 158 respondents who identified their caste, 52.5% selected Jatt, which is a traditionally agriculture caste, predominant in Punjab.

Consistent with this age profile, most had completed only high school prior to coming to Canada. In Canada, a large proportion were enrolled in associate degree (25.8%) or diploma/certificate programs (55.3%). Of the 223 respondents who disclosed their institution, 63 (29.7%) attended Langara College, 28 (13.2%) Selkirk College, 107 (50.5%) KPU, and 13 (6.1%) UFV. The percentage aligns with the size of the

institution, with somewhat lower numbers from UFV. More than 70% planned to graduate within six months of completing the survey.

Students' motivations for coming to Canada were shaped by both educational and migration considerations. When asked what factors influenced their decision to study in Canada, the most popular choice was "quality of education," selected by 67.92% ($n = 144$), followed closely by "opportunity to work while studying," selected by 57.55% ($n = 122$). The third most common factor, chosen by 51.42% ($n = 109$), was "opportunity to work after studying." These responses reflect the dual framing of Canada as a site of both education and labour market opportunity.

The majority of respondents had already entered the labour market while studying. Of 184 respondents, 88% ($n = 162$) reported having been employed in paid work since arriving in Canada. Of these, 84.1% ($n = 132$) reported working fewer than 20 hours per week, and 8.9% ($n = 14$) worked 20–40 hours per week. The maximum number of hours worked per week is updated periodically based on job market needs, for example, ranging from 20 hours per week to unlimited during Covid, and now 24 hours (IRCC, 2025, 2026). The hourly wage for most working students (72%, $n = 113$) ranged between \$16–19.99, indicating low-skilled jobs. When asked whether their pay was sufficient to cover daily expenses, 63.1% ($n = 99$) said "no" and 33.1% ($n = 52$) said "yes." This combination of high participation in low-wage work and difficulty meeting basic costs signals the economic precarity that many PS already experience before graduation.

Of the respondents who answered the volunteering question, 39.8% ($n = 191$) reported participating in unpaid volunteer work in Canada, 58.6% reported no volunteer experience, and 1.6% selected "prefer not to answer." Among those who volunteered, placements were most commonly in post-secondary institutions and student-led initiatives, followed by community and social service organizations, with smaller proportions volunteering in health-related, cultural or religious, and public service settings.

Employment was concentrated in low-wage sectors. Responses to the question about longest-held paid employment in Canada were coded into occupational categories. Retail positions accounted for approximately 48–50% of reported jobs, followed by food service roles (22–24%), and warehouse or logistics positions (15–17%). Healthcare and caregiving roles represented approximately 9–11% of jobs, while security-related roles accounted for 4–5%, and office or administrative positions accounted for 3–4%. Overall, students' longest-held employment was concentrated primarily in retail, food service, and warehouse sectors.

Students' responses regarding intended careers three years after graduation were coded into thematic categories. Healthcare-related careers were the most frequently reported aspiration, accounting for approximately 26–28% of responses. Accounting and finance was the second most common category (approximately 20–22%), followed by business and management (approximately 15–17%). Technology and engineering careers represented approximately 10–12% of responses, while education-related aspirations accounted for approximately 8–10%. Less frequently reported aspirations included law, government, and security or law enforcement roles (approximately 5–6% combined), hospitality

(approximately 2–3%), and trades (approximately 2–3%). A substantial proportion of respondents (approximately 30–35%) selected “N/A” or provided unclear responses, indicating uncertainty about their career plans three years after graduation.

Responses to the question asking about intended careers ten years after graduation were coded into thematic categories. Business and management careers were the most frequently reported long-term aspiration, accounting for approximately 24–26% of responses. Accounting and finance followed closely, representing approximately 20–22% of respondents. Healthcare-related careers accounted for approximately 18–20% of responses, while technology and engineering aspirations represented approximately 10–12%. Law, government, and security or law enforcement careers together accounted for approximately 8–10% of responses. Smaller proportions of respondents reported aspirations in education, research, arts, hospitality, or trades, each representing less than 5% of responses. A substantial proportion of respondents (approximately 30–35%) selected “N/A” or provided unclear responses, indicating uncertainty about their long-term career goals.

Financial concerns were also the most commonly reported source of stress. When asked “what is currently causing you stress,” 63.7% ($n = 135$) selected “financial concerns.” “Immigration status or procedures” was the second most frequent stressor, selected by 46.7% ($n = 99$), followed by “academic workload” at 43.4% ($n = 92$). These results highlight the extent to which students’ daily lives are shaped by multiple stressors and demands including academic workload, financial concerns, loneliness, homesickness, immigration status or procedures, personal or family issues, and work-related pressures.

The survey also probed students’ expectations around PR and post-graduation plans. When asked how difficult they thought it would be to obtain PR, 110 of 163 respondents anticipated either “difficult” ($n = 54$) or “very difficult” ($n = 56$). Despite this, 93 respondents (57.1%) said they were “likely” ($n = 45$) or “very likely” ($n = 48$) to apply for PR, while 54 students (33.1%) were “unsure.” When asked what they planned to do immediately after completing their programs, 45.4% (74 of 163 respondents) intended to “remain in Canada to work,” and 23.9% ($n = 39$) planned to “remain in Canada to continue studying.”

Overall, the survey findings depict a cohort of young, largely first-generation post-secondary students who are already deeply embedded in the Canadian labour market while studying. They carry significant financial burdens and see immigration procedures as both stressful and necessary. Most plan to remain in Canada to work or study further, even while anticipating that the path to PR will be difficult.

Crosstabs revealed some visible differences between groups based on hometown and gender; however, the independent-sample t -tests did not identify any statistically significant differences. Independent sample t -tests were conducted using gender (man/woman) and hometown size (village/city) as independent variables, and likelihood to apply for PR and perceived difficulty in obtaining PR as dependent variables. Despite the descriptive variation shown in the crosstabs, the mean differences between groups were not large or consistent enough to reach statistical significance.

Qualitative Findings

Education and Professional Trajectories

Interview participants described how their future plans and aspirations were tightly constrained by immigration policies, education program costs, and labour market dynamics. Many articulated a clear distinction between what they saw as their aspired end goals and what was currently possible. Dhameet shared:

When I came to Canada, I always thought that once I got my PR, I would pursue an RN [registered nurse] program. I always wanted to become a RN. If I get PR, I can just do my RN program for under \$10,000 ... But if I'm an international, it's way, way, way more expensive.

Students were trying to hold on to the purpose that brought them to Canada, while understanding that the journey is complicated and unpredictable. As Dilpreet put it, "I have seen people drop their dream and just earn money, but I feel for me success will be achieving my dream job [in law enforcement]." Similarly, Shaan's narrative highlighted how migration pathways impact his career decisions. He stayed in a sub-optimal workplace to accumulate experience for PR, while postponing his professional passion for computer programming:

After a year of experience, I can apply for a PR, so that is why I'm just trying to stay at this [work] place. For now, all that is in my mind is that the PR goes well. ... As soon as I get PR, I'm going for a BA degree in computer information. Because once we are PR, the fees reduce.

Vrushti shared how graduating with a diploma was a disappointment relative to her hopes:

After I completed my diploma, I was like ... I want to continue my studies. And for that, I need more money ... I'll have to apply for a work permit to complete my degree because I don't want to go back after doing just a diploma in business or something that's not worth it. That's like 0% of what I should have done.

Diploma programs are primarily designed for revenue generation and often do not align with international students' ideal professional life nor with job market needs. Many PS pursued diplomas, since they can be completed in a shorter timeframe (e.g., two years) and therefore cost less in tuition, yet still qualified for PGWP prior to the policy change (Author A, 2022). However, students often realized that they were only qualified for low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Across accounts, it seems that the goal of achieving PR operated as a threshold that had to be crossed before desired educational or career aspirations could resume; however, the policy change added an additional barrier to these plans.

Motivations and Dilemmas About Staying in Canada

Students described complex emotional, financial, and familial dilemmas around staying in Canada. For many, the quality of life and prospective career trajectory in Canada were weighed against

homesickness, cultural ties, and concerns about precarious and prolonged working and life conditions. Seema captured this ambivalence:

I am a very family person, so I feel very homesick away from home. But I like the quality of life here. I like the living standards here. So these are the things that make me consider. Okay, I can have a future here But thinking about home in India, it makes me double-minded.

Particularly, female participants appreciated the higher level of personal freedom and professional opportunities available to them in Canada, which were not available in India (Janzen & Heringer, 2023; Neetu & Gosain, 2025). Dilpreet shared, "I have always had an interest in law enforcement, but coming from India, being a female, it is difficult to go into criminal stuff because it is kind of dangerous." Sukhpreet added:

I have more opportunities here, because in India, for girls, it's hard; we can't work outside, we are just going to stay home. If I have to go outside, I have to go with my parents, because it's not safe. I can't walk there freely. But here I can go anywhere ... I can take buses, like without any fear. Some participants also weighed the Canadian work conditions and possibilities against the work culture in India.

Pardeep shared:

I plan to get my Chartered Professional Accountant, CPA, designation and get a good job, and start a new life. If I stay in accounting in Canada, I will get a good opportunity and an employer with good benefits. In India, there are corporate jobs that force employees to work around 60 hours a week, and it's a very stressful culture. So, I feel that's a good thing in Canada that I don't want to waste.

At the same time, participants were aware of the fierce competition in the Canadian job market and that their post-secondary education did not position them competitively to secure professional positions. Isha shared:

I looked at LinkedIn and saw some of the job postings, you have one entry level job that was posted one hour ago, and then you see the statistics, it says 900 applicants have already applied for this job, and then you see 23% has have a bachelor's degree, and then you also see 40% have a master's degree.

Veer agreed: "I have a 3.97 GPA. But even if I applied, I won't get the job, because I don't have the skills or the experience that is required." As these examples reveal, many PS were enrolled in diploma programs and general studies programs, while in the job market, they were competing for jobs with graduates with more advanced degrees from more highly ranked institutions (Brunner et al., 2024). PS applying for PR in the express entry category also faced steep competition against applicants with advanced degrees and professional backgrounds (IRCC, 2025).

Coming from a collectivist society, participants shared how decisions about their future involved family members in India who often supported their studies and invested significant economic resources,

including selling land and taking loans, in the hope of new possibilities for the family (Brunner et al., 2024). Vrushti explained her concerns about bringing her family to Canada:

I don't want them to face what I have faced, to be honest. They are pressuring me to apply for their visa and stuff ... They won't be able to get accustomed, the way I got accustomed, because I knew English. They don't know English. This country ... I feel like it's not for them.

Particularly for students coming from rural areas and small villages, the gaps between India and Canada can be substantial, and the adjustment is not seamless. At the same time, students shared how obligations toward their families pulled them toward staying in Canada and giving back. Shaan described:

My biggest, happiest moment will be when I get my paycheck ... I still remember the first time I sent money home, and I cannot tell you how happy my parents were. Still, whenever I send money home, they give me the same excitement, and that, I would say, is the only thing that's keeping me going.

Students thus inhabited an in-between position, suspended between the will to secure permanent status in Canada and some life possibilities, and a continuing sense of attachment and responsibility toward families in Punjab.

Impact of Recent Policy Changes

Participants' narratives were saturated with references to recent policy changes, including shifting eligibility rules for PGWP, changes to occupational tiers, and the rising points thresholds for PR (IRCC, 2025). For some, policy shifts directly invalidated the plans they had been working toward. Dhameet described the removal of certain management positions from eligibility lists for PR:

In 2023, when I was studying, the government clearly said that you have two years of education, and you have one year of experience in retail management, and you can apply for a PR. I spent 3 years in retail. I worked so hard to get into management ... and suddenly, management is out ... The Government had made me ineligible.

He further shared the sense of helplessness and unfairness of these changes:

I really want to stay in Canada because I'm already involved in the community. But I can't do anything if the government sends me back ... I came here; my parents sold the house. I struggled for 2–3 years, and the government just say, go back.

While part of the rationale behind the policy changes was to eliminate exploitation and bad actors in this process (IRCC, 2024c), it seems that the policy change did not prevent the problem of bad actors. Instead, new loopholes and other shady ways to bypass the policy emerged. Shaan shared:

My friend told me that some lawyers told him, "pay us \$10,000 now, and we can send you a year of pay stubs for a year ..." but he won't receive any money, so, he'll have to pay \$10,000 ... and on that basis, he

can apply for PR.

Dhameet added: "Since that rule has been launched, I have been visiting many local businesses, and everyone has asked me for money, like they are asking me for \$30,000, \$35,000, not less than \$20,000. That's how the scam is going on." In order to avoid exploitation and misalignment with the job market needs, the government cracked down on private HE institutions, making them ineligible for PGWP. It also aimed to eliminate fraudulent agents and business owners from selling job titles and placements that could lead to PR (IRCC, 2024c). Yet when people have invested significant time and resources and are now cut off from possibilities, they will be desperate to look for ways to stay in Canada.

The interviewees further described a heightened sense of urgency and despair, trying to adapt to these policy changes and find legal ways to stay in Canada. Shaan explained:

I keep hearing the same thing ... to move to Nova Scotia or to a different Atlantic province. But when I start looking online, the Atlantic immigration programs just accept a few candidates every year. Even if I move somewhere, that won't help me with my PR.

Vrushti added, "I think I should start learning French because that is the easiest way to get a better job in Canada right now." Shaan agreed: "I am taking online classes from France with Herman. He's an Indian instructor. ... And after 6 or 7 months, I think I'll be prepared to [take] an exam." Veer described trying to secure enough points through a combination of work and learning French:

The most challenging thing for me right now is finding a job that can help me secure PR. I have a TEER [training, education, experience and responsibilities] 4 level job. But to qualify for PR, you need level 1 or 2. So that is one thing that I'm very much worried about. And even if I get a job, I still have to do something about the points. The cutoff for a PR is way too high, so I might have to learn French.

In all these examples, the flawed logic of the policy changes becomes apparent, with students aiming to get enough points through language programs or relocation to different provinces, rather than building a professional pathway that draws on their priorities and strengths.

The cumulative effect of financial strain, policy volatility, and uncertain labour market prospects created pervasive stress. Jasleen shared, "The pathway to PR ... there are so many changes, it's really hard. If I do not get it, what am I going to do? It's kind of tough." Similarly, Sumit highlighted the fear of "wasted" years:

It's just a feeling; if you don't get the PR here and have to move back, it's really hard because I have gained experience here. I have done my education here ... it makes no sense because my five years would go to waste.

Seema summed it up, "As the policy is changing so rapidly and almost every second month, it's very hard to plan for the next 3 months, as of now, so it's pretty much playing by the day."

Overall, these voices demonstrate the precocity of PS who are caught in the midst of policy changes. While the pipeline from education to migration was flawed and exploitative, the abrupt changes left students with even more limited options and heightened levels of stress.

Discussion

This article makes three contributions. First, empirically, it identifies the post-graduation period as a consequential phase of the education–migration pathway, documenting how PS across four BC institutions navigate the first year surrounding graduation amid rapid policy change. Second, theoretically, it shows how governmentality and biopower operate through policy instruments that retroactively recalibrate eligibility, sorting students through shifting categories of legitimacy while relocating uncertainty and responsibility onto individuals. Third, for policy and practice, it demonstrates why reforms framed as protecting integrity can intensify precarity and inadvertently expand the market for exploitation, underscoring the need for stable transition rules and stronger accountability for institutional and labour-market misalignment.

Rather than treating post-graduation outcomes as the result of individual employability or effort, this study conceptualizes the transition of PS as a politically and institutionally produced condition. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopower, the analysis demonstrates how education and labour-market policies operate together to shape whose mobility is denied or allowed (Foucault, 1978, 1991; Rose, 1999). In this framework, PS are not simply navigating policy environments; they are governed through them. Public discourse jointly shapes whose mobility is enabled, delayed, or revoked. In this framing, international students, particularly those who have been educated outside elite pathways, are rendered conditionally desirable or disposable based on their perceived economic utility.

Governmentality helps illuminate how governance operates beyond direct coercion, by structuring the conditions under which certain futures become imaginable, calculable, and actionable (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991). The findings show that PS are governed through intersecting and often misaligned regimes of immigration regulation, institutional programming, and labour-market logics. These regimes position international students as indispensable contributors to Canada's labour market and multicultural makeup during periods of growth, while recasting them as risky or burdensome when political or economic priorities shift (Author A et al., 2026). This oscillation is a central feature of neoliberal governance, where flexibility is demanded of individuals while accountability for instability is displaced outward.

Policy instruments, such as PGWP rules and occupational classifications, orient conduct "at a distance" (Rose & Miller, 2010). Participants' post-graduation trajectories were marked by interruption, deferral, and contingency. The PS accounts of their struggle illustrate how post-graduation transition is a continuing process of uncertainty in response to constantly changing criteria. Responsibility for managing uncertainty is displaced onto PS themselves, even though policies remain unstable and opaque (Foucault, 1975/1995; Ong, 2006)

Biopower elucidates how PS are governed as a population using techniques of classification and differentiation. Biopower operates through regulatory interventions that reduce populations to knowable and governable subjects via metrics of risk and productivity (Foucault, 1978, 1997/2003). In this way, immigration and education policies function as sorting mechanisms, distributing opportunity unevenly rather than through explicit exclusion. Our findings show that PS are encouraged into low-wage sectors to meet immediate labour shortages. At the same time, those forms of work are not accepted for long-term status in Canada. Consequently, biopower operates through continually recalibrating the parameters that both actively and retroactively define and redefine legitimacy.

PR acted not only as a legal status but as a gatekeeping mechanism that mediates access to further education, professional mobility, and long-term life planning. Policy volatility, retroactive exclusions, and the repeated recalibration of eligibility criteria function as apparatuses of neoliberal governmentality, regulating population flows while relocating uncertainty and risks onto individuals. Students are required to continually adjust their aspirations and strategies in response to shifting rules that remain largely beyond their control.

Neoliberal governmentality is particularly evident in the expectation that students continuously act upon themselves as self-optimizing subjects (Janzen & Heringer, 2023). Participants described learning French, enduring exploitative or unsatisfying workplaces, postponing educational goals, and reconfiguring family obligations as pragmatic responses to an unstable policy environment. These strategies, however, were tightly constrained by the expectation to perform the role of the “good economic migrant”: continuously employed, self-sufficient, and adaptable to ever-shifting criteria of eligibility, regardless of personal cost.

This positioning reflects broader North-South hierarchies through which mobility is selectively enabled and disciplined (Brunner, 2022; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). While education pathways promise opportunity, they simultaneously regulate who may remain once economic or political conditions change. In this process, PS are conditionally accepted, reinforcing a sharp distinction between domestic students—who retain legal and institutional protections—and temporary migrants whose legitimacy is governed by labour market demand and policy recalibration.

Importantly, these governing processes are lived and internalized. Students’ narratives reveal how structural contradictions are internalized as personal dilemmas. Such responses illustrate the effectiveness of governmental rationalities that normalize insecurity, such as the inability to plan for one’s future, as an individual burden. At the same time, participants articulated moments of resistance by locating failure within the system rather than the self, and by striving to sustain dignity, family responsibility, and future-oriented aspirations within the constraints imposed upon them.

Conclusion

This paper examines the early post-graduation trajectories of PS in BC during a period of rapid and destabilizing policy change. Drawing on survey and interview data, the analysis demonstrates that the

post-graduation transition is not simply a personal stage of entering the workforce. Rather, it is a highly governed moment shaped by shifting immigration policies, institutional practices, and classificatory regimes that structure access to work, education, and PR.

Using the concepts of governmentality and biopower, the study shows how PS are simultaneously encouraged to invest financially and emotionally in Canada through the promise of Canadian migratory mobility, while being subjected to volatile and restrictive policy environments that can abruptly invalidate those investments. PS' experiences illuminate a broader education–migration regime that governs through classification, risk management, and the shifting, continual redefinition of “desirable” migrants.

A central finding is the extent to which responsibility for navigating the volatile conditions is individualized. Students bear the consequences of retroactive policy changes that undo years of educational effort, labour, and family investment. Dhameet's statement, “the government had made me ineligible,” captures how governance is experienced at the level of everyday life, where eligibility is withdrawn not because of individual failure, but through policy recalibration.

The findings also reveal a racialized dimension of this governance where PS are framed as fraudulent subjects. This simplification obscures the structural conditions that channel PS into precarious positions of low-wage work and poorly run educational programs, which in turn legitimizes their exclusion when policy priorities shift.

This study contributes to the scholarship on international education and migration by centering the post-graduation transition of PS as a critical yet underexamined site of governance. It calls for policy approaches that take responsibility for the instability built into the current system and for the misalignment between international education, labour-market outcomes, and immigration objectives. Moving beyond the management of PS as statistical casualties requires addressing the structural contradictions of Canada's education-migration governmentality. Without greater accountability, international students will continue to shoulder the risks of a system that benefits from their presence while reserving the right to redefine their eligibility after the fact.

Declarations

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of British Columbia (H23-03824).

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