

# Post-Secondary International Students in Canada: A National Survey



Sheikh Sabrina Ahmed, Elsie Anokwa, Monica Sesma Vazquez, Melissa Mostert, Karen Lazaruk, Shamsa Mistry  
Faculty of Social Work

## Abstract

International students contribute significantly to Canada’s academic and economic landscapes, with a majority aspiring to settle permanently post-graduation. However, their transition involves navigating unique challenges that impact mental health and well-being. Existing literature highlights challenges such as cultural and linguistic adjustments, academic pressures, and the demands of managing familial responsibilities. Yet, research on mental health services for international students, particularly those with dependents, remains scarce.

This national survey investigates the experiences of post-secondary international students in Canada, focusing on those with and without families, to explore barriers and expectations surrounding mental health support.

This study uses an online survey targeting a sample size of 300 students across Canadian institutions. Participants will share their experiences and expectations regarding access to mental health resources, stressors affecting well-being, and institutional support for families. The study employs an intersectional lens to examine disparities in access based on variables such as gender, immigration status, and living arrangements. The study aims to inform higher education institutions and policymakers to develop culturally sensitive and inclusive mental health strategies, addressing the distinct needs of international students and their families. Results will guide the creation of equitable mental health services to support this growing population effectively.

## Context: Mental Health and Support Challenges

•Post Secondary International Students have described unique challenges. Securing housing, managing financial demands and navigating service systems in the host country all impact their access to basic needs. Housing, paramount to student wellness (Newton et al., 2021; Qadeer et al., 2021), is described by Canadian Post Secondary International Students as unaffordable, and harder to access off campus (Calder et al., 2016).

•As international student populations continue to rise in Canada, there is a heavy impetus for the lived experiences of international graduate students with families to be examined to inform better the infrastructure meant to support them throughout their journey in this country. The mental health of university students is a predominant topic for social work, psychology, and education researchers and a source of interest for policymakers and stakeholders.

•International students in Canada face unique mental health challenges while balancing academic, personal, and cultural adjustments. This study explores the barriers and gaps in accessing mental health services on and off campus for post-secondary international students, particularly those with families.

•Lack of relationship with faculty members combined with other factors have negative impact on international students

## Methodology

### Participants

- Participants will share their experiences and expectations regarding access to mental health resources, stressors affecting well-being, and institutional support for families.

### Data Collection

- This study uses an online survey targeting a sample size of 300 students across Canada post secondary institutions.

### Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis.

## Discussion: Making Change Together

- The study emphasizes the importance of making change together by creating a strong partnership between international students with or without families, Canadian educational institutions, policy makers and mental health professionals.
- The study also creates a platform for international students to voice their concerns and bring to the fore the need for a collaborative effort to improve mental health support.
- Creating a strong partnership not only address the current needs of international students with or without families but also improves their long term well being.
- Together, international students, institutions, mental health practitioners and policy makers can ensure that mental health challenges are addressed with more empathy, inclusive strategies that reflect the diversity and uniqueness.

## Findings

Although the findings of the study are still ongoing, there are some gaps which have been identified through existing literature.

### 1. Increasing Student Population:

- International students in Canada increased by 69.8% in the past five years.
- Significant mental health challenges remain unaddressed for students and their families.

### 2. Barriers Identified:

- Cultural stigma around mental health.
- Insufficient family-inclusive mental health services.
- Limited research on the mental health needs of international students with families.

### 3. Unique Stressors:

- Balancing academic and family responsibilities.
- Financial constraints and cultural transitions.
- Navigating long-distance relationships with family abroad.

### 4. Recommendations:

- Culturally inclusive mental health resources.
- Both on and off campus family-focused support initiatives are recommended.
- Policy reforms addressing diverse international student needs.



## References

- Calder, M. J., Richter, S., Mao, Y., Burns, K. K., Mogale, R. S., & Danko, M. (2016). International students attending Canadian universities: Their experiences with housing, finances, and other issues. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* (1975), 46(2), 92–110. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v46i2.184585>
- Newton, D. C., Tomin, A. J., & LaMontagne, A. D. (2021). Exploring the challenges and opportunities for improving the health and wellbeing of international students: perspectives of international students. *JANZSSA: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 29(1), 18-34. DOI
- Qadeer, T., Javed, M. K., Manzoor, A., Wu, M., & Zaman, S. I. (2021). The experience of international students and institutional recommendations: A comparison between the students from the developing and developed regions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 667230–667230. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.667230>

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Ethics Board  
has approved this study REB22-1211