

## **RESEARCHING, UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RESILIENCE**

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When the BMRC-IRMU Partnership started in 2016, our focus was primarily on addressing issues of resilience among immigrants and various groups of permanent citizens in Canadian cities – including newcomers, sponsored refugees, economic migrants, family reunification, etc. But by 2018, we became aware of the growing number of international students – there were approximately 700,000 international students in 2018 (Zahid, 2021) up from about 142,000 in 2010 (StatsCan Plus, 2024) – and the urgent need to examine the challenges they face and their resilience.

Among other things, increasing numbers of international students were seeking permanent residence through the so called ‘two-step migration’ process. Nevertheless, there were significant gaps in policy and available supports for their settlement and labour market integration. The transition from study permit to temporary work permit, and then to permanent residence is complex and filled with challenges that needed to be understood. These issues became even more complex when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020.

Several members of the BMRC-IRMU partnership conducted studies on the experiences of international students in different city-networks – Windsor, Kitchener-Waterloo, Toronto, Sudbury, Ottawa and Montreal. Their aim was to understand how they managed their temporary status, interactions with post-secondary institutions, segmented labour markets and the broader Canadian society. In each instance, the concern was with probing students’ ability to adapt to their circumstances, succeed at their studies, secure affordable housing, and manage a ‘two-step migration’ process.

From the BMRC-IRMU projects and initiatives, we learned that social resilience (Preston et al. 2022) proves to be a useful concept to understand the ways international students cope with, negotiate, and challenge the circumstances in which they find themselves. Our projects and various Partnership initiatives – including a forum held in Windsor in January 2020 and multiple webinars since then – revealed that shifting constellations of immigration policies and practices, post-secondary sector needs, and the availability of local infrastructures and resources (housing, employment, services, ethnic communities, civil society groups) all play a key role in shaping international students’ lives at different times. Importantly, while these factors and stakeholders shape international students’ resilience, their own resilience is also dependent on their ability to respond and adapt to

changing circumstances (e.g., the pandemic) – that is, the resilience of the system as a whole.

We suggest adopting a *relational approach* that considers the resilience of the system as a whole, in addition to the resilience of its various parts and the ongoing dynamics between them (state, educational institutions, service organizations, communities, and individuals). This approach can serve to better understand the complex 'assemblage' of stakeholders and structures that shape international students' experiences.

It is important to recognize that international student resilience is deeply entangled in the broader institutional and political context. Our projects and Partnership initiatives have documented the adverse experiences international students face, such as financial hardship and challenges accessing appropriate employment and affordable housing, and how their capacity to manage these experiences is shaped by the state, educational institutions, and the cities and neighbourhoods where they live.

Based on our findings, a number of recommendations can be highlighted to improve individual, system, and overall relational resilience across the sectors. The following recommendations have been adapted from Gabriel et al. (forthcoming):

- 1) First, for policy and state actors, the renewal of Canada's International Education Strategy for 2024 – led by the ministry of Global Affairs in collaboration with Employment and Social Development Canada and IRCC (Global Affairs Canada 2023) – provides an opportunity to enhance equity by putting greater emphasis on facilitating meaningful international student progression into the labour market and targeted recruitment of students from lower income countries not typically plugged into international educational circuits. Specifically, the time is right for the Federal government to conduct an analysis of the priorities and needs of international students in a (post)pandemic world. Relatedly, there must be an ongoing assessment and evaluation of the broader system that determines how and how many international students enter Canada, the education and training they receive, and how their educational achievements translate into jobs and long-term settlement. Policies about international students would benefit from dialogue between the ministries responsible for immigration and labour market and economic planning and more concerted engagement with the multiple stakeholders involved in the emerging apparatus that frames the migration of international students.
- 2) Our second set of recommendations focus on local-level actors and practices. To start, since temporary study permits are increasingly a first step towards a more long-term pathway to permanent residence, it appears imperative to consider providing international students with access to settlement services, including language training and employment counselling (for an innovative example of training, see Baez Abreu & Schlosser forthcoming); this is even more so given that international students play a key role in filling significant labour

shortages. Next, local actors – including educational institutions, service providers, community organizations, but also municipal governments along with landlords and employers – ought to come together and develop locally-based initiatives that can address international student needs while being adapted to the context and ensure resilience of local systems through a relational approach. To support this process, existing structures such as Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs; see Walton-Roberts et al. 2019) and the *Réseaux en Immigration Francophone* (RIFs, community networks for Francophone immigration; see Veronis & Huot 2018) – which exist outside of Quebec – and the *Table de concertation des organismes communautaires du réseau de l'immigration et de l'intégration du Québec* (TCRI) could provide an ideal forum to facilitate the process. By working together and aligning with one another, relationally, all the stakeholders involved in the broader system working with and relying on international students will benefit by supporting the others and the students, thus contributing to creating a more robust and resilient system and society.

We have prepared a list of resources produced through the BMRC-IRMU Partnership, including policy briefs, publications, reports, and research digests, which we hope will be useful to various stakeholders and others working with international students. We are also excited to announce an upcoming edited volume, "Leaving to Learn: Mapping the place of resilience in the journeys of international students to Canada," co-edited by Sutama Ghosh (Toronto Metropolitan University), Luisa Veronis (University of Ottawa) and Margaret Walton-Roberts (Wilfrid Laurier University) and to be published in 2025 with UBC Press. This collection will feature 12 chapters that provide a comprehensive examination of international student experiences in Canada from a social resilience perspective by mapping their journeys from pre-departure to arrival, study, work, and potentially gaining permanent residence on the way to citizenship.

For a detailed bibliography, please [click here](#).

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