Higher Education
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01118-5

International students as labour: experiencing the global imaginary

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Accepted: 28 September 2023

Abstract
Through higher education-migration ('edugration') systems, many immigrant-dependent countries have become structurally reliant on the retention of post-secondary international students as a source of the so-called global talent. This emerging area of research focuses primarily on the *potential* economic contributions international students may perform post-graduation. However, the labour international students perform *during* their studies—both within the broader labour market and, more specifically, the higher education sector—is relatively absent in the academic and public discourse, despite its growing significance. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of the modern/colonial global imaginary and the ways in which this imaginary frames international students as 'cash, competition, or charity' in the Global North (Stein & Andreotti, *Higher Education, 72*, 225 239, 2016), we call for a renewed understanding of governments' engagement with—and higher education's complicity in—the framing of international students as workers. Utilizing collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a method of inquiry, we explore ways the 'cash, competition, or charity' framing impacts international graduate students' experiences in the Canadian post-secondary context. We suggest an update to Stein and Andreotti's framing by adding 'labour' as a fourth dominant trope framing international students in Canada and, increasingly, across the Global North.

Keywords International Students · Graduate students · Internationalization · Academic labour · Global imaginary · Migrant workers

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Published online: 09 October 2023

Introduction

In their influential paper, Stein & Andreotti, (2016) suggested that international students (IS) in Western higher education (HE) institutions are framed by three dominant tropes: cash, charity, and competition. By linking the recruitment of IS to the racism experienced by many upon their arrival, Stein and Andreotti illustrated how both processes (i.e. their recruitment and racist reception) are framed by the same overarching dominant modern/colonial global imaginary rooted in Western supremacy. Building on Stein and Andreotti's work, here, we suggest that a fourth relatively unexplored trope additionally shapes IS' experience, labour, which is performed *while* they are students.

Overlooking IS' labour during their studies is common in academic and public discourses. IS are primarily framed as *students* rather than workers, with governments highlighting their valuable contributions as consumers and, in some countries, *potential* post-graduation workers in an international competition for 'global talent' and 'high-skilled' immigrants (Brunner, 2023; Knight, 2004; Lomer, 2018; Lomer & Yang, 2022; Scott et al., 2015). Strategically stressing these particular economic contributions reinforces the idea that IS are a unique class of migrants, since 'services are sold to the migrant rather than provided by them' (Riaño et al., 2018, p. 291); politically, this can be an attempt to make IS' presence palatable to constituents who might otherwise be wary of the so-called labour market competition they represent.

Yet many immigrant-dependent countries have also become reliant on the work of IS *while they are studying*. This occurs in the broader labour market and specifically within the HE system, the latter particularly relying on graduate students' academic labour. In Canada, where Stein and Andreotti's analysis was based and where we co-authors live, IS' right to work on- and off-campus has broadened over the past decade, aligning with similar policy changes across the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). This calls for a renewed understanding of the ways governments are actively engaged—and HE institutions are complicit—in the changing positionalities of IS, as well as how this affects IS' experiences.

Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, this paper analyses the lived experiences of graduate IS in Canada. Through these experiences, we explore the topic of IS labour and 'talk back' to both the modern/colonial global imaginary and the way it is articulated, answering calls to explore IS as multifaceted beings 'not easily categorizable as students alone' (Raghuram, 2013, p. 140; Gilmartin et al., 2021). Our stories highlight how (1) holding a study permit affects IS' relations to the labour market, and (2) the 'labour' of IS has emerged as a fourth framing trope alongside 'cash', 'competition', and 'charity'.

International students in the modern/colonial global imaginary

Andreotti, (2015), Stein et al., (2016), Stein & Andreotti, (2016, 2017), and Stein et al., (2019) developed the idea of a dominant modern/colonial global imaginary in relation to HE. Their work is based on Taylor's, (2004) description of a social imaginary, defined as a 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (p. 23). Because it is simultaneously factual and normative, a social imaginary's power lies in the normalization of social hierarchies and understandings while simultaneously delegitimizing or erasing alternative possibilities (Stein et al., 2019; Taylor, 2002).

Social imaginaries have been used as a basis for considering a global imaginary (García Canclini, 1999; Steger, 2009), as well as understanding globalization's relationship to education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), and migration (López García, 2021). However, a specifically modern/colonial global imaginary takes a distinct approach based on decolonial thought (e.g. Quijano, 2007; Spivak, 2004). It locates the global imaginary's origins in the fifteenth century, when 'Europe first envisaged and asserted a totalizing—i.e., global—vision for the planet, through a single narrative of space and time in which Europe stood as the geographic centre, and as the leader of linear, universal human progress' (Stein et al., 2016, p. 3). While not the first with such aspirations, Stein et al. argued that European empires were unique in their scope and scale, and this frame has endured, propelled by the West's accumulation of both ideological and material power.

It is within this ongoing frame that Western HE has been positioned as universally superior, tied up in the modern/colonial global imaginary's promises of 'security, material prosperity, possessive individualism, linear progress, democracy, meritocracy, and universal knowledge' (Stein et al., 2016, p. 3). The pursuit of upward mobility (e.g. social, economic, or occupational) within this hierarchical framing is a driving force of durable IS flows to the West. The catch is that promises dependent on a hierarchy are, by definition, available only to some; in the case of the modern/colonial global imaginary, they require the 'insecurity, exploitation, expropriation, material poverty, and onto-epistemological dominance' of *Others* (Stein et al., 2016, p. 3).

In this light, Stein and Andreotti (2016) articulated three dominant tropes framing IS: (1) 'cash', or 'sources of income and intellectual capital that support the continued prosperity of the Western university and nation-state'; (2) 'competition', or inferior competitors in the social mobility 'game'; and (3) 'charity', or recipients of the West's knowledge and development (2016, p. 226), with the 'cash' trope becoming dominant since the late 1960s. Stein and Andreotti's description of 'cash' included both direct income from IS (e.g. tuition fees) and their 'indirect economic benefit' (e.g. their contribution to innovation and potential as future citizens). However, this 'cash-competition-charity' categorization fails to adequately account for the direct and indirect recruitment of IS for the work they perform on- and off-campus *during* their studies. Our paper expands Stein and Andreotti's work by reminding HE scholars of just one of the many complexities arising from the entanglement of HE and (im)migration (Brunner, 2022a).

International students: a unique category of workers

Work is common among post-secondary students, albeit to varying degrees and for different purposes (Beerkens et al., 2011). However, students tend to be primarily framed as *students* rather than employees or workers. This is especially true within HE, regardless of how much academic labour, paid or unpaid, they conduct on behalf of their institutions (Bauer, 2017; Gallope, 2007). Students are also seldom considered an important source of labour outside academia (Han et al., 2022). Yet students' self-identification may contradict this framing; in Europe, for example, survey data shows that approximately half of working students in seven countries identify primarily as *workers* rather than students (Eurostudent, 2023).

While IS are in many ways similar to their domestic counterparts—e.g. their work temporalities are rhythmed by academic temporalities (Bailey, 1985; Coustere et al., 2021), and they work due to financial needs and desires to enhance their employability (Benabdeljalil,

2009; Maury, 2017)—relevant distinguishing factors exist. That said, the ways IS experience labour during their studies are complex and not frequently discussed in academic literature, despite gaining recent traction (Maury, 2017, 2020). Within migration studies, IS workers are not easily categorizable and thus often excluded from migration policy discussions, since their typically part-time labour is viewed secondary to their assumed primary role as students (Robertson, 2016a). In countries with strong linkages between IS recruitment and permanent immigration targets, IS have long been seen as *potential*, rather than active, workers; even as they are increasingly considered 'temporary workers with limited entitlements', their visa category continues to mask their labour (Dauvergne & Marsden, 2014, p. 228–229; Sabzalieva et al., 2022).

What we know is that the way IS labour is regulated and discursively represented affects how they perceive and experience it, with national variations (Brooks & Abrahams, 2021). Significantly, while all students are precarious workers to varying degrees (Bauer, 2017; Maury, 2017, 2020; Nakache et al., 2022), precarity is more pronounced for IS (Chacko, 2021; Gilmartin et al., 2021; Lomer, 2017). Those who are non-native English-speakers face difficulties finding suitable work, such as teaching assistant (TA) and research assistant (RA) opportunities, and are more likely to work in low-paying off-campus jobs (Lyakhovetska, 2004). Those who do find work as TAs tend to face linguistic, cultural, instructional, and relational challenges (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Despite their relatively high representation in certain labour markets, IS are disadvantaged as workers (Maury, 2017; Nyland et al., 2009; Robertson, 2016a). Their temporary status constitutes a barrier to labour market access, leading to precarious work which is often 'casualised, informal and low skilled' (Robertson, 2016a, p. 2276), especially for those who are racialized (Martin, 2017). This legal precariousness may 'translat[e] into economic precarity' (Gilmartin et al., 2021, p. 4736; Maury, 2020) and depend on widespread 'semi-compliance' with their exploitation (Robertson, 2016b).

IS are highly heterogeneous (Shokirova et al., 2022), and their fluency in dominant languages, as well as their race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors, likely affects their work opportunities and experiences. Like international postdocs (Cantwell & Lee, 2010), all IS are deeply impacted by academic capitalism—yet they are differentially impacted by institutionalized neoracism. Stein & Andreotti, (2016) have been critiqued for 'distill[ing] all racism to the standard colonial White/Other binary' while ignoring more nuanced considerations, e.g. the relatively privileged socioeconomic position of internationally mobile students irrespective of race (Wyly & Dhillon, 2018, p. 143). In response to these critiques, we draw from our varied lived experiences to highlight how privilege and marginalization differentially contextualize the governance of IS labour.

The Canadian international student work context

Since the 1980s, Canada has increasingly positioned IS as crucial to national economic growth, highlighting their role in creating 'new jobs and opportunities for Canadians while addressing looming skills and labour shortages' (Government of Canada, 2014, p. 4). Today, IS' economic value—whether through their expenditures (GAC, 2019) or potential as high-wage immigrants (Crossman et al., 2021)—is the federal government's primary justification for recruiting IS (Brunner, 2022b). However, until very recently, this framing of labour market contributions has focused mainly on their *post-graduation* integration into the workforce.

In reality, IS' work authorization during their studies—generally unlimited on-campus, and with hourly restrictions off-campus—expanded over time, including a 2014 regulation

change allowing most study permit holders to work off-campus for up to 20 h per week without applying for a separate work permit (Government of Canada, 2021). In April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada temporarily removed the hourly off-campus work restrictions for IS working in essential services, acknowledging their noteworthy labour contributions (Government of Canada, 2020). In October 2022, the Canadian government recognized IS as a key component to address Canada's labour shortage by temporarily[1] lifting hourly off-campus work restrictions for the majority of IS to 'help ease pressing needs in many sectors across the country' and contribute 'to our short-term recovery and long-term prosperity' (Government of Canada, 2022, para. 9). These moves coincide with the significant growth of temporary work permit-holder entries compared to permanent resident entries since the early 2000s (Bélanger et al., 2019).

Mentions of IS' work experiences as students in Canada are mostly contextual rather than the object of analysis (e.g. CBIE, 2018; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Scott et al., 2015). Many IS work multiple jobs during their studies to gain Canadian work experience and afford the costs of their tuition fees and daily expenses (Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022). However, they report barriers when accessing the labour market, including lack of work experience and networks, lack of 'appropriate' jobs matching their qualifications, employer discrimination based on their IS status, and language-based discrimination (CBIE, 2018; Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022). Although temporarily lifted, the usual 20-h off-campus limitation is a deterrent for some employers (Trilokekar et al., 2022). As a result, IS tend to be underpaid and underemployed (El Masri & Khan, 2022). Despite being increasingly present in all sectors of the labour market, they are overrepresented in low-paid sectors such as in accommodation and food services (Crossman et al., 2022). While this is similar domestic students, IS' precarious status might produce a difference in their experience and employers' labour management strategies (Polanco, 2016). IS are much less likely than domestic students to hold a job during their studies (Trilokekar et al., 2022) and they underperform in the labour market (Akbar, 2022) although their employment rate increases among master's and doctoral students (Frenette et al., 2019). Finally, work experience (or lack of) has a major effect on their post-graduation employment outcomes (El Masri & Khan, 2022).

The Canadian government is currently invested in understanding 'the role of IS as a source of labour in Canada' (Crossman et al., 2022, p. 2). A recent study revealed that 'the share of [IS] with paid employment income among total paid workers grew from 0.1% in 2000 to 1.4% in 2018, corresponding to a tenfold increase from 21,800 to 277,400 in the number of [IS] paid workers' (Crossman et al., 2022, p. 3). At the time of publication, the government was conducting stakeholder consultations and a survey of IS regarding the temporary policy lifting off-campus work restrictions. This signals a new and growing focus on IS as a labour source.

Methodology

Guided by the philosophical underpinnings of social constructionism (Baert et al., 2011), we utilized collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to research personal narratives. In recent years, CAE has been used to explore the nuanced, everyday complexities of identity and mobility in HE by PhD students (Choi et al., 2021; Karki, 2016),

[1] Effective November 15, 2022, to December 31, 2023, although current policy discussions indicate the possibility for extension.

IS (Shokirova et al., 2022) and foreign-born faculty (Kim & Reichmuth, 2020). CAE allows researchers to produce rich accounts of IS experiences (Chen, 2021).

Through reflexivity and introspection, we five co-authors examined our 'self' as participant/s, acknowledging that sociohistorical/political/economic circumstances, as well as our social positionalities, shape experiences. We are all migration researchers in the social sciences with current or former experience as international graduate students in Canada, yet grew up in different countries (France, Iran, Nepal, Tajikistan, and the USA) and studied different disciplines (education, geography, social work, and sociology) in different provinces (Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec), from 2008 to today. Two of us are white, while three are racialized. We are all cisgender, with one identifying as a man and four as women. Four arrived in Canada with partners and one with a child; four of us had children after arrival in Canada. Three are now Canadian citizens, one is a permanent resident, and one holds a study permit. We all self-identify as settlers in Canada's settler-colonial context.

We initially discussed our lived experiences during meetings of a national Canadian research alliance focusing on newcomer settlement (Pathways to Prosperity). In 2020, we began a collaborative ethnography research process focusing on IS' experience in Canada (see Shokirova et al., 2022). During weekly meetings, we explored how our identities were, or are, constructed and intersected as IS. We developed an overarching question: How do personal experiences of power, privilege, and marginalization impact international graduate students' labour in Canada? On this basis, we collectively crafted the following questions as prompts for each co-author to develop a personal self-reflective story regarding labour specifically:

- How has being a foreigner (a notion that could encapsulate different identities and be explored with an intersectional perspective) affected our work experiences as IS?
- How has holding a study permit affected our work experiences?
- How have our experiences with the labour market affected our studies and overall migration experience in Canada?

Each of us then wrote a narrative responding to these questions, which we collectively discussed in weekly virtual meetings, constituting a self-reflective data source (Chang et al., 2013). Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022), we undertook a rigorous and polyvocal process. We read and re-read each other's stories independently to understand the data and find commonalities and differences. We each individually coded the stories and developed themes and sub-themes that we then reviewed and revised collectively. Thus, the data collection process continued throughout the analysis, until we eventually arrived on two overarching themes and four sub-themes. Through critical discussions of the narratives, self-reflexivity, and triangulation of each other's themes and sub-themes, we moved between individual and collective analysis to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Chang et al., 2013).

Because ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was not possible as a small group of simultaneous researchers and participants, we were forced to strategically balance this ethical imperative with an accurate representation of the data. In our findings below, we only partially represent how our specific social positionalities affected our experiences of labour in Canada.

'Cash', 'competition', and 'charity' tropes and the pressure to work

All of us worked on-campus while studying as IS; three also worked off-campus. Like most students, we did so to fund our studies, support ourselves and family, and build our professional career, whether inside or outside academia (Benabdeljalil, 2009; Maury, 2020). However, our stories also revealed specific pressures as IS which additionally compelled us to work. These pressures stemmed from the way the 'cash' and 'charity' tropes were translated into policies, regulations, and restrictions, producing unique financial pressures for IS, in particular the unique costs and funding limitations we faced as study permit holders.

Unique costs as study permit holders

In Canada, study permit holders incur specific costs. For example, the majority of IS pay significantly higher tuition than permanent residents and citizens (El Masri & Khan, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022), an ethically questionable form of HE subsidization common throughout the Global North (Habib, 2023; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Generalizing the tuition we paid was difficult, as it fluctuated over time and varied based on our province, university, nationality, and funding conditions. Our annual tuition fees ranged from $3300 CAD to $21,000. Those of us paying more than $20,000 a year endured significant worries and fears regarding our ability to afford tuition while maintaining our daily lives. Those of us who did not pay high tuition fees were either in research-intensive programs and/or benefitted from a bilateral student mobility agreement between their country of citizenship and Quebec. In the former—i.e. studying in a research-intensive program—the labour we performed as researchers-in-training was a form of 'cash' for the institution and economy more generally, as we became a source of 'indirect economic benefit […] contributing to innovation' (Stein & Andreotti, 2016, p. 232), justifying reduced fees. In the latter case of reduced tuition due to a bilateral agreement, the position of an IS in the modern/colonial global imaginary was less clear. As the student who benefitted from this agreement reflected:

> Not only does this reflect the historical colonial relations tying my country to the province I studied in, but also my position as a Westerner in the global imaginary framed by Western supremacy. I am not primarily considered as a source of cash or a recipient of charity.

Their privileged position in the global imaginary was reflected in their equal financial footing with permanent residents and citizens solely due to their nationality. As such, this co-author's advantage seemed to result from a 'cash' framing, where *reduced* tuition fees act as an incentive for desired (in this case, French) potential immigrants to study in the province in the hope that they would remain and contribute to its economic development and Francophone population after graduation.

IS' access to public health insurance also varied from province to province. Some had access for free or with a fee; others had to subscribe to private insurance programs through their universities. This also required substantial monetary contributions to cover not just ourselves but our accompanying family members, producing another source of financial constraint from $1050 to $5786 a year. One co-author recalled:

> I was worried about having access to health services, as I came with a family also requiring medical care. We had to purchase health insurance through university, which cost almost a monthly paycheck.

Additionally, in comparison with students with permanent residency or Canadian citizenship, we all had to renew our student permit at least once, incurring costs. We paid federal processing fees (about $200) and, in the case of Quebec, additional provincial fees (about $100). Those of us with accompanying family members faced the concomitant renewal of their permits, which were tied to our study permit. Renewing our study permits also necessitated proof of 'sufficient funds', ranging from $10,000 (plus more for accompanying family members) to, in Quebec, $10,000 plus funds to cover tuition. We had to ensure our savings matched this requirement by accepting jobs and budgeting accordingly.

Indeed, when framed as 'cash', IS are not supposed to benefit from public social systems and must prove their ability to support themselves and their accompanying members for the duration of their stay. This expectation also serves to make sure IS know the limits of their framing as 'charity'. While Canada provides IS with access to its 'universal knowledge and values' (Stein et al., 2016), it should not be understood as an unlimited access to its social welfare. However, as the differential treatment of IS (depending on nationality, province, family structure, etc.) illustrates, our positioning influenced the ways we were framed, which in turn affected our living conditions in Canada and pressure to work.

Funding limitations as study permit holders

Despite these additional costs, we also had uneven access to scholarships and funding opportunities as study permit holders. Resulting from the combination of the 'cash', and 'competition' tropes, many were restricted to permanent residents and citizens (Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Scott et al., 2015). One co-authors recalled:

> I never considered applying for any external funding; I was naive about graduate school and didn't even realize this was a possibility until after I started the program and heard about Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grants, most of which I was not eligible to apply for as an IS.

This reduced our range of possibilities to financially support our studies. As a result, some sought alternative paid opportunities as TAs or RAs which ultimately contributed to our professional growth and increased income. One of us shared:

> During my studies, besides TAships, I was trying to apply for various other short-term contract opportunities within the university…As I incorrectly thought I could not work off-campus at the time (due to a lack of information), I was looking for every possible opportunity to work on campus and bring some income to the family.

Some of us were awarded merit-based scholarships. This could be interpreted as an act of 'charity', providing us with publicly funded financial assistance in order for us, as foreigners, to benefit from the university's knowledge. Nevertheless, the conditions of these so-called scholarships all entailed a requirement to work as TA and RA on campus. One of the co-authors shared their experience:

> My scholarship covered high tuition fees, and the rest of the scholarship I had to earn while working as a TA and RA. Although I found these roles very beneficial for my professional development, it still constituted "labour."

Another co-author recalled:

> I already had loans from my undergraduate degree to pay, so I decided I would only attend graduate school if it was fully funded somehow […] I was offered guaranteed "funding" through TAs and RAs.

As illustrated above, although the scholarship could result from the 'charity' framing, it was also influenced by the 'cash' trope, since these co-authors had to work on-campus to receive those funds. However, not all of us had equal access to TA and RA opportunities. One co-author shared that initially:

> ...as a study permit holder, I was deprived of positions like TAs at my department. I always questioned my exclusion. However, such discriminatory treatment was resolved after two years of my graduate studies by defining new policies which supported me in the [unionized graduate student hiring] system.

Another co-author also observed such discrimination, but from a different perspective as an instructor of an international TA seminar. She recalled that some IS were forced by their supervisors to enroll after receiving negative feedback on student evaluations regarding their spoken accents; others hoped the seminar would improve their chances of being hired. We can see how the 'competition' trope can construct the university system as a gatekeeper, which does not always provide equal opportunities for growth to IS. Although a number of us paid high tuition fees and were thus beneficial to universities who saw us as 'cash', we, simultaneously, were not always treated equally with domestic students, especially in relation to access to fundings.

We also found that graduate funding, including that which comes from RAs and TAs, is sometimes framed as a form of 'charity' when HE is seen as offering 'not only hands-on learning but also financial support for graduate study [which] many other countries cannot provide' (Black & Stephan, 2010, p. 158–159) and which IS should be grateful for. Such findings highlight the scarcely made relationship between funding discrimination based on residence status and the pursuit of TAs and RAs (Benabdeljalil, 2009).

In sum, as our stories illustrate, holding a study permit comes with specific costs and reduced access to funding and social protections that resulted from the framing of IS by the 'cash', 'competition', and 'charity' tropes and, in turn, influenced our decision to engage with labour.

Ambiguity of in/exclusion and (un)desirability of international student workers

The following section explores how these tropes affect IS work experiences, once they have decided to engage with the labour market. Our analysis reveals that at this stage, their effects vary depending on the section of the labour market and level of wage considered. Our narratives made clear that, while framing IS as 'cash' may ease their access to the labour market (on- and off-campus), this was counterbalanced by their framing as 'competition', especially in high-wage positions in (1) the academic labour market and (2) on- and off-campus labour market. The 'charity' framing, however, did not seem to impact our experiences of labour.

In the academic labour market

As mentioned, we all worked as TAs and/or RAs at our universities, since on-campus work hours were not legally limited and our specialized internationally obtained skills had a higher economic value in the academic labour market than the non-academic labour market. Despite the challenges we encountered, such as becoming familiar with local norms, lacking formal training, and struggling with imposter syndrome, such experience proved rewarding. Our TA and RA roles benefited from our international background, previous education, and experiences as migrants in Canada. One co-author noted,

> I realized I can actually offer a lot: my interdisciplinarity knowledge, practical international experience, transnationality in addition to my strong passion for the subject I was teaching.

Another co-author pointed out that their experience as a migrant worker inside and outside of Canada served as a basis for a research project they assisted on. Another shared:

> I was actively involved in community activities with social services agencies. I believe I contributed immensely to the university and broader community through various means, including knowledge production, international relations, Canada's socio-cultural fabrics, and, more importantly, the nation's economy. IS are gifts to Canadian universities who bring translational knowledge, skills, and experiences that help Canadian universities to internationalize their course curriculum and pedagogy.

On one hand, as demonstrated in this quote, IS acknowledge their own value and contribution to universities. This acknowledgment could also translate to the desirability of IS' academic labour, as they do bring their unique experiences and skills, contributing to the universities' knowledge economy. On the other hand, in our discussions, we agreed that the desirability of IS in academia also stems from IS' position as an available, disciplined, and semi-constrained source of labour, constituting a cheap labour for universities (Ramjattan, 2019). Indeed, students are generally offered a low pay for their labour in the form of a short-term contract with no direct pathways to stable jobs, forming part of the growing precarization of the academic workforce in Canada (Rose, 2020). As IS have limited access to work opportunities, they may feel more compelled than domestic students to accept those working conditions, becoming particularly desirable workers for universities. Furthermore, through reflections on our experiences, we realized that these work opportunities are often embedded in funding conditions as mentioned earlier, which IS may have little choice but to accept. There is thus a clear linkage between the financial constraints faced by IS and their work experiences, the former conditioning what work conditions they are offered and accept.

In the off-campus labour market

While being framed as 'cash' allowed us to be included in the academic labour market, IS have mainly been framed as competitors when it comes to the off-campus labour market. This is reflected in the restrictions on IS' labour opportunities off-campus. However, our experiences reveal that such restrictions had a disproportionate impact on our ability to obtain high-wage positions compared to low-wage positions.

For example, when one of the co-authors started studying in Canada, working off-campus required a separate work permit. Lacking support to understand their rights and

navigate the maze of changing immigration policies as a newcomer, they incorrectly believed that they could not work off-campus. Later, when they discovered that it was possible, they decided against it, partially because academic contracts were available. However, this hindered their opportunities to get practical Canadian experience beyond academia, later affecting their post-graduation professional opportunities.

When Canada's IS program regulations changed in 2014, IS gained access to off-campus work without the need for a separate permit. However, their hourly contribution remained restricted to 20 h per week, which still impacted the ability of some of the co-authors to get valuable professional work experience in the sector they were qualified for, and, subsequently, impacted the building of their professional career. While many domestic graduate students balance full-time off-campus work with graduate school, especially in graduate programs targeted at working professionals, IS do not have this option. As one co-author shared:

Who will hire a foreign professional who can only work for 20 h a week?

Another co-author lamented their reduced ability to network during their internship as the hours spent with colleagues were limited.

We also experienced exclusion from certain positions based on the claimed necessity to have 'Canadian experience', especially in high-wage positions. Here, we were clearly seen as 'competition'. Despite their diplomas and extensive professional experience, one co-author could not secure a job commensurate with their experience, despite applying widely to jobs in their field. They recalled:

> An annoying part of the interview was that these agencies asked me if I had Canadian education or experience. I said, "I don't have Canadian experience." And they advised me to have Canadian experience. What a paradox! How can I get Canadian experience if I am not given an opportunity to work in Canada?

There is a notable and well-documented protection of skilled positions in Canada, which are often limited or give preference to permanent residents or citizens, or at least those with a 'Canadian experience' (Han et al., 2022; Karki, 2020; Masri & Khan, 2022). Our stories highlight that IS are impacted by such forms of protectionism as well. The conditional inclusion and outright exclusion experienced by IS might contribute to the documented discrepancy in post-graduation professional outcomes compared to domestic students (Akbar, 2022).

However, the lack of 'Canadian experience' did not prevent any of the co-authors from finding a low-waged job. Some of us worked off-campus in low-paid, precarious jobs, where IS are often employed (Chira, 2013; Coustere et al., 2021). One co-author worked in a coffee shop where the majority of workers were IS from the same nationality and fluent in the dominant language. The owner considered IS more reliable than domestic students and favoured certain nationalities over others based on their perceived work ethics. As one co-author shared,

> Unlike others, my embodied characteristics made me a desirable worker in the service area of hospitality: white, middle-class looking and sounding (with a degree), speaking the language with a desirable accent.

Indeed, the embodiment of gendered, racial, and class attributes is often part of the recruiting criteria in service industries such as hospitality, as service employees are considered a part of the product (Farrugia, 2018; Karki, 2020). Employers make assumptions based on their beliefs in how national and cultural characteristics translate into work ethic and performance (Matthews & Ruhs, 2007), even though differences of work attitudes may

in fact result from the IS' 'dual frame of reference'[2] (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003) and/or from their higher dependency on an income to pursue their studies. In many low-wage positions, IS are framed as 'cash' by employers instead of 'competition'.

One of the co-authors who could not find a skilled job in their field was compelled to work at grocery stores and gas stations. They considered IS' experience in the labour market similar to that of skilled immigrants:

> I want to borrow the phrase "taxi driver syndrome," used by Jeffrey G. Reitz, indicating that many skilled immigrants in Canada's metropolitan cities are driving taxis – despite having been selected for high levels of training and experience […] We know that Canada is experiencing "brain gain," while the developing countries "brain drain," and individual immigrants are, in a true sense, experiencing "brain waste" [...] perhaps a better term would be "brain abuse" (Bauder, 2003).

Overall, working IS are framed as 'competition' through the regulation of their work hours and the direct and indirect restrictions they face. High-wage positions are often gatekept to favour permanent residents and citizens, reflecting this 'competition' trope. However, IS workers are also framed as 'cash' in other ways, particularly in the case of low-wage workers—where their embodied attributes and constraints make them a particularly desirable workforce.

Conclusion: labour as a fourth trope

Riaño et al., (2018) argued that IS 'may be desired and rejected simultaneously' as 'immigrants of doubtful value' (p. 4). Our stories showed that this contradiction applies to IS' experiences with the Canadian labour market. Through CAE, we explored the effects of the modern/colonial global imaginary on the labour experiences of IS, demonstrating the importance of analysing the factors influencing IS' decision to work while studying. Being framed as 'cash' led to increased costs and limited access to social support systems like public health services. Nevertheless, this varied depending on one's nationality and whether they were also framed as 'charity'. In turn, the 'competition' framing contributes to a reduced access to funding. By producing a higher cost of study and a reduced access to financial support, these combined framings create a specific pressure to work which impacts IS' work conditions.

Based on our experiences, we argue that IS are a desired workforce (with caveats) on- and off-campus, favoured for competing but cumulating reasons: (1) for their intellectual production and aesthetic labour, where their international experience is valued, but also (2) as a source of cheap and vulnerable labour, which is amplified by their temporary residence permit, lack of Canadian experience, and in many cases race (Fang et al., 2022). In both, IS' experiences as workers are framed by the 'cash' trope, although different economic values are expected of them depending on the segment of the market in which they work. However, this desirability is limited by IS' framing as 'competition'. Off-campus, their labour remains restricted despite gradually relaxing regulations, as IS can still not easily access certain high-wage positions due to their temporary residence permit or need

[2] Roger Waldinger and Michael Lichter show that recent immigrants might have a 'dual frame of reference' (2003), which means that they compare their work conditions in the country of immigration with those of the country of origin.

to acquire 'Canadian experience'. While recent discourses recognizing IS as much-needed workers might mark a shift towards their formal inclusion in the labour market at large, it may not lift informal barriers to high-wage occupations.

Noticeably, charity did not play a significant role in our experiences of labour. This likely reflects the general policy shift over the past three decades from 'aid to trade' (Sabzalieva et al., 2022), where the majority of IS are primarily considered economic subjects, potential temporary migrants, and labour, rather than objects of charity.

Although our study relies on a small sample size of international graduate students studying in the social sciences at Canadian universities and is not necessarily generalizable, it offers insights into the IS experience of labour by extending Stein and Andreotti's analysis in two ways. First, it demonstrates how their identified tropes affect IS' labour experiences. These experiences are influenced by the interplay between two tropes in particular: the 'cash' and the 'competition' tropes, while the 'charity' trope seems to mostly affect IS' pressure to work rather than their work experiences themselves. Highly conditioned by their very status *as* IS—at once students and holders of a temporary residence permit—IS are constructed as a specific category of workers whose labour is mostly invisibilized. On campus, it is treated as a 'different' kind of labour in 'the life of the mind' (Bauer, 2017; Gallope, 2007) and primarily considered academic training. Off-campus work, meanwhile, has not typically been a focus of researchers of IS, as their 'primary' role has been perceived to be study. While IS are a coveted financial resource for universities through the significant tuition fees they pay, these very costs, combined with the specific costs induced by their residence permit and limited access to funding, make labour a crucial feature of their academic success. We acknowledge that IS, like domestic students, have varied motivations to work. However, the specific constraints faced by IS affect their choice to work, their access to the labour market, and their work conditions. The Canadian government and HE regulations and discourses, as well as employers' choices, are shaped by the identified tropes as much as they are shaping them and affecting IS' labour experiences in turn.

Our study also extends Stein and Andreotti's analysis in a second way. While Stein and Andreotti only mention *post-graduation* work and how it contributes to the framing of IS as 'cash' and 'competition', we suggest IS also form a unique category of temporary migrant workers *during* their studies. As such, labour can be considered a fourth trope within the modern/colonial global imaginary. In other words, labour is a fourth ongoing narrative which affects not just governmental and HE policies but also circulating discourses regarding IS. While labour has some overlap with the 'cash, competition, charity' narratives, it does not fit neatly in any. Its addition as a fourth trope allows a better understanding of the current narratives shaping IS' experiences. Its emergence also reflects a trend in the blurring of boundaries between study and labour globally (Sabzalieva et al., 2022) and speaks to the emphasis on economic and labour market priorities in immigration policy design (Dauvergne, 2016; Pellerin, 2011).

As such, our study contributes to understanding how the changing discursive and political landscape of migration affects IS not just in Canada but also in many countries with similar education-migration, or 'edugration', contexts (Brunner, 2022a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). As we demonstrate, the shifting relationships between HE and immigration policies, and particularly the growing view of IS as solutions to labour shortages, impact IS not just during recruitment (before studies) and settlement (after graduation). They also have major effects *during* studies, a finding relevant for many countries and HE systems. Adding to the ongoing debate regarding the ethics of differential fees for IS (e.g. Habib, 2023), we demonstrate ways in which not just

differential fees, but also exclusionary policies, at both institutional and governmental levels intertwine to govern IS' lives in distinct ways.

Our analysis also highlights the significant heterogeneity of IS and their experiences, which is important for the field to more explicitly acknowledge (Wyly & Dhillon, 2018). For example, not only does an IS' province of study impact their conditions of migration, but those in the same province may have vastly different experiences based on one's nationality. Further analysis of how differing subnational policies and the federalization of immigration (Paquet, 2016) produce different conditions for IS would be useful, as well as more nuanced conceptualizations of IS' experiences. Even among our small sample, through the in-depth CAE approach, we found significant variability; a study incorporating participants from different levels of study, institution types, disciplines, etc. would have likely produced even more varied results. As the number (and, in many cases, proportion) of IS globally continues to climb following a 'COVID recruitment recovery', this raises questions regarding research into, and claims about, IS' experiences as a monolithic group.

Finally, our stories showed how study permits affect access to the labour market, even though this is unevenly influenced by differing individual positionalities. Due to space and confidentiality limitations, our analysis in this regard is necessarily partial; still, our data demonstrate some of the enduring ways 'structures of opportunity are conditioned by the interaction among patterns of academic capitalism, globalization, and structures of national and racial inequality' (Cantwell & Lee, 2010, p. 511). To that end, we highlight the fact that while 'grounding solutions in citizenship and labour rights…may cultivate international student agency and long-term security in Canada', it fails to disrupt the settler-colonial project of Canada in which temporary migrants are engaged (Gomez, 2020, p. 522). As the role of IS labour rises in prominence and scope, we echo Cantwell and Lee's call for more linkages of 'systemic and organizational changes with individual experiences and outcomes' (Cantwell & Lee, 2010, p. 511) to better understand how the global/colonial global imaginary shapes IS' heterogeneous experiences in more nuanced ways.

Acknowledgements Thank you to the Pathways to Prosperity Partnership Canada for its facilitation of the Standing Committee of Students and Junior Scholar Engagement, which brought us co-authors together. Thanks also to Sharon Stein for feedback. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education conference in May 2022.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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