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Unfamiliarities, Uncertainties, and Ambivalent Long-Term Intentions: Conceptualizing International Student-Migrant Settlement and Integration

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Abstract

International students (IS) are increasingly positioned as "ideal" economic immigrants for their supposedly limited settlement and integration needs, resulting in a growing number of education-migration, or *edugration*, immigration pathways. However, the settlement and integration experiences student-migrants undergo during *edugration* are undertheorized. Using collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we examine five graduate student-migrants' *edugration* experiences in Canada. Our interest is not whether student-migrants are sufficiently integrated or settled through the eyes of the state, but rather the experiential impacts of *edugration*; in other words, we examine not the *process of assimilation* but the *experience of being positioned as "easily" assimilated subjects*. Our findings suggest three distinct experiential categories produced by *edugration:* unfamiliarity, uncertainty, and ambivalence. Together, these experiences form a unique settlement and integration experience due to extended periods of temporariness. Through this conceptualization, we argue that the recruitment of IS through multi-step migration pathways like *edugration* presents ethical questions for both the state and higher education. While we support strategic calls for more coordinated, cross-sectoral efforts to improve the lived experiences of student-migrants, we caution against justifying these calls based on neoliberal, econometric, or (neo)colonial rationales regarding (1) the value of IS as human capital, and (2) assimilationist notions of settlement and integration. We instead encourage more critical, nuanced discussions of student-migrant experiences which actively resist such logics.

Keywords Collaborative autoethnography · Education-migration nexus · Higher education · Integration · Edugration · International students · Two-step migration

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Introduction

International students (IS), defined here as study permit holders, have long been conceptualized as sojourners with only *temporary* residence intentions in their so-called host countries (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2010). However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, a global race for talent spurred largely by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments to view IS as potential *permanent* residents (OECD, 2022). IS are now positioned in many national policy discourses as "ideal" immigrants due to their supposedly limited settlement and integration needs (Dam et al., 2018; Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2015). This growing global trend of recruiting economic immigrants through education-migration pathways, also described as *edugration*, blurs the line between temporary and permanent migrant categories while entangling the policy domains of higher education (HE) and migration (Brunner, 2022a; Robertson, 2013; Soong, 2016).

Edugration is located within a broader trend of two-step immigrant selection processes oriented by neoliberal logics. In two-step migration, immigrants are selected not from abroad but rather from domestic pools of temporary foreign workers. Because permanent residence (PR) criteria are based on demonstrated success in local labor markets, successful settlement and integration become de facto responsibilities of migrants themselves, enabling states to reduce investments in supports traditionally provided to newcomers arriving directly as immigrants (Goldring & Landolt, 2012). As an extension of two-step immigration, *edugration* is notable in two regards. First, IS are seen as desirable not only due to characteristics favorable for long-term economic outcomes as *permanent* residents (such as their relatively young age and high education level), but also their economic capital (e.g., as consumers of HE and local services) and academic labor (as graduate student researchers and teaching assistants) while studying as *temporary* residents (Coustere et al., 2023). Second, IS who remain in their country of study after graduation (henceforth described as student-migrants) must transition through multiple migration statuses—typically holding study permits, then work permits, before becoming eligible for PR. *Edugration* thus allows states to test student-migrants' outcomes not just in local labor markets but HE systems as well. Throughout this *three*-step immigration process, student-migrants endure extended periods of temporariness and precarity while competing to qualify for PR (Brunner, 2022a; Rajkumar et al., 2012).

As *edugration* expands (OECD, 2022), traditional settlement and integration paradigms are being destabilized (Robertson, 2013). Several papers in the *Journal of International Migration and Integration* have addressed these complexities, highlighting the role HE institutions now play in settlement and integration service delivery (Flynn & Bauder, 2015; Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023; Suter & Jandl, 2008; Walton-Roberts, 2011) as well as exploitation risks student-migrants face (Lamb & Banerjee, 2022). We extend this conversation by asking how *edugration's* unique three-step structure impacts experiences of settlement and integration by considering "the relation between social identities and the experiential

reality of temporariness" (Akbar, 2022b, p. 15). Because such experiences are not typically central to discussions of temporary migration (Robertson, 2013), we employ collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to examine the lived experiences of student-migrants in Canada. In this way, we respond to a need to hear from IS as thinkers, rather than simply as subjects (Lipura, 2021).

We begin by situating *edugration* within the context of two-step migration systems. We then map the genealogy of settlement and integration, focusing on critical theorizations which inform our study. After contextualizing student-migrant settlement and integration in Canada, we present our study.

Edugration as an Extension of Two-Step Migration

Post-WWII, immigrant-dependent countries largely selected economic immigrants from abroad. However, countries such as Australia and Canada increasingly came to rely on two-step migration in which employers recruit *workers* from abroad, creating a domestic pool from which states select only top labor market performers to remain as immigrants (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019). In Canada, for example, the number of economic immigrants with Canadian work experience rose from 8% in 2000 to 46% in 2018 (Crossman et al., 2020) and now comprises the majority of new economic immigrants (Nakache et al., 2022).

Despite the purported benefits of reducing "brain waste," or the underemployment of immigrants selected from abroad (Karki, 2020; Mattoo et al., 2008), many have identified ethical issues in two-step migration, which is "crafted by state desires for the flexible accumulation of labor [and] create staggered pathways to belonging and gradations of citizenship" (Robertson, 2013, pp. 159–160). Worker exploitation due to differential rights and increased reliance on employer support for transition to PR is widely acknowledged (e.g., Australia Education and Employment References Committee, 2016; Crossman et al., 2020; Rajkumar et al., 2012), and the extended periods of precarious and probationary status inherent in two-step migration have additional impacts as migrants navigate "chutes and ladders" while "on trial" to prove their worthiness to the state (Dauvergne, 2016; Ellermann & Gorokhovskaia, 2019; Goldring & Landolt, 2012; Rajkumar et al., 2012). Settlement and integration are privatized as a privilege to be earned (Nakache et al., 2022; Somers, 2008), since temporary residents are denied access to many state-funded settlement and integration services (Nakache & Dixon-Perera, 2015). Additionally, two-step policies bifurcate economic immigration systems, offering disparate pathways for those who are positioned as *permanently* temporary versus those who are *temporarily* temporary (Akbar, 2022b; Rajkumar et al., 2012).

As previously mentioned, *edugration* is an extension of two-step migration. Its *three*-step filtering process involves elongated periods of precarity, in which (1) HE institutions, alongside the state, recruit IS; (2) a portion of graduates go on to obtain open work permits; and (3) a smaller portion remain as PRs (Brunner, 2022a; Robertson, 2013). Mirroring the rapid rise in two-step migration, *edugration* has grown significantly in Canada. In 2000, only 6% of new economic immigrants had previous Canadian study experience; by 2019, this had risen to 38% (Crossman

et al., 2022). There is a need to examine (1) the ethics of *edugration* globally (Brunner, 2022a) and in Canada specifically (Brunner, 2022b); (2) the impacts of temporariness on student-migrants' vulnerability and anxieties (Belkhodja & Esses, 2013); and (3) the ways *edugration* impacts experiences and understandings of settlement and integration, given the lack of micro-level data about individual student-migrants (Chevalier, 2022). However, the study of settlement and integration is a troubled subfield, as we discuss in the following section.

The Trouble with "Settlement" and "Integration"

In migration contexts, the literature on settlement and integration encompasses many terms, each with their own genealogies. The foundational conception of assimilation, alongside adaptation, acculturation, and insertion, was seen as a unilateral process (Gordon, 1964) in contrast to integration, which attempted to describe a two-way process between both newcomers and the 'host' society (Berry, 1980, 2006). Settlement, on the other hand, is used in Canada to refer to:

> the *preliminary* steps in the integration process in which the initial needs of immigrants are met in domains such as housing, school registration for immigrant children, initiation of language training for adults, accessing mainstream services, and gaining a basic understanding of rights and responsibilities. (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018, p. 3, emphasis added)

In practice, however, integration is often "used loosely to refer to the process of immigrant settlement" (Li, 2003, p. 13). And while settlement is sometimes operationalized as a more neutral term when compared to integration, both have become normative euphemisms for assimilation, as have other terms such as inclusion, incorporation, and accommodation (Favell, 2019; Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Houtkamp, 2015; Kostakopoulou, 2010). Whether explicitly or implicitly, all presume the existence of a separate society for a newcomer to join "into" (Castles et al., 2002).

Take Alba and Foner's definition of integration as "the processes that increase the opportunities of immigrants and their descendants to obtain the valued 'stuff' of a society, as well as social acceptance, through participation in major institutions," with "full integration" implying "parity of life chances with members of the native majority group and being recognized as a legitimate part of the national community" (Alba & Foner, 2015, p. 17). In using "native majority" in reference to "later-generation Americans or Canadians of European descent" in North America and "those with long-established ancestry" in Europe (p. 17), Alba and Foner not only make a clear demarcation between "us" and "them" but also erase North America's history of settler colonialism (see Brunner, 2023). Alba and Foner's definition is additionally problematic in its neoliberal focus on opportunities for social mobility (Kunz, 2022).

Many definitions suffer from similar limitations, such as the Canadian government's definition of integration as the "ability to contribute, free of barriers, to

every dimension of Canadian life - economic, social, cultural, and political" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, as cited in Kaushik & Drolet, 2018, p. 3) in which "Canadian life" is left undefined. Others rely on tidy separations between "permanent" and "temporary" migrants or the assumption that IS "will eventually leave" (Berry, 2006, p. 30)—both which fail to reflect the complex reality of multi-step migration systems such as *edugration*.

Integration is also conceptually undertheorized and inconsistently deployed (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Klarenbeek, 2021; Li, 2003; Schinkel, 2018), with settlement even more so. Some suggest alternative terms focusing on "the process of granting citizenship rights and social entitlements to newcomers and allowing them to exercise their rights, including the right and legitimacy to challenge the status quo" (Li, 2003, p. 12). Others argue that the very attempt to measure integration is a (neo)colonial process in that it "assume[s] that migrants have not really arrived [and] are not yet 'members of society'" (Schinkel, 2018, p. 15) and disregards Indigenous sovereignty and nations, falling into a larger trap of methodological nationalism (Villegas et al., 2020).

Scholarship which makes "immigrant integration discourse the *object of analysis* – rather than operationalizing integration *as analytical tool*" (Kunz, 2022, p. 1986) can offer more critical perspectives on settlement and integration. Hadj Abdou (2019) suggested a focus on integration as a governance technique, while Klarenbeek (2021) offered three potential shifts for researchers: (1) an ontological shift focusing on power relations; (2) a methodological shift which asks different types of questions and is open to complexity, intersectionality, and heterogeneity; and (3) a vocabulary shift which moves away from phrases such as the "integration of migrants" to instead consider relationships between outsiders and insiders. Kunz additionally suggested "interrogating 'integration' from the privileged margins of the migratory spectrum" (2022, p. 1987) as well as "centring the voices of those positioned as in need of integration" in order to improve understandings "not only of (being subjected to) integration, but also of the power relations and structural inequalities that integration discourses side-line, obscure, or even reproduce" (p. 1900).

Although this paper is constrained by methodological nationalism in its examination of Canada and offers limited engagement with Canada's settler-colonial past/present, we nonetheless position our work within more critical conceptualizations of what we call henceforth as "settlement and integration." Our interest is not whether student-migrants are sufficiently integrated or settled through the eyes of the state, nor understanding "acculturation strategies" (Berry, 2006), but rather in examining the experiential impacts of an *edugration* system premised on the notion that IS are desired *because* their settlement and integration "needs" are presumed to be limited. In other words, we focus not on the *process of acculturation* but on the *experience of being positioned as subjects to be acculturated*. Because we see integration as a policy discourse to be "negotiated, challenged, translated, and possibly re-signified by those supposedly in need of integration themselves" (Kunz, 2022, p. 1913-1914), we seek to understand student-migrants' *experience of* integration policies. Next, we provide a brief overview of such policies in the Canadian context.

International Student-Migrant Settlement and Integration in Canada

IS in Canada are a heterogeneous group (El Masri & Khan, 2022; Nakache et al., 2022). However, as a general trend, interest in transitioning to PR status after graduation is high among prospective IS. Although these intentions drop after arriving in Canada (Esses et al., 2018), in recent years, approximately a third of international undergraduate students and half of graduate students became PRs within 10 years of obtaining their first study permit (Choi et al., 2021). Like many temporary foreign workers in two-step migration contexts, IS' long-term intentions to stay are often unfixed upon arrival to Canada (Nakache & Dixon-Perera, 2015), and their decision-making unfolds gradually over time, influenced by "contextual factors (e.g., career prospects, employment opportunities, family obligation, and immigration status)" encountered in Canada (Netierman et al., 2022, p. 55). In particular, unanticipated negative experiences "such as difficulties with obtaining PR status, lack of employment opportunities, or experiences of racism and discrimination" shape decision-making (Netierman et al., 2022, p. 56; Dam et al., 2018; Niraula & Triandafyllidou, 2022). Student-migrant experiences are further complexified by the experiences of accompanying family members (who are often excluded from settlement and integration services), and decisions to remain are interconnected with larger family systems spanning international borders (Ge & Durst, 2022).

Conceptually, scholars have asked whether, given *edugration's* multi-step process, student-migrants' settlement and integration process begins during studies (while students) or after graduation (while temporary foreign workers) (Belkhodja & Esses, 2013). More than an issue of semantics, this question has policy implications, as IS are ineligible for many formal government-funded settlement and integration services—a fact which may hinder their economic outcomes (Akbar, 2022a; Belkhodja & Esses, 2013; Dauwer, 2018; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Scott et al., 2015). Support services offered by HE institutions vary by institution type, size, and location and are poorly integrated with community supports (Calder et al., 2016; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Reichert, 2020; Smith et al., 2013). Overall, research suggests neither HE nor government supports adequately meet student-migrant needs (Akbar, 2022a; Dauwer, 2018; Shokirova et al., 2022). However, there is disagreement over who, beyond student-migrants themselves, holds responsibility for their outcomes (Calder et al., 2016), let alone what those outcomes should be.

The lack of coordinated settlement and integration support for IS has become a major issue in Canada (Lamb & Banerjee, 2022; Nakache et al., 2022). This is despite over a decade of calls for "comprehensive settlement services and supports for IS to facilitate a smooth transition towards their full integration and participation in Canadian society" (Gates-Gasse, 2012, p. 272), re-evaluations of existing service delivery models (Belkhodja & Esses, 2013), and better coordination, both within HE institutions (Reichert, 2020) and between the HE and settlement sectors (Akbar, 2022a, 2022b; El Masri & Khan, 2022). The Canadian government is currently experimenting with options to incentivize HE institutions' role in the settlement

and integration of IS (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023). Meanwhile, in-depth studies on student-migrants' *edugration* experiences remain limited.

Methodology

Our study is informed by the philosophical underpinnings of participatory research, emphasizing mutual learning, collaboration, and the co-creation of knowledge (Kindon et al., 2007). Through this lens, we employed CAE to engage in a collective process of self-reflection and narrative co-construction. CAE expands on autoethnographic research, combining autobiographical self-reflection and ethnographic investigation to understand phenomena through the experiences of multiple researcher-participants. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of autoethnography, then CAE.

Autoethnography values personal experiences as important sources of knowledge and insights into broader socio-politico and cultural human experiences (Ellis & Adams, 2014), positioning them as sources of primary data from which a social phenomenon can be conceptualized (Chang, 2013; Prasad, 2019). Situated within a social constructionist framework, autoethnography does not accept that knowledge is objective or that researchers should be value-free and detached (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). It also recognizes that identities are constructed and reconstructed through ongoing interactions between lived experience, social structures, and subjective processes (Thurston & Beynon, 1995), enabling researchers to fill knowledge gaps about everyday experiences not easily captured through other methods (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography is both a process and a product of research in which the narration of personal experience is centered and used for analysis (Chang, 2013; Shokirova et al., 2022). More than just relaying personal narratives, autoethnography involves a systematic research process, including research question identification, data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing.

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) allows co-researchers to engage with multidimensional perspectives through a richer, "more rigorous [and] polyvocal" approach to autoethnography in which self and collective analyses are combined (Lapadat, 2017, p. 598; Chang et al., 2013; Toyosaki et al., 2009). Like autoethnography, CAE takes a systematic approach. While it can usefully allow for "(1) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (2) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (3) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (4) deeper learning about self and other; and (5) community building," it also presents challenges regarding logistics, interdependency, trustworthiness, and vulnerability (Chang et al., 2013, p. 25). The complexity of multiple voices requires substantial time to negotiate differing perspectives and arrive at consensus (Chang, 2013). Still, this process can also be CAE's strength. Building on the metaphor of the research encounter as dance (Razon & Ross, 2012; Ryan, 2015), CAE encourages a "reflexive focus on rhythms and re-positioning" as researcher-participants move dynamically through the study in relation to each other, enabling an appreciation of "how various facets of identities move in and out of

focus" (Ryan, 2015, n.p.). CAE thus aligns with intersectional approaches seeking to understand how different, yet interlocking, systems of oppression and privilege interact (Crenshaw, 1989; Ge & Durst, 2022; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Karki, 2016; Ryan, 2015). Through self-reflexivity and an ongoing examination of assumptions, CAE "sharpens [researcher-participants'] collective interpretation of multiple perspectives and keeps everyone accountable for the process and product" (Chang, 2013, p. 112).

Study Initiation

We five co-authors met as members of a national Canadian settlement and integration research committee for early-career scholars. Because we all came to Canada as international graduate students to study migration and are now (or plan to become) Canadian PRs, we organically discussed our student-migrant journeys during committee meetings. We learned that we embody diverse ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, and gender identities. We grew up in France, Iran, Nepal, Tajikistan, and the USA, and now work in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan within the disciplines of education, geography, social work, and sociology. As our conversations about *edugration* became increasingly compelling—particularly regarding our shared experience of conflicted feelings as student-migrants, despite our diverse positionalities—we embarked on a year-long CAE process to systematically examine dimensions of IS' experiences (see Coustere et al., 2023; Shokirova et al., 2022).

As migration scholars, we had already engaged in intuitive reflection about our own individual lived experiences as student-migrants. CAE presented a unique opportunity to more deeply analyze those reflections in relation to, and in community with, others who were similarly invested in the topic personally and academically. Despite these benefits, our academic expertise in migration inevitably influenced our interpretation of the data. Two of us are now Assistant Professors, one is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, and two are PhD candidates.

We selected CAE for its alignment with calls for "a more concerted engagement with temporality and the dynamism of migrant agency" (Brotherhood, 2019, p. 38), which, in the context of IS, benefits from (1) "in-depth ethnographic research on mobile students who recognize their multiple roles in knowledge diffusion and social reproduction" (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 127); (2) viewing student migration as a process, not an event (Carlson, 2013); and (3) bringing the human face of student-migration into focus (Favell et al., 2007). CAE also follows Klarenbeek (2021) suggestion to engage with methodological approaches highlighting the complexities, intersectionalities, and heterogeneities inherent to migration. Through CAE, we sought to explore the tensions and incongruencies we personally felt in relation to existing conceptualizations of student-migrant settlement and integration.

Research Question, Data Collection, and Analysis/Interpretation

We structured our research process into five nonlinear stages: research question formation, preliminary data collection, subsequent data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. First, during bi-weekly virtual meetings, we engaged in critical discussions related to IS settlement and integration in Canada. This generated several possible research questions, from which we co-selected one: *How did we, as student-migrants, experience the settlement and integration process?* Our primary aim was to examine what, if any, commonalities emerged among our diverse experiences.

For our preliminary data collection, we each independently wrote a personal narrative answering our research question. To allow for open interpretation, there were no predetermined parameters regarding the length, structure, scope, or depth of the narratives. Our narratives ranged from ~1500 to ~2500 words. We also collected subsequent personal memory data by mapping the formal settlement and integration-related services we accessed. See Table 1 for a simplified, anonymized version of this data.

Next, we organized the data in a shared online folder, reviewed the data, and independently identified the most salient emerging themes using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) through a manual process of familiarization, coding, theme generation, and theme review/development. We then shared these themes with each other. Through a schedule of weekly virtual meetings supplemented by asynchronous communication, we identified alignments and divergences among our individual thematic analyses and engaged in a collective theme review/development process. This required extensive discussion to (1) identify the commonalities of our experience as student-migrants (as opposed to our experience as, for example, students, migrants, spouses, or racialized newcomers), and (2) how to interpret and represent our experiences collectively beyond a "patchwork of stories" (Chang et al., 2013). As a result, we refocused our thematic categorizations on our experiences of the *overall* settlement and integration process, rather than delineating themes based on *individual elements* of the process, e.g., housing or language.

We continued to collectively discuss, revise, and refine our themes, allowing for concurrent data analysis and interpretation (Chang et al., 2013) while also endeavouring to practice "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al., 2015). Despite difficulties due to time and geographical constraints, our ongoing communication developed familiarity and trust, which revealed additional conservational and interactive data and gradually produced a finalized analysis and interpretation. In this way, our research incorporated multivocality and crystallization (Tracy, 2010) and was more iterative than linear (Chang et al., 2013). Lastly, we engaged in a report-writing phase in which we identified illustrative quotes and wove our CAE together.

Results

Overall, we five researcher-participants shared similar interpretations of the meaning of "the settlement and integration process"—that is, the process of overcoming material/logistical barriers in Canada, intertwined with the development of a sense

Table 1 Researcher-participants' utilization of formal settlement and integration-related services within (1) higher education (HE) institutions, and (2) community-based settlement agencies

	Career support		Immigration support		Logistical support		Language support	
	HE	Community	HE	Community	HE	Community	HE	Community
Author A	- Resume - Job search - Internship placement		- Study permit extension - Post-graduation work permit		IS orientation			
Author B	Resume and cover letter	Job search		PR application (sought, but too expensive)	On-campus housing (sought, but not available to students with spouses)	Off-campus housing		Language classes for spouse
Author C	On-campus work search				On-campus housing support (sought, but not available to students with spouses)		- Language classes - Academic writing classes	
Author D	- Resume and cover letter - Job search			- PR application (sought, but unsuccessful) - Job search for spouse (sought, but not available to spouses)	- IS orientation - Health insurance (for self and spouse)	Housing	Academic writing classes (sought, but not available)	
Author E			PR pathways	PR application (sought, but too expensive)		Health insurance		Language classes for spouse

of belonging. We also shared dissatisfaction with the settlement and integration supports available to IS. Notably, our dissatisfaction varied significantly based on our individual situations and identity positions. Our data reflected a range of personalities, values, and migration goals; we studied in different regions, at different higher education institutions, and under different circumstances, all of which impacted our unique experiences of settlement and integration. However, two significant differentiating factors stood out: whether we (1) had a spouse and/or children, and (2) were racialized.

Key to our CAE is understanding that there is no single, simple story of student-migrant settlement and integration; we do not attempt to tell it. In the remainder of this section, we instead offer the collectively agreed-upon commonalities CAE revealed across our diverse settlement and integration experiences: (1) *unfamiliarities*, (2) *uncertainties*, and (3) *ambivalent long-term intentions*.

Theme 1: Unfamiliarities

The first theme we identified was the experience of *unfamiliarity* with new social contexts. As expected, factors such as our English/French language abilities and previous experience living in the Global North significantly impacted the degree of this unfamiliarity. While the experience of unfamiliarity is well-documented in the context of international migration, ours was complexified as student-migrants because it occurred (1) within the sub-context of an additionally unfamiliar HE system, and (2) during a crucial point in our career development and life-course.

We experienced dual pressures to quickly understand, and adjust to, new academic systems while *also* navigating unfamiliar systems of daily life. We faced (uneven) challenges adjusting to Canadian curricula, teaching styles, technology, and professor-student relationships, in addition to housing, transportation, finance, healthcare, immigration, and employment systems. The level of unfamiliarity we faced was unexpected; we all underestimated the difficulty of adjusting to life and studies in Canada given our relatively high socio-economic status in previous contexts.

For instance, multiple co-authors with spouses were ineligible for on-campus housing, and two struggled to find housing near campus. Protracted housing searches, in addition to study permit processing delays, interfered with our ability to attend our HE institutions' orientations. While securing affordable housing is not a challenge unique to international students in Canada, our temporary immigration status compounded the difficulty. One co-author expressed a challenge all five of us encountered:

> I made every effort to find suitable housing, but landlords asked for my Canadian credit history. How could I have Canadian credit history within a week?

Due to our unfamiliarity with cultural norms and Canadian systems, our limited local social networks, and the pressures of beginning a graduate degree immediately upon arrival to Canada, such stumbling blocks caused stress and anxiety. As a

result, feelings of diminished confidence framed our initial settlement and integration experiences.

While previous findings also demonstrated IS' challenges with, for example, housing discrimination (Calder et al., 2016), we found that both racism and neoracism (Lee & Rice, 2007) shaped such hurdles, impacting us differentially. For example, those of us who were White and native English-speaking (in British Columbia) or French-speaking (in Quebec) were not assumed to be "international" and, as a result, benefitted from associated privileges. One white co-author shared:

> As I was checking a potential apartment, the landlord said I would like the building because the other occupants were people 'like me.' When I asked what she meant, she said, 'Canadians, people from here,' and went on to list the specific nationalities to whom she did not rent – even though the landlord herself was a racialized immigrant.

This experience contrasts with the experiences of the racialized co-authors, one of whom relied on the support of a white Canadian guarantor to secure housing.

We also experienced difficulties, again to different degrees, finding jobs commensurate with our credentials both during and after our studies. Our previous international degrees and work experiences were devalued in the Canadian job market, aligning with findings that "prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviour" by Canadian employers is a "primary obstacle" faced by IS in the Canadian labor market (Scott et al., 2015, p. 8). As one co-author who arrived with multiple graduate degrees and over a decade of professional experience noted:

> I applied for many jobs at numerous agencies and institutions, including immigration settlement agencies, social services organizations, colleges, and research institutions. Only three agencies called for an interview, but none offered a job…I never imagined that my professional career would end up working at grocery stores and gas stations.

We were unfamiliar with both the Canadian labor market and strategies to overcome obstacles. The lack of newcomer-specific career support within our HE institutions made our overall immigration process more challenging, given the importance of skilled work experience to our immigration goals.

Relatedly, as Chira (2013) also found, we were confused, discouraged, and frustrated by the complexity and volatility of Canada's immigration processes. Several of us paid for private immigration advice in order to access crucial information we expected, yet did not receive, from our universities.

Despite the presence of IS support offices in our universities, the quality and scope of their services varied significantly, and they were often not aware of, or connected with, community-based supports. In retrospect, some of us felt we would have benefitted from earlier connections with ethnic social networks, which we overlooked due to our identification with our university community as our primary social network. We eventually found support from other sources such as social media, faith-based organizations, ethnic associations, friends, and relatives. Although

we were grateful for these informal connections, the advice (particularly regarding immigration) was not always accurate, and it was difficult to know who to trust.

In general, we felt that overcoming our unfamiliarities was something we needed to do independently. One co-author noted:

Most of the time, I felt alone, neglected, unsupported.

Another shared:

It felt like we were thrown into the water without a life jacket. It was a 'swim or sink' situation.

We acknowledged our overall privilege in comparison with other migrant groups and recognized that our "sink or swim" situation was common among many temporary residents. However, contrary to the belief that our HE institutions provided such supports, or that IS did not need such supports, we felt like we "fell through the cracks." Similar to the findings of Kang (2020) and Cox (2014), we experienced a lack of sufficient information and support systems and viewed formal institutional supports as ultimately insufficient.

Theme 2: Uncertainties

As the previous theme showed, we struggled with unfamiliarities, which we experienced differently based on our social positions. These unfamiliarities were exacerbated by societal, structural, and institutional factors, particularly a lack of settlement and integration supports. While our experiences of unfamiliarity impacted our overall well-being and academic trajectories to varying extents, we were all ultimately able to overcome these unfamiliarities through information-seeking and/or coping strategies (Dauwer, 2018; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Yoon & Chung, 2017). While this is not the case for all IS, we five have fortunately been relatively successful in achieving our goals.

This contrasts with theme 2, which pertains to *uncertainties* about our life prospects in Canada—specifically, uncertain labor market success and unclear PR pathways. These uncertainties were produced by factors which were out of our control; unlike unfamiliarities, they could *not* be tackled through information-seeking or coping strategies. While these uncertainties were impacted by our unfamiliarities, they were primarily related to *edugration's* structural uncertainty and extended temporariness. We were uncertain about our ability to remain in Canada, which impacted every step of our settlement and integration trajectory. All migrants in multi-step immigration systems experience uncertainties to some extent as they are tested in their respective labor markets; here, we stress the experience of *extended* uncertainty due to *edugration's* three-step structure, in that we spent a prolonged period of time as students before even entering the labor market.

We knew upon arrival that we, as IS, were positioned by the Canadian government as attractive potential immigrants because of our human and economic capital. We interpreted this messaging as both validating and dehumanizing, while also

questioning why we did not feel desired as such. We experienced our temporary immigration status as an indentured period of time as we scrambled to accumulate "points" while waiting to find out if we would be "invited" to apply for PR. We knew this invitation might not ever come, and that knowledge cast a long shadow on our futures, making it difficult to plan long-term.

The rights denied to us as temporary residents were felt on a daily basis. Despite living, working, and studying for years in Canada, we could not vote and did not know when, if ever, we would have a say in our governance; we were also excluded from important opportunities such as most research funding. As one co-author recalled:

> IS like me witness the socio-economic progress of their peers who are not on a temporary immigration status. Their PR or citizenship helps them access research funding and employment in full-time professional jobs, even while they are students. It is so different for us.

Our off-campus work restriction (which was limited to 20 hours per week at the time of the study) felt arbitrary, yet also like a major barrier in a competitive labor market. This made us uncertain about our future careers in Canada.

For those of us who were racialized and came from non-Western cultural backgrounds, we also had many questions about whether we could succeed within Eurocentric values, traditions, and institutions, which reproduced many disadvantages and inequalities in our eyes. Yet even those co-authors who came from the US and France experienced some discrimination based on their temporary resident status. We felt an acute disjunction between dominant society ("us") and IS ("them"), which was a difficult affective experience; this subsequently gave us pause when it came to our settlement and integration goals. As a co-author shared:

> To be both wanted (as labour) and distained (as an Other) was exhausting as a temporary resident. It wasn't just that I didn't know if I would ever be able to stay in Canada permanently; it was also the constant uncertainty of whether I would experience an embrace or a refusal from one person to the other and from one moment to the next. I felt wanted in Canada, and yet I was not - or only under certain conditions. Was I needed in the labour market, or was I 'taking' a job from a more deserving Canadian? At the same time, I recognized that I was attempting to settle in a problematic settler-colonial context. It was disorienting to my sense of self.

Our uncertainties about our ability to forge a future within the dominant Canadian society, and our place within a settler-colonial context, resulted in an extended period of *dis*orientation.

Theme 3: Ambivalent Long-Term Intentions

The third theme we identified in our narratives was our *ambivalent long-term intentions* to stay permanently in Canada. Upon beginning our studies in Canada, one of

us had concrete plans to immigrate to Canada through *edugration*; two of us planned to eventually immigrate somewhere after graduation but were not sure to which country; and two of us had no intentions to immigrate. However, the unfamiliarities and uncertainties discussed in the previous sections impacted our ambitions in different ways. As in theme 1, our experience with ambivalence varied based on our social locations, yet it was a clear theme in all our journeys.

We felt the sense of "being tested" by Canada throughout our temporary status, an experience common to most in two-step migration systems. Yet our narratives also demonstrated that we were simultaneously "testing" Canada, and our ambivalence partially came from these mutual and concurrent testing processes. We had so many unfamiliarities and uncertainties that it was impossible for us to fully "begin" the settlement and integration process someone with PR might undergo upon arrival.

Some of us felt rejected and sad about our futures in Canada. This was particularly true for those who experienced racialization; one co-author described their experience as:

> …knocking on a closed door, but learning it was perhaps not my door, and wondering if I had to find another path.

At the same time, as graduate students experiencing major transformational life milestones in Canada—e.g., our first professional job or becoming a parent—we nonetheless felt our ties and relationships in Canada grow over time. As our roots deepened and we thought more about permanency, we had conflicting emotions. One of us shared:

> I started here with temporary intentions, but then felt roots and networks growing. If I left, would I have to start over? It was hard to tell what the world would look like, and I wanted to keep a foot here in Canada. Migrants can stay in the state of in-betweenness for decades - I've been a migrant for years. When my partner and I arrived here, we didn't think we would want to stay, but we knew that we probably didn't want to go back to our countries – so it's open.

Our long-term experiences with temporariness made all of us ambivalent, reminiscent of Sayad's (1999) concept of a double absence—i.e., feeling neither here (in Canada) nor there (in our home countries). Those of us with clear intentions to live long-term in a second country found ourselves questioning Canada, while the co-author who wanted to stay in Canada permanently from the start later had doubts.

Our ambivalence was further complexified by three relational factors. First, our transnational context as relatively young migrants in the early stages of our careers impacted our experiences and decisions. Although some of us eventually found satisfying jobs and felt *professionally* settled and integrated, four of us felt less, or more hesitant about becoming, *personally* settled and integrated, as our extended family members—particularly aging parents—were far away. Due to the extended temporariness, we felt unable to meet extended family responsibilities, particularly around parental sponsorship for which we did not yet qualify. As Lachman et al. (2015) argued, middle adulthood can be stressful while juggling

multiple responsibilities; additionally, lifecycle events, such as becoming parents, can impact settlement ambivalence (Bélanger et al., 2021). While this was reflected in our stories, it was particularly stark for those who were still students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Giving birth in isolation, for example, vividly demonstrated the importance of proximity to our extended family, which intensified our ambivalence about our future in Canada.

Second, our ambivalence was complexified by the experiences of our dependent family members—specifically their settlement and integration experiences, professional growth opportunities, and sense of belonging. As one co-author wrote:

> For my partner, it's still hard to accept that we are settling; they feel it's temporary, but it's a 'long temporary.' So our future is really unclear.

Our ambivalence intensified if our family members had limited opportunities or struggled with language proficiency, finding a professional job, or feeling excluded; if they were not keen to stay in Canada, our ambitions were also dampened.

Third, our own sense of belonging contributed to ambivalence. Despite our privilege of being "temporarily temporary," we faced complex emotional experiences due to the conditional desirability faced by IS in Canada (Stein & Andreotti, 2016), which we internalized. Just as Ahmed (2012) showed how HE's "institutional whiteness" means that diversity efforts reproduce structural racism, even if unintentionally or unconsciously, we felt the mismatch between Canada's rhetoric of multiculturalism and our lived experiences of exclusion, both in the country and more specifically within our universities. One of us plans to leave Canada due to the intensity of the racism and exclusion they continue to experience. As they shared:

> I read and heard so many great things about Canada - a country of milk and honey that celebrates diversity, equity, inclusivity, and multiculturalism…this was my understanding of Canada, and this is how Canada is projected internationally. But the reality became quite different to me. As an IS, I had to struggle a lot.

Our inclusion into both Canada and our HE institutions was conditioned based on our different social positionalities, such as gender, race, spoken accent, age, skin color, and nationality. Neo-racism impacted some of our labor market experiences vividly; for example, we knew Canadian employers valued Global North-based foreign work experience over that conducted in the Global South (Picot & Hou, 2023). However, despite our differences, all of us were emotionally impacted by competing discourses around IS and Canadian immigration.

Discussion

By focusing on "the lives of others in shared storytelling and conservation" (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013, p. 366), as well as our own lives, our thick descriptions and conceptual understandings offered insights into the settlement and integration experience of IS in Canada. We concur with Lipura (2021) that we, as IS, should

be seen as thinkers and agents (rather than merely subjects), which CAE allowed us to do. We found CAE to be an empowering method to contest dominant discourses (Acosta et al., 2015). Our findings counter prevailing generalizations about IS as a homogeneous group uniformly focused on obtaining PR. To the contrary, we found significant variability in our experiences as well as our evolving PR intentions.

As is the case with any CAE study, our findings are not generalizable to all IS. They reflect the experiences of a small subgroup of international graduate students studying in the social sciences at research-intensive Canadian universities. Additionally, our shared understanding of "settlement and integration," as well as our critiques of its associated supports, were likely influenced by our academic knowledge of the topic. Still, given our intimate familiarity with our study's data as researcher-participants, as well as our life-wide engagement with *edugration*, our study offered a nuanced and contextualized understanding of student-migrant settlement and integration.

Distinguishing between unfamiliarities, uncertainties, and ambivalences can be a useful new conceptualization when considering experiences of settlement and integration's governance, particularly in multi-step migration contexts (Karki & Moasun, 2023). Our findings suggest that *edugration* creates structural unfamiliarities, uncertainties, and ambivalences for IS. While unfamiliarities *can* be (yet are not necessarily) overcome, uncertainties often cannot, as they are directly produced by multi-step policies themselves. Additionally, focusing on ambivalence highlights how a lack of coordination between HE institutions, settlement and integration services, labor market opportunities, and immigration policies impact IS' experience of, and feelings about, permanent immigration.

Importantly, such unfamiliarities, uncertainties, and ambivalences are influenced by one's positionality, particularly the way one is racialized and experiences linguistic discrimination (Karki, 2020). While all of us felt some degree of unfamiliarity, uncertainty, and ambivalence, those of us who were not White and not native English and/or French speakers experienced more intense exclusion, pointing to the importance of intersectional approaches. This was made especially clear through the conservational and interactive data which emerged over time, in which experiences of racism and neo-racism were central to the experiences of three co-authors but not of two.

Our findings also suggest that the way settlement and integration is governed in multi-step migration systems produces a distinct temporal experience. Our unfamiliarities, uncertainties, and ambivalences prevented us from settling and integrating in a traditional sense. Even as local ties and roots emerged, the sense of ambivalence did not go away. This contradicts with settlement and integration in one-step migration contexts.

Our data suggests that multi-step migration systems create a settlement and integration paradox: migrants are expected to take responsibility for their settlement and integration, yet they often do not know how long they can, or if they want to, stay. This positions settlement and integration not only as a privatized good (Nakache et al., 2022; Somers, 2008) but also a risky investment (even though it is also a necessary step towards achieving PR). Supposedly temporarily-temporary

migrants are forced to self-manage, both emotionally and logistically, significant uncertainties about their futures for prolonged periods of time; those uncertainties develop into ambivalences over time based on the way one is included or excluded.

Those of us who did find a metaphorical door which was "ours" to open remained stuck in the threshold with only one foot inside, often for years—not only waiting to be let in, but also deciding whether it was the right door after all. We did not feel that we "became" settled or integrated; instead, our experience was more akin to waiting at a threshold and becoming less and less enchanted with the rhetorical promises of Canadian immigration—even as we saw the benefits of life in Canada. In this sense, the door remains ajar.

Conclusion

Despite the prevailing view that IS are "ideal immigrants" to recruit and retain due to their limited settlement and integration needs, their lived experiences of *edugration* have been mostly overlooked. Through CAE, we showed that Canada's multi-step *edugration* system asks student-migrants to undergo a unique and prolonged settlement and integration experience framed by unfamiliarity, uncertainty, and ambiguity which is experienced differentially based on multiple dimensions of identity.

On one hand, we support the growing calls for improved coordination of IS' settlement and integration supports. Funding, improving, expanding, and potentially mandating settlement and integration services offered by HE institutions, for example, would likely address the intensity of IS' unfamiliarities. In Canada, HE institutions' role as migration and settlement and integration actors in Canada is no longer in question (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023), and HE and the state both need to think through the ethical complexities this presents (Brunner, 2017, 2023). The state should also re-evaluate *edugration* policies which place the onus for such settlement and integration service provision on migrants and, to a lesser extent, HE institutions, despite decreasing public investment in HE. This relates to core questions about the role of HE in society and the responsibilities of immigrant-dependent countries towards migrants.

On the other hand, settlement and integration supports will only be a partial "solution" if uncertainty is a defining characteristic of the broader multi-step migration policy context. While unfamiliarity can be overcome, uncertainty—and, we argue, the subsequent ambiguity about the future—cannot be solved through service provision. It is instead something which the state actively produces in its strategy to most efficiently capture human and economic capital. Our paper talks back as subjects of these policies by sharing their impacts.

We also suggest that settlement and integration is a problematic frame more conceptually. At a time when the study of migration is only recently undergoing a much-needed self-reflection of its colonial roots (Mayblin & Turner, 2021), scholars and practitioners alike need to consider how the framing of strategic requests for material supports may unintentionally produce harm. One small step would be moving away from "assum[ing] that international students should conform to current university practices" and practices of so-called Canadian life more generally, and instead "help students understand the cultural and institutional foundations of

these practices" (Yao, 2015, p. 9). Another would be revaluating and dismantling the embedded power imbalances within those foundations.

Even IS themselves tend to locate critiques of immigration systems "within neoliberal economic discourse through the positioning of their value as economic subjects as evidence of their worth as political subjects" (Robertson, 2013, p. 133). While we understand this impulse, we resist the internalization of such logics. Instead, we conclude by critiquing the instrumentalization and objectification of student-migrants in *edugration* and encourage others to do the same.

Declarations

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