



RESEARCH BRIEF

The International Student Experience in Canada

June 2026

Overview

Canada's International Student Program plays a critical role in attracting and developing global talent, serving as a strategic driver that advances the country's economic priorities, cultural diversity, and long-term population growth. From K-12 and language training to colleges, polytechnics, and universities, Canada's education system draws high-calibre students from around the world by offering a world-class education, strong language development, and valuable work-integrated learning opportunities. In turn, international students enrich classrooms, enhance campus life, and contribute to the social, cultural, and economic vitality of communities across the country.

Many choose to remain in Canada after their studies, contributing alongside their Canadian peers to communities, workplaces, and innovation across the country. This includes sectors facing labour shortages or through entrepreneurship, often contributing to the regions where they studied. Others return to their home countries post-graduation, where their experiences in Canada can help foster lasting economic, academic, and people-to-people connections. Familiar with Canadian institutions, systems, and culture, they often serve as a bridge between Canada and their home countries, supporting ongoing collaboration, partnerships, and mutual understanding.

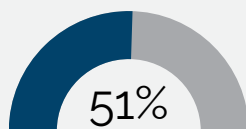
The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) conducts a biannual survey of current international students (ISS) in Canada. In 2025, CBIE paired the ISS with a survey of international alumni (IAS) who studied at Canadian post-secondary institutions. The data below provides a snapshot into the experiences and contributions of international students and graduates from Canadian institutions, highlighting opportunities for innovation and improvement to help ensure the international student program continues to sustainably attract the talent Canada needs.

Choosing Canada for its High-Quality Education

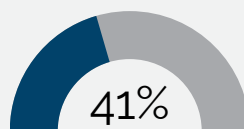
83% of current international students selected Canada as their top study destination, with most citing its globally respected education system as a primary factor, followed by internationally recognized credentials, post-graduation work opportunities, Canadian culture, and access to work permits or permanent residency.

The 2025 survey highlights a shift away from the values long associated with Canada's appeal, such as safety, stability, and a tolerant, non-discriminatory society. While these factors were core drivers in 2021, by 2025, they have been overtaken by more pragmatic considerations. Overall, this indicates an increasingly outcome-driven mindset, where students are increasingly prioritizing the long-term, global value of high-quality education and internationally recognized credentials over Canada-specific social or settlement advantages.

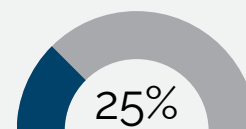
Top Reasons Students Choose Canada



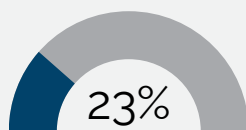
High-quality education



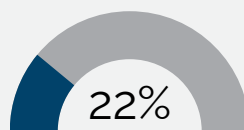
Internationally recognized credentials



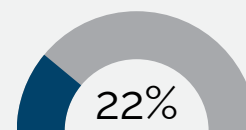
Post-graduate work



Safety, liberalism and multiculturalism



Access to work permits and premanent residency (PR)



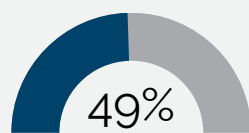
Research Opportunities



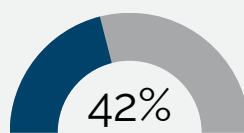
Choosing an Institution

Between 2023 and 2025, students' institution selection criteria reflect a shift toward more targeted and experience-driven decision-making. Core academic factors of program offerings (55% to 49%) and reputation (44% to 42%) remain dominant, while location dropped (48% to 41%). Work-integrated learning remained stable (31% to 32%). Notably, word-of-mouth increased significantly (from 20% to 29%), highlighting a growing reliance on peer networks and trusted experiences. The emergence of professor expertise (26%) as a key factor further points to a more academically sophisticated decision-making process, potentially reflecting a rise in graduate-level students who place greater importance on faculty specialization and research strength.

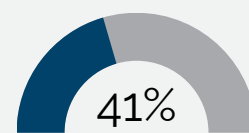
Top Reasons Students Choose Institutions



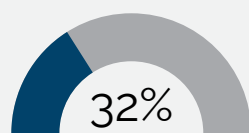
Program Offerings



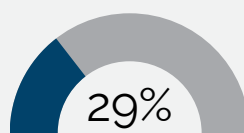
Reputation/Global
Rankings



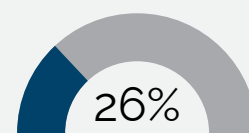
Location



Work-Integrated
Learning



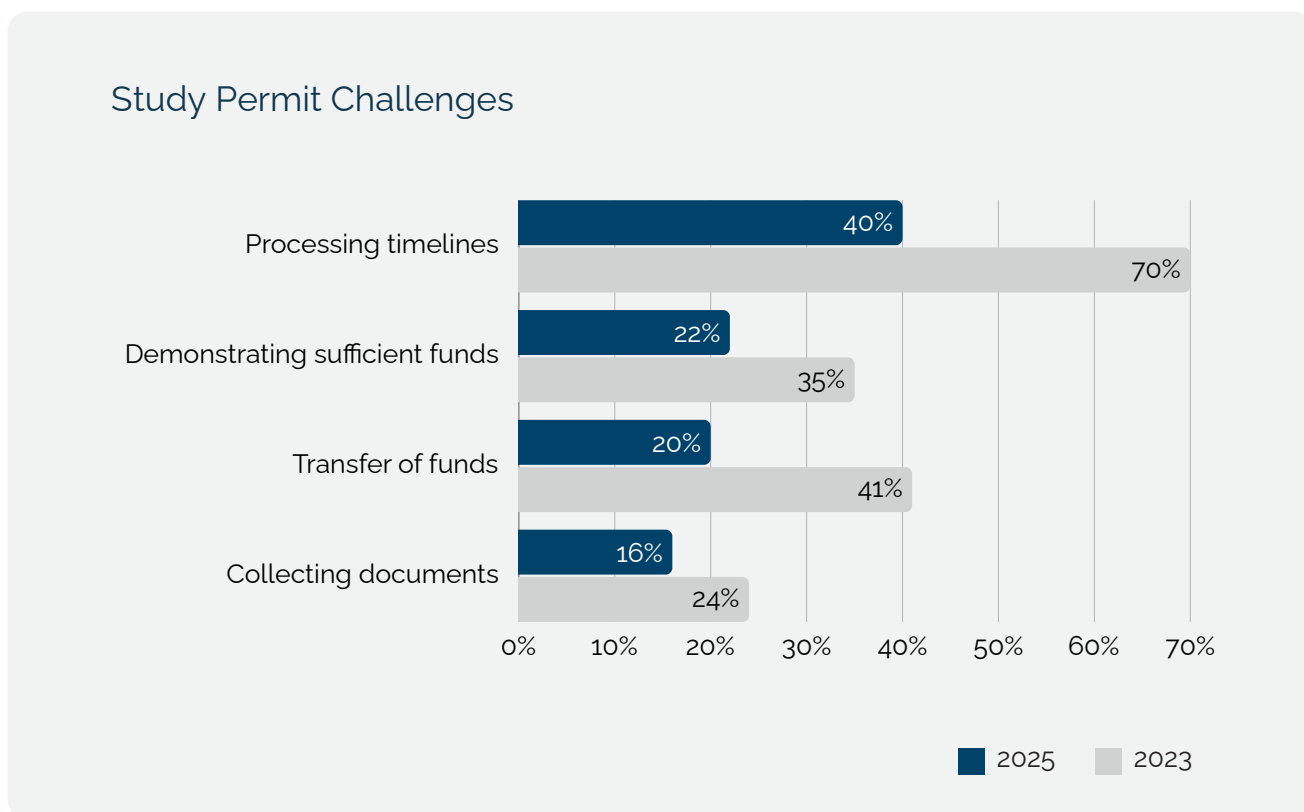
Word-of-Mouth



Professor Expertise

Experience with Canada's Immigration Ecosystem

Canada's immigration system and student visa application process can be cumbersome and slow compared to competitor countries. Since 2021, international students have consistently reported significant challenges with the process. While 2025 saw some improvements, slow processing remains a critical issue reported by 40% of students.



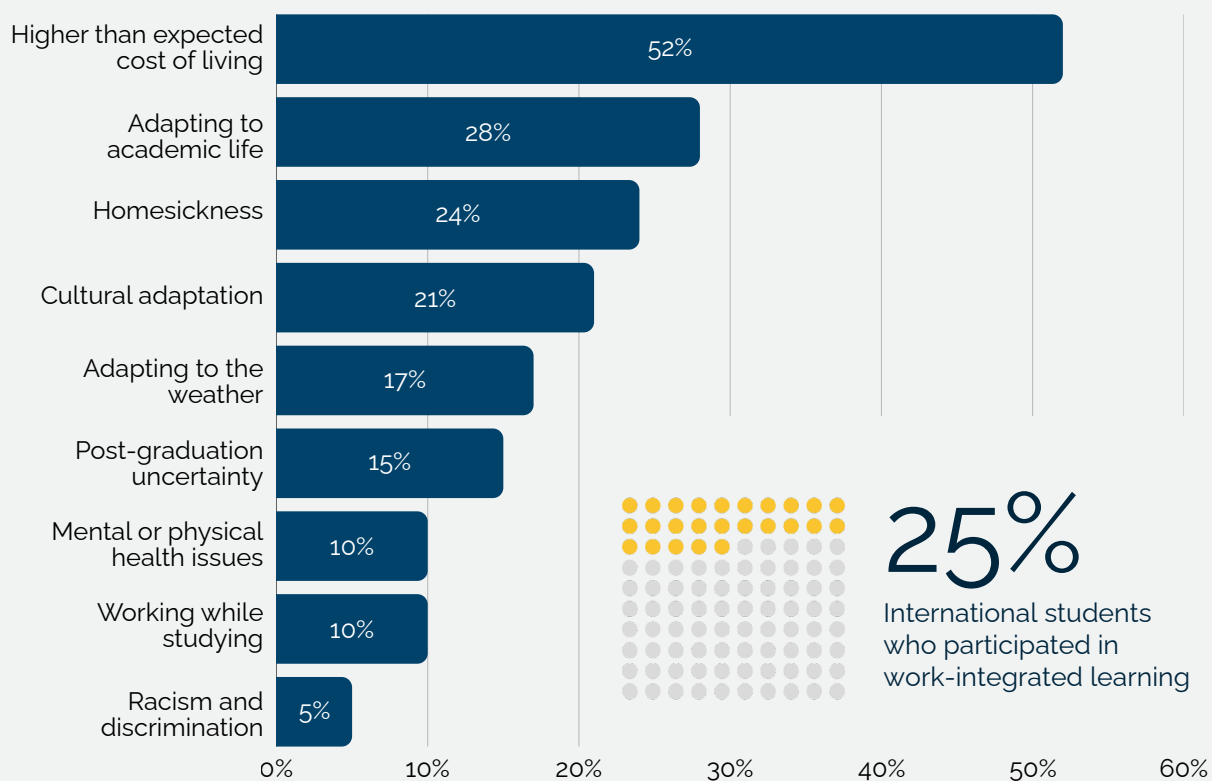
Current Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC) timelines estimate nine weeks to process study permits from students applying from within Canada, and processing timelines from those applying from outside of Canada range widely between source countries, with students applying from India and France taking four weeks, Philippines and Mexico five weeks, Australia, China and Saudi Arabia six weeks and Pakistan 15 weeks. In comparison, study permit processing takes about three weeks in the UK and 33 days in Australia.

International Student Experience in Canada

78% of international students indicated that their study experience in Canada is meeting their expectations, and 80% reported that Canada is an inclusive and welcoming country. The 2025 survey found that international students were generally very satisfied with institutional services and wraparound supports during their studies, with increases in satisfaction across almost every service category since the 2023 survey.

Like their Canadian peers, international students identified the high cost of living, including housing, as their biggest challenge throughout their studies, followed by adapting to academic life, homesickness and cultural adaptation. To help support themselves during their studies and gain hands-on work experience, international students are permitted to work up to 24 hours per week off campus and full-time during study breaks. 57% of international students surveyed indicated that they were working part-time during their studies. 25% of students participated in work-integrated learning. 90% of working international students reported that this income was required to support themselves.

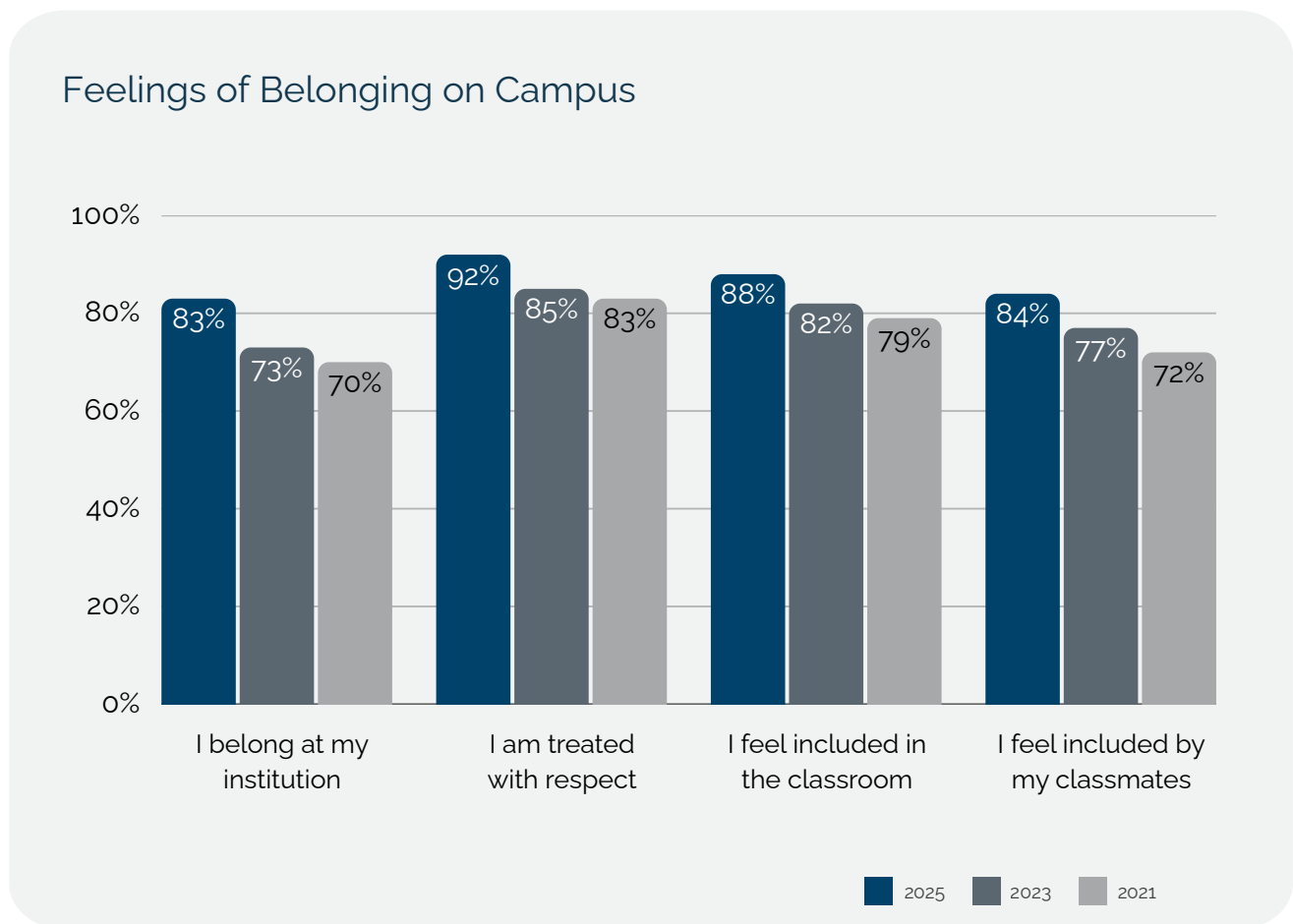
Biggest Challenges During Studies



Feelings of Belonging

Feelings of belonging are a helpful indicator for student success and well-being, and a data point of note when discussing retention should they choose to stay post-graduation.

The 2025 survey saw improvements in feelings of belonging on campus as well as broader off-campus communities. 63% of students reported feeling that they belong in the extended, off-campus community and 71% reported making friends and connections with Canadian students who do not share their cultural background. Students based in rural areas report slightly higher feelings of belonging compared to those in urban settings.



International Student Contributions Post-Studies

The 2025 ISA, which surveyed international alumni of Canadian institutions, found that international students were well prepared during their studies for the transition to the workforce. 80% reported that they were currently working. 81% reported that having Canadian credentials was valuable to accessing the labour market in Canada, while 68% indicated that they were valuable for accessing the labour market in their home country.



Choosing to Stay in Canada

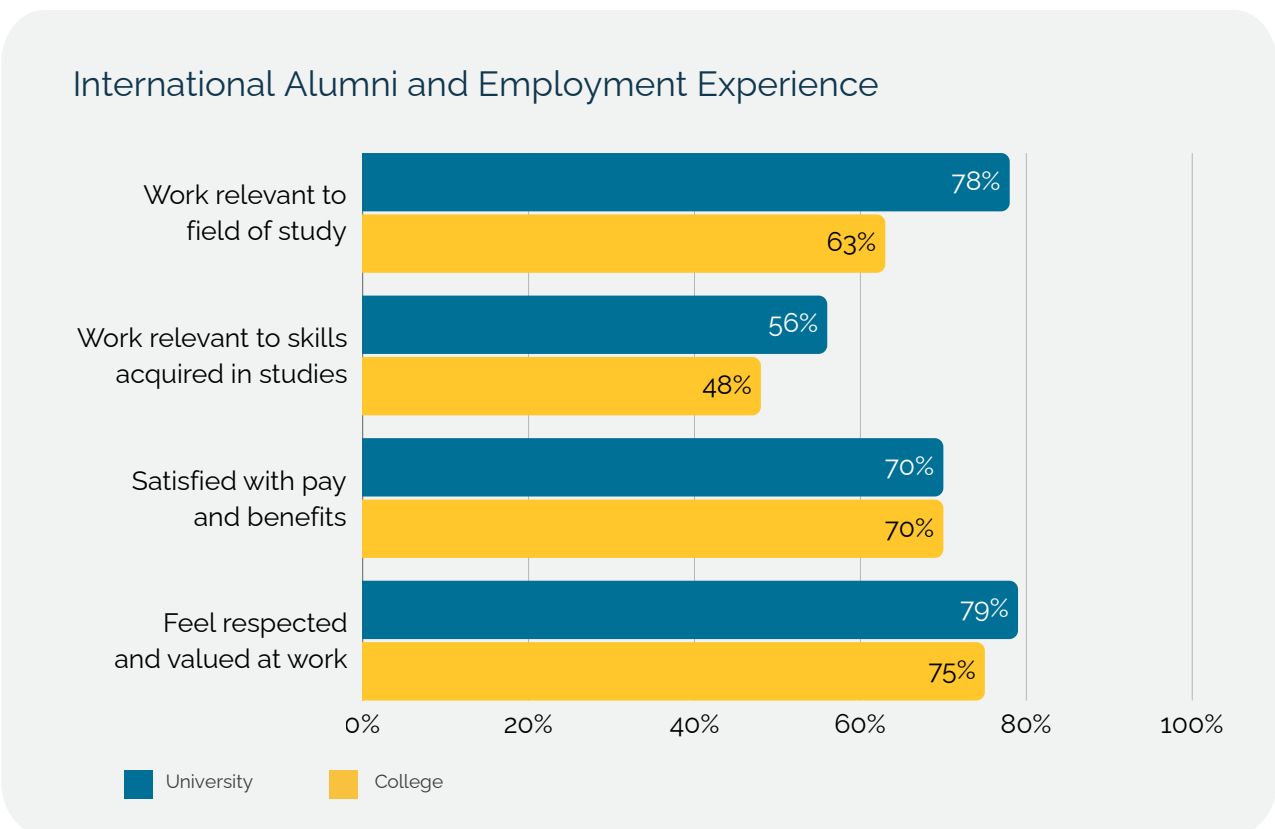
The 2025 alumni survey found a strong degree of consistency between alumni's post-graduation plans at the outset of their degree and at the end of their study program. At outset of their studies, 65% of alumni intended to find work in Canada post-graduation compared to 68% at the end of their degree. At the outset of their degree 9% intended to pursue their studies in Canada after graduation, compared to 8% at the end of their study program.

The top factors that influence alumni's decisions to stay in Canada were professional opportunities postgraduation (60%), Canada's multicultural and liberal culture (49%), its natural environment (42%), safety (41%) and ease of obtaining a Canadian work permit or permanent residence (29%). Alumni that chose to leave Canada after graduation did so because it was never their intention to stay (32%), for personal or familial reasons (27%), they did not find employment relevant to their studies (23%), or did not find a position that corresponds to their skills and experience (19%). This suggests that even when talent is available, a disconnect between training pathways and workforce demand can drive individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Working in Canada

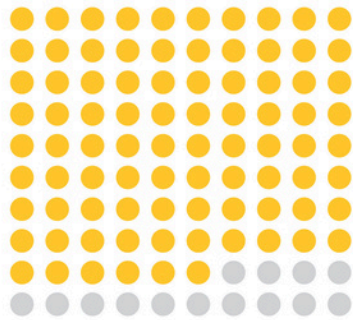
International alumni in Canada work in all types of industries across Canada's economy. One-quarter of respondents work for corporations, while almost 20% work for small and medium enterprises, 16% for multinational corporations, 13% for educational institutions, 10% for nonprofits, and 10% for government. Most respondents (70%) work in permanent positions, while 21% work on a contractual basis.

Overall, the survey data suggests that international alumni are successfully contributing to Canada's economy, with 85% reporting satisfaction with their employment and 70% indicating that their work is relevant to their field of study. 70% indicated that finding work post-studies was challenging; however, 69% of alumni reported finding a job within 6 months of graduation. The survey also found generally low awareness and uptake of the available institutional and community support services designed to help international students transition to the workforce or settle into their new communities.



Integration into Canadian Communities

In addition to the high level of satisfaction with their Canadian employment, international alumni also reported high levels of feelings of belonging and engagement in their Canadian communities. Over 86% felt that Canada was a welcoming and inclusive country. 40% of international alumni chose to give back to their Canadian communities through volunteerism, while others got involved by joining professional networks (37%), community or faith groups (36%), sports teams or 2SLGBTQIA+ groups (26%).



86%

International graduates reported that Canada was a welcoming and inclusive country.



Conclusion

Canada's International Student Program remains central to addressing the country's long-term economic, talent, and demographic challenges by attracting high-calibre students who can contribute meaningfully during and after their studies. The 2025 survey findings reinforce that international students and graduates largely view their Canadian experience positively, with strong satisfaction levels, strong employment outcomes, and meaningful engagement in communities across the country.

Emerging indicators suggest that student decision-making is becoming increasingly outcome-driven, rather than being guided primarily by values-based considerations as seen in past iterations of the survey. At the same time, persistent systemic challenges, including immigration processing delays, high cost of living, and barriers to workforce transition, continue to affect the overall student experience. While many of these pressures are also faced by domestic students, they can have amplified impacts on international learners and may influence long-term perceptions and outcomes.

Encouragingly, students report increasing feelings of belonging, strong satisfaction with institutional supports, and improved experiences of inclusion both on campus and in their communities. When considering retention strategies for in-demand talent, strengthening pathways that better connect education, skills development, and labour-market needs is essential.

Alumni outcomes demonstrate that, despite initial challenges, international graduates who stay in Canada to gain meaningful employment and possess strong, in-demand skillsets integrate more successfully into the labour market and contribute across many sectors of the economy.

About CBIE

CBIE is a national, non-profit association dedicated to advancing international education in Canada. It supports Canadian education institutions in achieving their internationalization goals through advocacy, capacity building and partnerships. CBIE's institutional membership comprises 160+ colleges, universities, polytechnics, CEGEPs, language schools and school boards from across Canada.

The 2025 ISS was completed by 21,918 current international students attending 84 colleges, polytechnic institutions, and universities in 10 provinces. The alumni survey was completed by 5,524 alumni who attended 55 colleges, polytechnic institutes and universities in 9 provinces. For more information, please visit the [CBIE website](https://cbie.ca).

Suggested Citation

Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), The International Student Experience in Canada, Research Brief, CBIE, 2026, <<https://cbie.ca/news-resources/reports-publications/>>