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“Politics of Restricting Student Migration”

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Politics of Restricting Student Migration

Abstract

This paper studies the politics of restrictive immigration policies impacting international student mobility in popular host countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The central argument of this paper is that this policy and attitude shift underscores the rush towards framing immigration policies based on the convergence of security concerns, populist anxiety, and national identity. It emphasizes the increasing role of domestic political imperatives in driving such restrictive policies in major host countries. The paper also examines the broader implications of such policy and attitude shifts on global student mobility patterns and what it means for higher education sectors in popular host countries.

Introduction

With international education becoming a lucrative business in recent decades, more and more countries have been competing to attract tertiary-level international enrolments (Collett, 2025). The immigrating students offer more than plain economic benefits to the host countries since they also contribute to knowledge and cultural exchanges, and talent & labour pipelines. However, this trend of student immigration has confronted headwinds in recent years, with attitudes towards international students shifting in popular host countries (Collett, 2025). Major host countries such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have announced stricter scrutiny and regulations around visa rules, work permits, and admission criteria for immigrant students, suggesting a collective shift towards restrictive migration policies largely unfavourable for the immigrant population. Despite the economic dependency of such host countries on immigrant students, the shift in immigration policies not only raises the barriers to entry for students from lower and middle-income countries, especially from the Global South, but also has resulted in a recalibration of global student flows and an anxiety around reduced competitiveness for major host countries in the Global North. This paper builds on this argument in the sections ahead.

Understanding International Student Mobility: Economics, Politics & Security

Economic Logic

From an economic logic, international student migration can be connected to the capabilities and aspirational factors that have historically fuelled the movement of students amidst economic globalisation and internationalisation of higher studies (Haas, 2021). The push-pull framework in migration studies explains this trend better. Push factors for the migrating students include inadequate educational infrastructure and career prospects, as well as political and/or economic instability in the country of origin. Pull factors include better educational infrastructure, global recognition for the academic qualifications, and post-study work options that directly translate to better career prospects. While this framework has indeed described the migration patterns for students from the Global South to the Global North, the recent trend in popular host countries announcing restrictive immigration policies seems to have undermined the popular pull factors for international students. Such a pattern has contributed to growing uncertainty within the immigrant population as well as the educational institutions, suggesting that immigration patterns are not being shaped purely by market-driven logic.

Political Logic

From a lens of political calculations, the complex interplay between mobility, security, and politics can be argued to have been increasingly shaping how migration is governed in host countries. Considering the political environment within which immigration policies are shaped, governments are faced with competing pressures between maintaining an open access for attracting a global talent pipeline and controlling the immigration patterns to protect domestic jobs, living costs, and cultural identity (American Immigration Council, 2008). The latter has often been exploited as a popular electoral tool (Franklin, 2024). Such competing pressures have pushed governments into a constant need to balance between openness and control (McAdam, 2025). The political narrative is also fuelled by the discourse surrounding identity politics, especially in countries experiencing rising nationalism or populist movements such as the Make America Great Again (MAGA) activism in the United States (Greenberg, 2025). The anti-immigrant movements in the United Kingdom, as well as in Australia, are also fuelled by similar identity debates wherein the public sentiment is often to protect culture, jobs, and space from the immigrant population. In the case of the United

Kingdom, the narrative behind banning immigrant postgraduate students from bringing their dependents was based on the political rhetoric of increasing student migration being clear evidence of uncontrolled migration in Britain (Ford, 2024).

In the context of the sensitive political nature of immigration, governments announce tougher immigration policies, such as stricter visa vetting procedures and scrutiny of work permits, to signal their stance on protecting the domestic and sovereign interests against immigration. This claim can be substantiated using examples drawn from popular host countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

The United States	Under the Trump administration, the United States has witnessed a growing political discourse around immigrant students posing not just a threat to domestic job seekers but also a national security threat. Beginning with associating Chinese students with national security threats, the federal administration has launched recent crackdowns on students and scholars participating in political demonstrations supporting the pro-Palestinian movement (GOVFACTS, 2025).
The United Kingdom	The United Kingdom's Home Office announced in 2024 that it was prohibiting most immigrant postgraduate students from bringing their dependents into the country, barring students with limited exceptions (UK ETA, 2024). The British government's narrative surrounding this announcement ahead of the general elections was focussed on protecting the "integrity" of the British student visa system. This policy move can be connected to the broader public outcry in Britain about the strain on its society, economy, and national security threat (Migration Watch UK, 2024).
Australia	In 2025, the Australian government announced its plan to introduce a limit on the number of international students immigrating to Australia, capping them at 270,000 for the year. While the administrative narrative behind this plan was to reform Australia's education sector, there has been growing anxiety within the institutions about it being a ministerial overreach and existential threat to one of Australia's largest industries (Truu, 2024). This policy move can be understood to have served a political purpose of the government's attempt at addressing the public outcry against the housing

	crisis, overstretched public services, rather than the claimed immigration crisis (Taylor, 2025).
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Security Logic

From a security lens, it can be argued that international student migration is being perceived more as a risk than an opportunity in popular host countries. Literature on student immigration in the United States argues that the country's foreign student program is a potent threat to national security, one that has remained unaddressed by both the legislative and the executive branch (Feere, 2025). There have been several cases wherein Chinese nationals working at American research labs and university departments as students and researchers have been repeatedly caught transferring sensitive data, proprietary algorithms, and advanced research back to China (The Economic Times, 2025). These research labs and university departments receive billions in public funding through agencies such as the Department of Defense (DoD), the National Institute of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) and were alleged to have become a fertile ground for technology and intellectual property thefts by China (The Economic Times, 2025).

The anxiety within the United States surrounding the fear of espionage led the federal government to launch the China Initiative under the Trump administration. Targeted at curbing alleged intellectual property theft, the initiative allowed the profiling of several Chinese and Asian scholars under the now-discontinued initiative (Pao, 2025). Furthermore, the federal government's decision to mandate social media screening for student visa procedures also highlights the anxiety within the United States regarding the large influx of student immigration turning into a potential security liability for the hosts (U.S Department of State, 2025). The pattern of increasing scrutiny and crackdowns on immigrant students suggests that the discourse on student immigration is being increasingly framed in terms of threat, control, and security in the host land (Allen & Bista, 2022). With the narrative surrounding student migration shifting towards a narrative of security risk, the restrictive policies in the form of stricter visa vetting procedures, capping issuance of work permits, and increased surveillance to control the risk are argued to be fair in the host land.

Scrutiny of the economic, political, and security logic suggests that the narrative surrounding the student immigrant population has shifted from talent pipelines and cultural exchanges towards one of social and economic threats (Knox, 2025). Such threats are often

translated through an anxiety around a strain on the housing market, a strain on jobs available to the domestic population, and as a threat to national security. The construction of such narratives aids in administrative scrutiny of immigration policies and stricter border control.

Policies Restricting Student Immigration: Case Studies

Case Study I: The United States

International students are the second-largest recipients of the US visa, yet the country's policies for immigrant students and immigration crackdowns in recent years reflect its growing anxiety around international student mobility into the United States (Magtulis, 2025). Apart from capping international enrolments in American colleges, a key example to explain this anxiety would be the federal government's chaotic announcement—which was eventually reversed—to strip thousands of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges of their legal status (Seminera & Keller, 2025).

The unease around international student mobility into the United States began deepening during the federal government's travel ban on seven majority-Muslim countries that left several students stranded. By 2019, abrupt visa denials and unexpectedly long processing delays had become a common phenomenon for US visa seekers, particularly international students and scholars (Harrigan, 2025). The ordeal continued through the pandemic-era policy ordering international students to head back to their homelands. The present government's 2024 crackdown on pro-Palestinian political demonstrations and the latest mandate for vetting of social media accounts of the visa applicants are some key examples of the federal government's shifting stance on international student mobility (Harrigan, 2025). Despite the administration defending the shift as a national security decision, the shifting policies and broader discourse surrounding immigration reflect the administration's growing anxiety and caution.

Case Study II: Australia

Australia has undergone a major shift towards restriction and caution in its student immigration policies. However, unlike the United States, the rationale behind its shift has less to do with an anxiety around student immigrants becoming national security threats. The federal government's recent announcement capping annual international student enrolments, framed as the government's attempt at restoring the integration of its immigration system, was essentially a political response to appease the domestic anxiety over the rising housing

crisis and angst over overstretched public services (Dupé, 2024). The allegations about the administration's rationale behind the policy move being baseless come from data that suggests that international students comprise around 4% of the rental market in Australia, whereas the real problem lies with the prolonged structural housing undersupply in Australia (Zorbas, 2024).

The rationale behind the reform seems more of a political optic rather than an intent grounded in reality to address structural challenges. This highlights how immigration (student immigration included) is exploited as an electoral tool to respond to domestic anxiety and angst.

Case Study III: The United Kingdom

Similar to the United States and Australia, the United Kingdom's immigration policy shifts suggest an anxiety surrounding Britain's primary political intent to control the influx of migrants despite its strong economic dependence on immigrant students (Hogan, 2025). As discussed earlier in the paper, the British government's 2024 policy to prohibit most immigrant postgraduate students from bringing their dependents into the country using a dependant visa with limited exceptions has triggered concerns within the UK higher education sector. Moreover, debates within the political corridors to revise the popular Graduate Route visa began ringing warning bells within the higher education sector in the United Kingdom. The warnings were about a substantial percentage of British universities slipping into a deficit in the event that international enrolments decline (Icef, 2024). The latest OECD report highlights the substantial share of revenue the United Kingdom generates from international students, especially the high tuition fees, underscoring the strong reliance on non-state sources of funding (Hogan, 2025).

The British government's policy move aligns with its broader goals of coming down heavily on the overall immigration system. The narrative suggests the administration's attempt at restoring the integrity of its immigration system and addressing the strain on public services, similar to what was witnessed in the case of Australia (Singh, 2024).

Case Study IV: Canada

In the case of Canada, recent changes to student immigration policies have indicated the country's shift towards imposing restrictions and controls. The narrative surrounding the policy move to cap annual international enrolments and work permits issues was similar to

the one issued in Australia, since both had a narrative of reducing the rapid increase in international student immigrants to alleviate the strain on their housing and public services (The Canadian Press, 2024). However, a broader scrutiny reveals that it is in response to the public angst against housing and affordability, and the capping is merely a political optic (Rana, 2024). The government's claim is scrutinized to be performative since capping the international enrolments is expected to do little for addressing the broader domestic housing crunch and the rental market crisis in the country (Rana, 2024). Furthermore, the narrative of easing labour market pressures by capping international enrolments is also contested since the actual problem remains with skill mismatches, underemployment, and biases in hiring practices in Canada (Walsh, 2025). Economically, the contribution of international student enrolments in Canada in 2022 represented over 23 percent of the country's total service exports and an estimated 5 percent of its merchandise exports (Walsh, 2025).

Shifting away from a stable immigration policy, especially as Canada remains a popular educational destination, could hurt the international pipeline that has contributed to the country's research enterprise, workforce, and economic growth for decades (Walsh, 2025).

Comparative Analysis of International Student Mobility

The case studies of the four popular host countries for international student enrolments suggest a commonality regarding the shifting narratives around changes to immigration policies. The common message that underscores each case study is that immigration policies are increasingly shaped by political pressures and populist anxieties. Despite each country having a narrative seemingly unique to its own domestic environment, the underlying intent behind each policy move highlights the government exploiting the student immigration policies as a response to public discontent and populist anxieties, whether it be about the rental market crisis, strain on public services, or the perceived threat to national security or identity politics.

While the United States presented an increasingly security-driven narrative behind its rush for controlling and/or restricting immigration, the United Kingdom presents a political recalibration towards signalling to the domestic audience about the government taking measures to address the broader immigration crisis (Denham & Lawrence, 2023). Both Australia and Canada echoed broadly similar narratives about international student

immigration triggering a housing crisis, a labour crisis, and straining public services, a move that is contested as performative rather than intended for addressing structural issues. The conventional economic logic supporting the push-pull framework no longer seems to be the only factor shaping international student mobility. International student migration being framed as a crisis is a common theme across all four countries, and the political class is in a rush to gain capital out of this (Curry, 2024).

Implications of Restrictive Student Immigration Policies

Tightening of the immigration policies across popular host countries can have far-reaching implications, especially against the backdrop of the narrative around international student enrolments being a risk liability rather than a contributor to the talent pipeline.

A key implication of such restrictive policy adoption could be a shift in popular student demand to destinations beyond the four popular host countries. Despite these four English-speaking destinations holding a lion's share in the international student market, there is a growing shift in student demand, interest, and movement to wider destinations, particularly in Europe and Asia (Riggs, 2025). Such market share disruptions could become a risk of such policy changes for countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, since their fiscal dependency could slip into a state of financial shock if the decline in international enrolments continues because of policy pressures. The higher education sector, particularly in the Global North, is largely dependent on the revenue that is brought in by the immigrant class, students and scholars alike (OECD, 2025).

In the United States, 2023 data published by the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) revealed that one American job is created/supported for every three international students (NAFSA, 2023). Over a million international students enrolled at U.S. institutions contributed more than \$40 billion to the country's economy during the 2022-23 academic year (NAFSA, 2023). In Canada, the contribution of international student enrolments in 2022 represented over 23 percent of the country's total service exports and an estimated 5 percent of its merchandise exports (Walsh, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the substantial dependence on non-state sources of funding by virtue of the revenue generated from international students could be at risk (Hogan, 2025). A substantial decline in international enrolments in the longer run could destabilize institutional finances in these host countries, a risk that impacts the fiscal health of these countries.

Another key implication of such market disruption could be the weakening of Western higher education as a soft power tool for the popular hosts, especially the United States, for strengthening international standing (Trilokekar, 2021). Even if the popular hosts boast of receiving one-third of all international student enrolments worldwide, emerging destinations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas are also increasingly drawing more numbers of international enrolments (Collett, 2025). Mainland European nations such as France, Germany, and the Czech Republic have demonstrated interest in welcoming more international enrolments from beyond the European Union, while Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Taiwan are setting targets for receiving more international students (Collett, 2025).

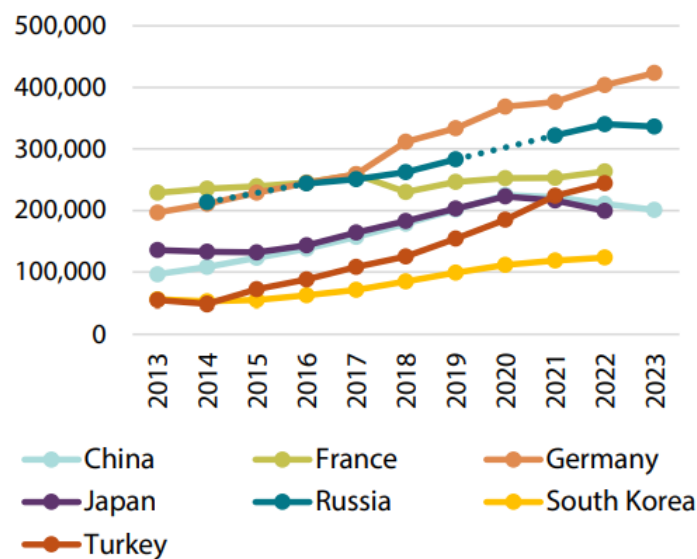


Fig 1: Inbound International Students in Emerging Popular Countries, 2013–23
Source: April 2025 Report by Migration Policy Institute

Interestingly, China is making rapid progress in expanding its English-taught programs, and though contested, the popularity of its becoming a popular destination in the next few years cannot be labelled as a distant reality (Packer, 2024). China is almost on the verge of overtaking Europe in English-taught degrees, and if the restrictive policies continue to deter international student enrolments, the academic and cultural dominance of Western hosts could gradually weaken, if not perish.

Conclusion

While the continued strong growth in demand for Western education has certainly been a key pull factor for international student mobility, increasingly restrictive policy settings in these host countries could certainly redefine international student mobility in the

next decade (Riggs, 2025). In these host countries, it is argued that the political culture reflects an increasing pushback against historically high immigration levels, which has a spillover effect into domestic anxiety around strain on public services, housing crisis, and so on (Riggs, 2025). Despite international students comprising a smaller portion of the historically high immigration levels across the globe, they're entangled in the pushback narrative. This results in most host countries adopting increasingly restrictive policies for such immigrant students.

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