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INSIGHT: SOUTH ASIA

Admission scams push Indian international students in Canada to the brink of deportation

THE TAKEAWAY

Canada's education system consistently ranks as one of the best worldwide, attracting large numbers of international students, particularly from India. However, a recent rise in admissions-related fraud and threats of deportation highlight an overburdened and under-resourced Canadian immigration system, which exacerbates the vulnerabilities felt by international students both in Canada and their home countries. Finding a solution will require closer collaboration between Canadian and Indian governments.

IN BRIEF

Some 700 Indian international students in Canada could face deportation due to a scam earlier this year involving fraudulent acceptance letters to Canadian educational institutions. The students remain in a precarious limbo as they await Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) assessment of each individual case. Such widespread fraud has been a recurring issue for years, highlighting the vulnerabilities of international students.

The Canadian federal government's immigration policies often prioritize economic growth, of which increasing international student numbers is a critical component due to domestic labour shortages. Between 2015 and 2022, Ottawa increased the number of study permits for international students by 151.7 per cent. In 2022, most international study permit holders in Canada were from India (226,450 out of 551,405). Overtaking Chinese students in terms of numbers, Indian students are attracted to Canada in part because of the Canadian dollar's favourable exchange rate against the U.S. dollar and the quality of Canada's universities. But students' primary motivation often lies in the easier route to obtaining work permits and immigration qualifications in Canada compared to other countries, especially given the U.S.'s stringent criteria for granting H-1B foreign-worker visas.

Still, hurdles remain within Canada's immigration and recruitment system that increase students' susceptibility to fraud. Analysts argue that there is insufficient support for international students as current policies and programs often fall short in addressing bureaucratic delays around visa processing, transparency issues related to work permits, and common challenges faced by students such as food insecurity, mental health concerns, racism, and marginalization. These issues are compounded by international student enrolment growth surpassing planned permanent immigration.

IMPLICATIONS

Canadian response to fraudulent cases

Former Canadian immigration minister Sean Fraser addressed the issue of international students facing deportation due to fraudulent acceptance letters in a June 14 statement, highlighting cases in which students were genuinely deceived but noting that others exploited the system knowingly. The federal government established a task force in June, with senior officials from IRCC and the Canada Border Services Agency, to identify victims of fraud among international students. Fraser pledged that honest international students would not be deported, and that Temporary Resident Visas would be issued to those genuinely intending to continue their studies.. However, the parameters for determining genuine intent versus involvement in fraudulent activities remain unclear. This might lead to subjective decision-making, inconsistencies, and potential disputes, resulting in further confusion and potential legal challenges for all parties involved. Moreover, this could negatively affect Canada's reputation in India, discouraging Indian students from choosing Canada as a study destination.

Common schemes and international student vulnerability

Indian students have been increasingly driven to pursue education abroad by promises of increased economic mobility and career opportunities. The number of Indian international students worldwide is expected to reach 1.8 million by 2024. But participating in education opportunities abroad is not without risk, including various types of fraud. Common schemes include phishing scams, in which students are asked for personal details to resolve issues with their visas or imaginary fines, and 'ghost consultants,' or unlicensed representatives, who offer admissions to potential students for high fees, then abandon or 'ghost' victims after collecting funds. Earlier this year, two private Canadian colleges were involved in international student scams, allegedly misleading Indian students about admissions to college programs. This points to a lack of sufficient institutional and government oversight throughout the recruitment and admissions processes for international students, particularly within private institutions.

WHAT'S NEXT

1. Digital safety and awareness

Promoting digital safety and security can also help mitigate fraud. Because ghost consultants often operate within India, it can be difficult for the Canadian government to hold them accountable. This sets up an opportunity for the Indian government to crack down on fraudulent and unlicensed immigration services. On the Canadian side, while non-profit organizations such as One Voice Canada offer support for vulnerable international students, provincial governments should allocate funding for similar services.

2. Refining immigration policies for students

Canada hopes to welcome up to 500,000 permanent residents annually by 2025. Indians are expected to make up a sizeable portion of this figure, given their high student immigration population within Canada in 2022. This highlights the need for substantial resource allocation at the federal level to provide comprehensive support for newcomers. Government bodies managing immigration, businesses employing students, designated learning institutions, and local communities can all play vital roles in contributing to the sound development of strategies to support and sustain international students in Canada.

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