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Transnational Talent and Canadian Higher Education: Strategies for Sustainable Retention

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study critically examines the challenges of talent migration and retention in Canadian higher education, with a focus on how global competition, immigration policy, and sociocultural dynamics intersect to shape outcomes for international scholars. Grounded in theories of brain circulation, internationalization, and diaspora engagement, it uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore systemic barriers, drawing on Guo's Triple Glass Effect and concept of transnational academic mobility. Using the Chinese academic diaspora as a case study, the paper synthesizes literature, policy documents, and personal narratives to reveal how racialized scholars face underemployment, exclusion, and policy misalignment, turning brain gain into brain waste. The study calls for sustainable, equity-oriented strategies that move beyond transactional talent acquisition to foster inclusive environments where global talent can thrive. It contributes to higher education research by reframing internationalization through an intersectional lens and emphasizing the need for institutional practices that center belonging, recognition, and long-term integration.

Full paper

This study aims to critically examine the recurring issue of talent migration and retention within the Canadian higher education sector, by analyzing how Canada's talent attraction strategies intersect with global competition, immigration policies, and sociocultural dynamics. The study's core objective is to expose how these dynamics undermine both Canada's global competitiveness and the professional aspirations of highly skilled immigrants (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018; Crossman et al., 2022).

The analysis is grounded in theories of internationalization in higher education, migration studies, and diaspora engagement. It draws on Guo's (2021) Triple Glass Effect framework, which outlines systemic barriers in social mobility for skilled immigrants, and on Saxenian's (2005) concept of brain circulation, which challenges older brain drain narratives. Also important is Rizvi & Lingard's (2000) work on globalization and education, which emphasizes knowledge exchange, cultural hybridity, and innovation through the integration of global and local dimensions. These frameworks help unpack the misalignment between Canada's policy goals and immigrant realities, particularly among racialized groups.

This is a qualitative, interpretive study that uses a case study method and literature-based analysis. It synthesizes findings from recent research on academic mobility, diaspora experiences, and Canadian immigration pathways (Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Picot & Hou, 2020), with a focus on the Chinese academic diaspora as a case to illustrate broader patterns.

The paper draws from a diverse range of secondary sources to support its analysis. These include academic literature on higher education internationalization, immigration, and diaspora studies, which provide the conceptual foundation for understanding global talent flows and integration challenges. Government policy documents from the Government of Canada, Universities Canada, and Statistics Canada, offer insight into the nation's evolving policy landscape. Media reports are used to highlight public discourse surrounding anti-immigrant sentiment, and the underemployment of immigrants, shedding light on contemporary social dynamics. Research studies on post-pandemic academic mobility and racial discrimination contribute empirical context to the discussion. Finally, the paper incorporates testimonies and personal narratives from members of the Chinese Canadian academic community to illustrate broader patterns of marginalization and systemic barriers in talent retention.

While Canada presents itself as a top destination for international talent, the reality is marked by fragmented policy alignment, social exclusion, and employment barriers for immigrants, especially from racialized communities (Guo, 2021; Crossman et al., 2022). The Chinese diaspora exemplifies these contradictions. Despite high levels of academic achievement and global collaboration, Chinese scholars often face suspicion, tokenization, and professional stagnation—trends worsened by post-COVID-19 anti-Asian racism (Chen et al., 2020).

The Triple Glass Effect prevents full participation in Canada's innovation economy, turning brain gain into brain waste (Zong & Lu, 2017; Guo, 2021). The paper concludes that addressing these barriers requires Canada to adopt inclusive, data-driven, and equity-oriented approaches that view talent as relational, not transactional.

This study contributes to the field of higher education by offering a critical, intersectional lens on global talent management, a domain that is often discussed in economic or policy terms, but insufficiently explored in relation to equity and lived experience. By centering the narratives of Chinese diaspora scholars and students, it challenges institutions to rethink what meaningful internationalization looks like beyond metrics of enrollment and revenue.

For educators, policymakers, and university leaders, the paper underscores the need for holistic strategies that integrate immigration, labour, and equity considerations into institutional planning. It also advocates for more inclusive pedagogical, hiring, and retention practices that recognize the diverse contributions of international scholars, especially those from communities that face racialized exclusion.

Ultimately, the study highlights that Canada's ability to compete in the global knowledge economy is not just about attracting the best and brightest, but about creating environments where they can thrive, contribute, and belong.