

**ONE VOICE**  
CANADA 

REPORT ON

# THE REALITIES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

*Evidenced Challenges*



JANUARY 2021

[www.onevoicecanada.org](http://www.onevoicecanada.org)

# Preface

One Voice Canada is a non-profit founded in 2019 to respond to hardships experienced by Indian international students in Canada. One Voice Canada's activities include raising awareness of issues and providing aid to vulnerable international students. Since April 2019, we have received 47 requests for assistance for issues including housing, labour exploitation, and sexual abuse and harassment.

Through *The Realities for International Students: Evidenced Challenges*, One Voice Canada aims to raise awareness and understanding of the problems arising from the international student program in Canada. In particular, many international students are lacking access to adequate supports and vulnerable to economic, social and criminal exploitation and abuse. This report is an accumulation of the experiences of students participating in or seeking assistance from One Voice Canada as well as research conducted by Dr. Kamaljeet Singh and Dr. Rakshinder Kaur of Punjabi University and Khalsa Aid.

Punjabi University is a public university in Patiala, India. In 2018, Dr. Kamaljeet Singh and Dr. Rakshinder Kaur of Punjabi University's Regional Centre conducted a study on the socio-economic profile of study visa aspirants in Punjab. The study involved 540 students enrolled in various IELTS (English language training) coaching centres of Bathinda city.

Khalsa Aid is an international non-governmental organization that provides humanitarian aid and relief in disaster areas and conflict zones around the world. Their Canadian chapter, Khalsa Aid Canada, provides support to vulnerable communities across Canada. Khalsa Aid Canada, with support from One Voice Canada, conducted the *International Students within Canada Survey* to better understand the circumstances of international students in Canada. The survey included questions concerning education, accommodation, workplace, financial stability, immigration, and mental health. Mental health data was collected by using the World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5). The survey was conducted from March 6, 2020 to April 5, 2020 and included 303 respondents, 98% of whom were from India.

One Voice Canada acknowledges the support and contribution made by Punjabi University and Khalsa Aid in developing this report. We would also like to acknowledge the advice and suggestions provided by the following individuals: Jasmine Sajjan, Jasbir Dhadda, Baltej Dhillon, and Jatinder Singh. We also thank the South Asian Legal Clinic of British Columbia for its review and editorial suggestions.

Finally, One Voice Canada would like to acknowledge that it operates on ancestral, traditional and unceded territories of the SEMYOME (Semiahmoo), q̓ic̓ə́ y̓ (Katzie), kwikwə́ləm (Kwkwetlem), q̓wa:n̓l̓ə́n̓ (Kwantlen), qiqéyt (Qayqayt), xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) and the scəwa' θən məsteyəxw (Tsawwassen) First Nations.

## Author

Balraj S. Kahlon

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## Executive Summary

International education is very lucrative for Canada; but there is a social cost associated with the profits being made off of international students. One Voice Canada's report on *The Realities for International Students: Evidenced Challenges* raises concern of the problems arising from Canada's international student program among Indian international students.

India is one of the largest source countries for international students. A significant proportion of Indian students are coming from the state of Punjab. A study in Punjab indicates a sizeable proportion of prospective international students from Punjab are from low-and modest-income families. The motivation for these families to have their child pursue an expensive Canadian education is to improve the family's economic situation.

Canadian postsecondary schools pay a commission to foreign consultants for every student they recruit. In Punjab, this economic model has given birth to an industry catering to youth wanting to obtain a study visa and settle Canada. The promotion of a Canadian education as a means to obtain permanent residency is so affective that some families are taking loans to send their children to Canada.

In Canada, business and public finance interests have become dependent on international education. The number of immigration consultants has almost doubled across the country in the 2010's decade. There are a considerable number of private colleges catering to international students. Revenues from international students have also allowed the BC and Ontario government to decrease their proportion of revenue for post-secondary schools.

The perspective and experiences of international students are important to consider given the many burdens they face in Canada. The greatest being the financial burden due to the exorbitant tuition fees coupled with the cost of housing in major urban markets. A recent survey found 9 in 10 students surveyed are concerned about their expenses.

To manage this financial burden many international students are working illegally. This has put them in a vulnerable position and many are victims of labour exploitation, and, exploitation of international students has become prevalent in communities across Canada. The economic dependency of female international students is especially unsettling as it makes them vulnerable to sexual violence.

Being an international student in Canada is also having an impact on the mental well being of many Indian international students. International student suicides have become a disturbing trend in Canada. This mirrors the international suicide problem for the last decade in Australia. The economic impact of COVID-19 seems to have exacerbated these problems.

Governments are aware of these issues discussed. Past government studies have identified shortcomings of the international student program and the vulnerability of international students. However, there have been no publicized reforms that address the underlying problem causes.

To improve the integrity of the international student program, and the welfare of international students, One Voice recommends to:

1. Conduct a comprehensive evaluative study of the international student program, examining the period between 2014 and 2020.
2. Regulate and reduce tuition fees for international students.
3. Increase funding and training for specialized services within post-secondary international student offices.

In closing, it is difficult to foresee these issues mitigating in the absence of any reforms that address the identified problem causes.

# Introduction

In the last decade, Canada has experienced a large influx of international students and the population has tripled. This reflects not only the external demand for Canadian education and qualifications, but also government initiatives to attract students from abroad. For example, the Government of Canada's International Education Strategy 2019–2024 was developed to strengthen Canada's competitive advantage in international education (Global Affairs Canada, 2019a). Initiatives such as these tout the benefits of international education for Canada, including to address labour market shortages and to enhance our international trade, while ignoring any human consequences or costs.

Indeed, there is more to consider in terms of international education than Canada's economic development. When we neglect the perspective and needs of international students, such programs are destined to fall short of their proposed benefits and create unanticipated outcomes.

For many international students, coming to Canada is not just about obtaining skills – it is also about escaping poverty. For many of these students, pursuing an international education is their best opportunity to achieve social mobility and support their families. Further, some critics argue international student programs have led to universities and colleges acting like businesses, education being treated as a commodity, and international students being considered a convenient source of revenue.

International students range from those pursuing degrees in public universities to those pursuing diplomas in a private college. This report focuses on trends related to Indian international students coming to Canada, to provide a better understanding of the distinct trends and issues facing them. As British Columbia and Ontario are the top destinations for international students, accounting for 71% of all international students studying in Canada, we examine information and data from these two provinces. (CBIE, 2020).

Considering that international education is a global and growing phenomenon and that Indian youth continue to arrive in Canada in large numbers in pursuit of educational opportunities, we ask that the authorities, policy makers and stakeholders take a critical look at Canada's international student program and offer recommendations for improvement.

# Path to Permanent Residency

Many international students are incentivized to study in Canada because it can help them and/or their families settle in the country. These students treat international education as a phase in the settlement process. To understand their entire experience, it is helpful to understand the process for international students to enter Canada and gain permanent residency.

In order to be accepted by a Canadian post-secondary institution, a prospective student must achieve a minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.0. IELTS measures language proficiency (ranging from 1 to 9) and is intended for people who want to study in English speaking countries.

International students' study permit allows them to work off-campus for a maximum of 20 hours per week during academic sessions. Prior to June 1, 2014, international students seeking to work-off campus had to apply for a work permit. One of the eligibility requirements for a work permit was satisfactory academic standing.

After completing their studies, international students are eligible for a post-graduate work permit (PGWP). We note that students are only eligible for a PGWP if they attended a public post-secondary school or specified private post-secondary schools. The length of the work permit is dependent on the length of their studies.

An international student must have qualified work experience to obtain permanent residency (PR). In some cases, an international student may need to have their employer obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). A LMIA must show that an employer needs to hire a foreign worker because a Canadian citizen or permanent resident is not available.

## Situation in Punjab (India)

In 2019, 198,235 students from India came to Canada for post-secondary education, making it the largest source country. China, with 97,805 students arriving that year, is the second largest source country (CBIE, 2020). A major difference between students from these two countries is the institution they attend. Approximately 73% of students from India were studying at a Canadian college whereas 83% of students from China were studying at a Canadian university (CBIE, 2020).

A significant proportion of Indian international students come from Punjab. Although numbers of international students by Indian state are not available, academic sources and news outlets describe the strength of the outward migration trend (Thakur, 2018).

The Punjabi University study surveyed students in English language training institutes to understand the socio-economic background and perceptions of students planning to study abroad. The study findings include that:

- 67% of students are from farming families;
- 56% of the students' families owned five acres or land or less, and 80% owned 10 acres or less;
- 54% of the students' families will sell property or take a loan to fund their education;
- 78% preferred to study in Canada; and,
- 76% believed ample or some employment opportunities will definitely be available in their country of study.

As per above, the study revealed most students were from farming families with modest means. Given the current poor economic viability of farming, the motivating factors for these families are to alleviate the economic distress and lack of quality employment and livelihood opportunities for the next generation. So bleak are the economic opportunities in India that youth unemployment is higher for people with higher educational attainment (Mehrota and Parida, 2019). Despite the strong desire to emigrate, most students have little knowledge of the foreign country's education system and view all foreign institutions as good quality (Kaur and Singh, 2018). This indicates that many prospective international students from Punjab are naive and misinformed about foreign education.

The educational emigration phenomenon is having a negative impact on Punjab's post-secondary education sector. In 2018, universities in Punjab experienced a 20% decline in admissions (Thakur, 2018). In an *Asian Age* article, an IELTS centre employee explained that in the past students would go abroad to pursue post-graduate degrees, but now youth are going abroad after completing Grade 12 (Thakur, 2018).

Canadian initiatives are also contributing to this youth outflow. In the 1990s, the federal government established the Canadian Education Centre (CEC) Network to promote Canada as a destination for foreign students and to assist Canadian post-secondary schools in recruiting

foreign students (Keller, 2009). The government ceased to provide financial support in the 2000s due to a lack of success (Keller, 2009). Today, the CEC Network promotes itself on the StudyCanada website as “a private, independent non-profit company that has been promoting and marketing Canada as a study destination for international students.” CEC also boasts a membership that includes over 245 universities, community colleges, technical institutes, career colleges, secondary schools, language schools and summer camps across Canada. In India, the CEC Network has implemented “agent training workshops” to attract youth for pursuing a Canadian education (Brar, 2019).

The Punjabi University study found Canada to be most preferred country to study abroad because the cost of tuition is lower than other countries such as the United States, The allowance of 20 hours of work per week during studies and the opportunity for a post-study work permit (Kaur and Singh, 2018). Additional factors for prospective students include greater racial tolerance than elsewhere and the presence of a large Indian community (Kaur and Singh, 2018).

# Education-Industrial Complex

The education-industrial complex describes when for-profit business interests become entwined with the education system and institutions. Canada's international student program has given rise to booming cottage industries in both India and Canada. In both countries, many business interests have become intertwined in student migration and international education.

## Education and Business in India

In India, a business sector has emerged to recruit youth for foreign schools. The businesses range from immigration companies, visa consultants, air ticketing companies and IELTS centres. In Punjab, the appetite to come to Canada has become so intense that IELTS has become ingrained in mainstream pop culture with songs and films about IELTS.

IELTS coaching centres have mushroomed across Punjab. The state is estimated to have between 5,000 and 6,000 IELTS coaching centres with a vast majority unregulated (Roy, 2019). The proliferation in IELTS coaching centres is explained by the fact that people who have Punjabi as their mother tongue struggle to achieve the required IELTS score. Top 40 IELTS scores by nationality and first language are released annually. In 2018, out of the top 40 first languages (i.e. mother tongues) of the test takers, test takers whose first language was Punjabi ranked 39 (IELTS, 2019).

The IELTS coaching industry in Punjab has become very lucrative (Brar, 2019). Many IELTS coaching centres have even diversified their income sources by including visa approval services and arranging food and accommodation (Brar, 2019). The cost for coaching can also be substantial, given that some students must make multiple attempts to get the required IELTS score.

To ensure economic viability the migration industry (i.e., education consultants, English training centres, etc..) make efforts to attract a strong student client base. It is important to note that educational agents receive a commission from foreign schools for every student they recruit. An agent can earn up to \$3,000 to \$4,000 per student (Basen, 2019). This financial incentive has led to less than forthright marketing initiatives that cultivate an intense desire to migrate abroad among Punjabi youth (Kaur and Singh, 2018).

These businesses advertise stories of wealth and success abroad; promote the ease of immigration; and advise prospective students that living costs and tuition can be covered by working (Kaur and Singh, 2018). These initiatives have led to unrealistic expectations among many families. The marketing is so effective that even families who lack the resources to fund a foreign education believe educational migration is a feasible path for their children (Kaur and Singh, 2018).

Such education agents are vital for recruiting international students. In fact, a Council of Ministries of Education of Canada survey found nearly 80% of Canadian education institutes rely on agents (CIC, 2019). While in a 2016 report, UNESCO highlights how fraud and corruption is rampant in the global international student recruitment industry (UNESCO, 2016). Corrupt practices cited include publishing false recruitment advertising and participating in cheating rings for admissions tests (UNESCO, 2016).

## Education and Business in Canada

Canada is also reaping considerable financial benefits from student migration. Most notable is the private post-secondary education sector. In the Metro Vancouver Regional District there are over 300 private post-secondary institutions (PTIB, 2020). In Vancouver proper alone there are over 150 (PTIB, 2020).

Schools include those that provide job-ready skills or vocational education for industries. Yet there are many private colleges that provide a general education in a manner that does not connect to clear employment paths and that have a student body that is predominantly, if not completely, made up of international students.

The immigration consulting services sector has also grown in the last decade. The number of designated Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants (RCICs) is positively correlated with the increase of international students in Canada. Between 2014 and 2019, the number of RCICs increased by almost 50% across Canada. In BC, the number doubled and in Ontario it more than doubled (see Table 1).

The total number of individuals providing immigration consultancy services is greater if one includes the number of unregulated immigration consultants, often referred to as 'ghost consultants.' Unregulated consultants exist despite it being a criminal offence to provide Canadian immigration services for a fee or other consideration if not regulated by ICCRC, a Canadian law society or the Chamber of Notaries of Quebec.

**Table 1: Number of Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants in BC, Ontario and Canada**

Year	BC	Ontario	Canada
2014	822	1,125	3,202
2015	939	n/a	3,243
2016	1,070	1,439	3,711
2017	1,193	1,697	4,284
2018	1,397	1,973	4,990
2019	1,578	2,320	5,746

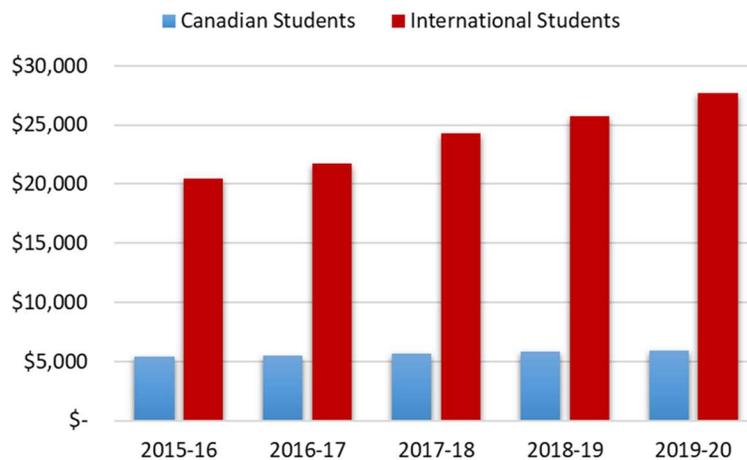
*Source: The Immigration Consultants of Canada Regulatory Council, 2020. Annual Reports*

# Price of Education

International students provide a considerable revenue stream for Canadian post-secondary schools. In Canada, international students pay more than four times the tuition fees compared to domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2020a). According to Statistics Canada, in 2019-20, the highest tuition fees for international students were charged in British Columbia and Ontario. In BC, undergraduate international students pay more than 4.5 times the tuition fees compared to domestic students. In Ontario, international students pay more than 4.8 times the tuition fees compared to domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2020a).

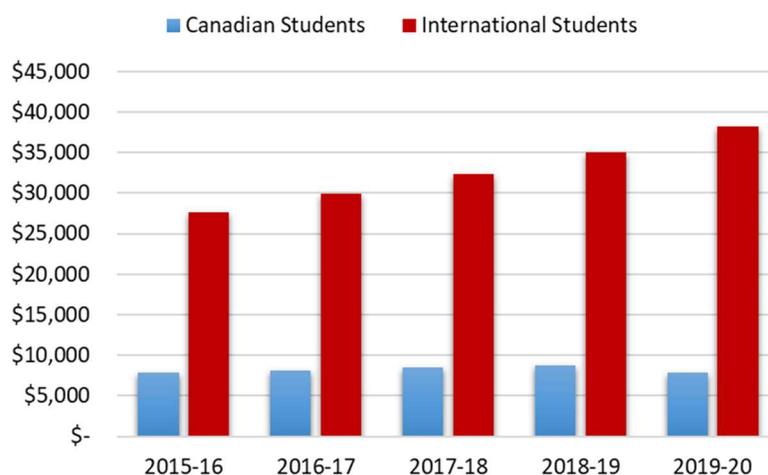
Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the average undergraduate tuition fees for international students in BC and Ontario have noticeably risen between 2015-16 and 2019-20, while being relatively stable for domestic students. Undergraduate tuition fees for international students are the highest in Ontario reaching \$38,276 in academic year 2019-20.

**Figure 1: Undergraduate tuition fees for Canadian and International students in BC**



*Source: Statistics Canada 2020a, Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study*

**Figure 2: Undergraduate tuition fees for Canadian and International students in Ontario**

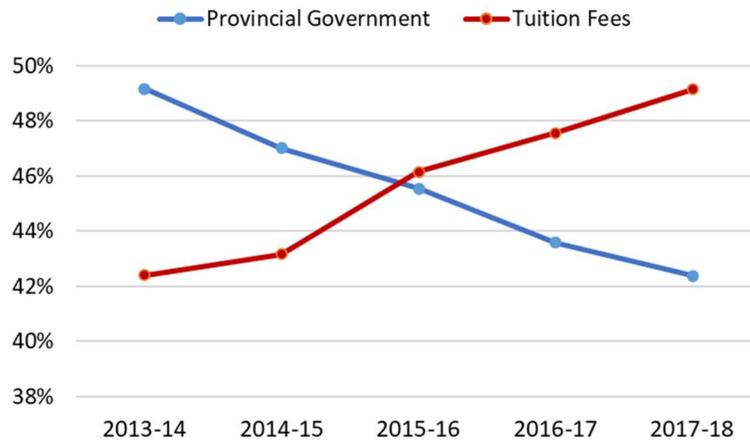


*Source: Statistics Canada 2020a, Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (per academic year)*

Public funding (federal and provincial government) is the largest source of revenue for post-secondary schools in Canada. A majority of this funding comes from provincial governments which cover operating costs and capital spending, whereas the federal government primarily funds research. For all provinces the proportion of funding from provincial governments has decreased from approximately 42% in 2010-11 to 39% in 2015-16, requiring schools to rely more heavily on tuition fees for revenue (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

In BC, Figure 3 reveals that students surpassed the BC government as the largest source of operating revenue for post-secondary schools. Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, BC government's contribution to operating revenue decreased from approximately 49% to 42%. During this same period, student's contribution to operating revenue increased from approximately 42% to 49%.

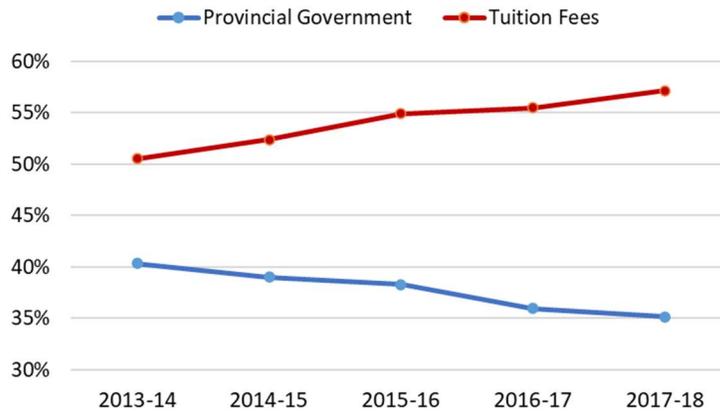
**Figure 3: Proportion of funding for BC universities and colleges by source**



Source: Statistics Canada 2020b. Financial information of universities and degree-granting colleges

Figure 4, below, shows that in Ontario students have been the largest source of operating revenue for post-secondary schools since 2013-14. By 2017-18, tuition fees accounted for 57% of funding compared to 35% by the provincial government (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

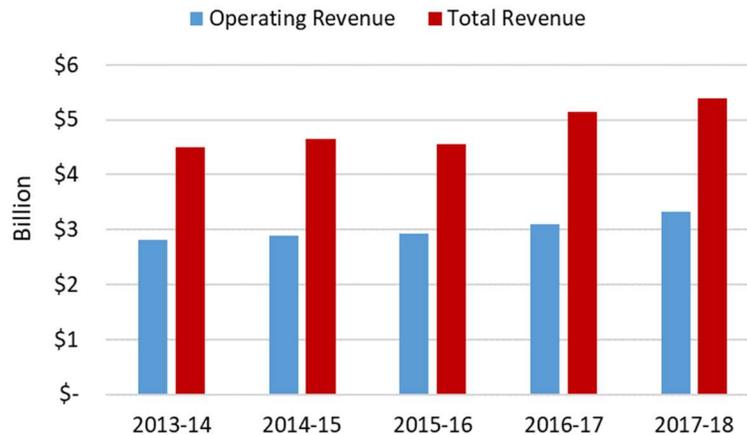
**Figure 4: Proportion of funding for Ontario universities and colleges by source**



Source: Statistics Canada 2020b. Financial information of universities and degree-granting colleges

Moreover, between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the largest source of funding for BC universities and colleges changed from the provincial government to students. Despite the decline in the provincial government's proportion of funding during this period, Figure 4 shows that operating and total revenue for BC universities and colleges has steadily increased.

**Figure 5: Operating and total revenue of BC universities and colleges**



*Source: Statistics Canada 2020b. Financial information of universities and degree-granting colleges*

Some schools also offer English language pathway programs for international students who cannot meet the English language proficiency (IELTS score) requirements. The program courses range from beginner to intermediate level English courses. In BC, English language pathway programs include university programs such as UBC's Vantage One and SFU's Fraser International College, as well as college programs, such as Langara College's Langara English for Academic Purposes (LEAP) and Douglas College's College Preparatory English programs.

English language pathway program examples in Ontario include Humber College's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Sheridan College's English Language Studies (ESL) programs. The University of Toronto also has a set of English Language Transition Programs for students who do not meet university English language requirements.

Paralleling the business sector that has emerged in countries of origin, international education has become very lucrative for Canadian post-secondary schools and associated businesses. For some time, it has been so lucrative that provincial governments have been generating budgetary windfalls. In 2018-19, for example, BC universities and colleges had a surplus of \$340 million, largely due to international student fee tuition (Olsen, 2019). Despite this surplus, research by the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC found BC post-secondary schools provide an inadequate level of support services for international students (Armos 2018).

Canada's approach towards international students contrasts the approach taken in other countries. For example, in France, the country's Constitutional Council ruled against the government's planned increase of tuition fees for international students (Boring, 2019). The court's decision stated that affordable education is a constitutional right for all students, including international students (Boring, 2019). Germany's public tuition free universities extend to international students (Trines, 2019). This approach does not treat education as a commodity and creates a better incentive for to attract foreign talent. Further, Canada, despite what we tell

ourselves, has gained an international reputation for having a post-secondary sector that "milks international students as cash cows" (Trines, 2019).

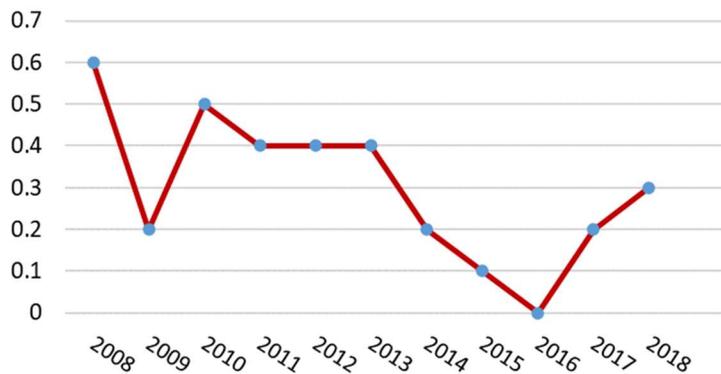
International education expert, Mel Broitman, argues that Canadian colleges have lowered standards to grow international student numbers for revenue, which has devalued a Canadian education (Basen, 2019). Another great concern is that Canadian post-secondary schools have become so reliant on international student revenue that they have become complacent – if not complicit – with deceitful student recruitment practices. Notably, The Independent Commission Against Corruption in Australia identified corruption risks associated with international education (ICAC, 2015)

# Challenge for a Home

The increased migration of international students, without increased infrastructure to support them, has impacted the rental housing market in Canada. Access to in-campus accommodation is limited or not available for international students, which means that, for many, off-campus accommodation is the only viable housing solution. Data suggests the influx of international students has contributed to Greater Vancouver or the Metro Vancouver Regional District having one of the tightest rental markets in the country. In 2007-08, 11,236 and 4,013 international students were attending Metro Vancouver universities and colleges, respectively (Heslop, 2008). By 2016-17, these numbers more than doubled and tripled: 26,456 international students were attending universities and 13, 558 international students were attending colleges, respectively (Heslop, 2018).

During the same 10-year period, Greater Vancouver’s rental vacancy rate<sup>1</sup> has decreased. Figure 4 shows the rental vacancy rate went from 0.6% in 2008 to 0.3% in 2018.

**Figure 6: Greater Vancouver rental vacancy rate**



Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2020. Rental Market Statistics Summary by Census Subdivision

Metro Vancouver not only faces a rental vacancy problem but also a severe affordability problem, along with the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In Demographia’s International Housing Affordability Survey 2020, Vancouver ranked the second most unaffordable housing market in the world and Toronto ranked sixth (Demographia, 2020). A Metro Vancouver report also found a significant increase in the number of low-income rental households in the region (Metro Vancouver, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> the percentage of all available units in a rental property that are vacant or unoccupied at a particular time.

These housing market conditions create a very difficult situation for an international student with modest means, forcing them to consider and choose poorer quality housing. To afford rent, many students are living in overcrowded suites so they can share the rental cost. In fact, almost 20% of respondents to Khalsa Aid's *International Students Within Canada Survey* indicated living in overcrowded accommodation.

Altogether, the high cost of tuition and housing is an incredible burden for many international students. The *International Students Within Canada Survey* found that 9 in 10 students are concerned about their expenses in Canada. Moreover, nearly 7 in 10 students have familial debt or loans due to their education, which they are expected to help pay off.

# Underground Economy

Student migration from India to Canada is feeding the underground economy in Canada. Many international students are working illegally and some even resort to paying employers to obtain a work permit.

## Working Illegally

Most students only have their parents pay the initial fee for the first semester and are expected to cover all expenses thereafter (Kaur and Singh, 2018). Many students must also earn money to help their family pay back the loan(s) they have taken out to send them to Canada.

One Voice Canada finds this financial burden is why many students from Punjab work over the 20-hour limit that is allowed under their study permit. Many Indian international students work illegally by being paid in cash and going over the 20-hour week limit.

International students working illegally are at the mercy of their employer. While some students may have a compassionate employer, other students are trapped in a form of bondage. For One Voice Canada, labour exploitation is the most common issue, representing approximately 25% of the requests for assistance received to date. A common case is for an employer to exploit their position by paying less than minimum wage. Unfortunately, many international students have no legal recourse to receive their earned income because they are working in violation of their study permit. For these young individuals, being exploited is an unexpected part of their Canadian experience.

*Students and their families believe it will be easy to settle here. But many students realize it is a struggle after they arrive, and they feel stuck.*

*- Rajpreet Sohal, One Voice member and former international student*

## LMIA Trading

Unscrupulous employers are also profiting from a phenomenon known as "LMIA Trading." This involves selling fake jobs through LMIAs to international students looking to settle in Canada. At this point, it is an open secret that LMIAs are up for sale to international students and other foreigners as a means to gain permanent residency (Tomlinson, 2019).

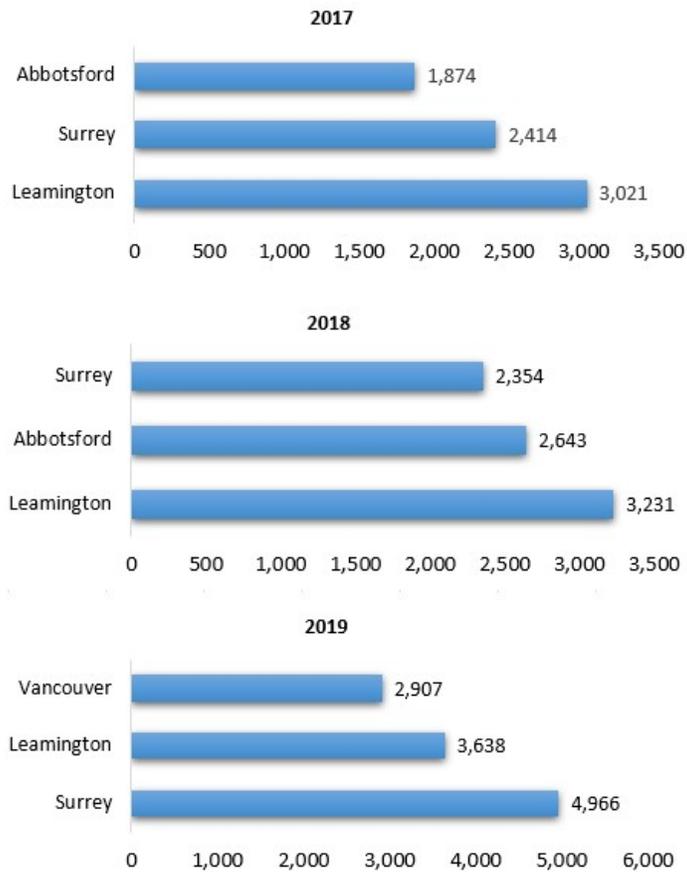
One Voice Canada has found that some international students will seek a temporary foreign worker visa if the struggle of being an international student is too great or if they have low job prospects with their educational qualifications. To purchase a such a visa, a student will be willing to pay an employer for a LMIA and many Canadian employers have taken advantage of this reality to sell them for a substantial price. One Voice Canada has been informed of LMIAs selling for up to \$50,000 for a fake job.

One Voice Canada has also learned from students seeking our assistance that this has become a widespread problem because corrupt immigration consultants have created an organized racket, by liaising between international students and local employers. These consultants recruit businesses to partake in this illegal scheme and then share a percentage of the funds from LMIA's sold to international students.

This issue has become prevalent in large Indian communities across Canada, such as those located in Surrey and Abbotsford, BC. It is difficult to determine the extent of LMIA's being sold. However, Figure 7 reveals that Surrey, BC, and Leamington, Ontario, are among the top three cities for approved LMIA's from 2017 to 2019.

We note there is a difference between Surrey and Leamington, in terms of the type of LMIA's being approved. According to Table 2, a majority of approved LMIA's in Surrey were for high wage workers, whereas 99% of approved LMIA's in Leamington were for agricultural workers. Given the sizeable agricultural industry in and around Surrey, BC, why employers in that municipality are recruiting more high wage workers than in any other Canadian city warrants further exploration.

**Figure 7: Top three cities for approved LMIAs (2017 to 2019)**



Source: Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020.

Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): Positive Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) Employers List

**Table 2: Percentage of LMIAs by workstream for Leamington and Surrey in 2019**

City	High Wage	Low Wage	Primary Agriculture	Global Talent Stream
Leamington	0%	1%	99%	0%
Surrey	69%	18%	13%	0%

Source: Source: Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020.

Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): Positive Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) Employers List

International students involved in these illegal activities are often coerced or complicit and thus play a role in creating this underground economy. However, their socio-cultural, financial and legal status vulnerability and precariousness and the pressure on them to settle in Canada, makes them easy prey for unscrupulous employers. It is also important to understand that for most of these students, returning back to India is not an option.

## Social Costs

The dollar figures evidencing the economic benefits of international education do not account for the social costs of the program. The most concerning consequence of the international student program as it currently operates is the heightened vulnerability it creates for international students, who, without adequate transition and adaptation supports, develop mental health issues and experience various forms of abuse.

### Mental Health and Suicide

Many international students coming from India view the Canadian international student program as their best hope to achieve social mobility. The stress and pressure experienced by these very young adults is of great concern. While at the extreme end of the spectrum, suicide among current or prospective international students has become a familiar, ongoing and unacceptable theme.

According to the BC Coroner Services' data, at least 15 foreign students committed suicide between 2013 and 2018, yet this number is likely an underestimate (Todd, 2019). The Ontario Office of the Chief Coroner does not have similar data for foreign or local post-secondary students.

There are nevertheless multiple reported examples of current and prospective international students. In 2018, Ajesh Chopra jumped into the St. Lawrence River in Windsor, Ontario, after being denied a work permit (Waddell, 2018). In 2020, Ram Thirath killed himself after pressure arising from his father's death (Go Fund Me campaign, 2020). In India, Harnoor Kaur consumed poison after receiving a low IELTS score (Times of India, 2017). In 2017, Pooranpreet Kaur set herself on fire after having her study visa rejected (Hindustan Times 2017). In 2019, the death of Linhai Yu in Richmond, BC, raised concern of suicides among Chinese international students (Xiong, 2019).

In 2009, reports raised similar concerns of suicide among international students in Australia., There were calls for a better reporting system of suicide deaths after it was found suicides of international students were being under-reported (Gilmore and Johnston, 2009). A decade later international student suicides are still a major concern. Various stakeholders are pleading to the government to collect relevant data in order to address the suicide trend among international students in Australia (Patten, 2019).

The numerous suicide cases related to students pursuing an international education should not be dismissed as singular instances. They are indicative of a deeper problem. A sizeable proportion of international students from modest-income families are facing pressures that are difficult to cope with. The pressures can stem from the high costs of tuition and living, debt obligations, challenges in academic performance and difficulty finding a job for a work permit. The cumulative effect of young people navigating a new culture and society, having little adult

guidance and facing such pressures is mental health deterioration. Yet, there are no easily accessible mental health supports available to them, where they may be unable or unwilling to vocalize the need for such supports.

Khalsa Aid's *International Students in Canada Survey* found approximately 6 in 10 students suffer from poor well-being which may be secondary to a depressive disorder. The *Survey* also found 3 in 10 suggesting a clinical or major depressive disorder. Furthermore, indicators suggesting clinical or major depressive disorder were more pronounced in female participants. Unfortunately, and often fatally, none of the Canadian marketing campaigns discuss the challenges of studying in Canada. Further, there is a disproportionate gendered effect, to which we now turn.

## Sexual Abuse

Young women of colour from abroad are particularly vulnerable in Canada. Female international students are more likely to be targeted for sexual assault or harassment than their domestic counterparts. MOSIAC BC, in a press release, explained that some perpetrators consider international students easy targets because they are more likely to be too ashamed to report sexual assault; unaware of where to get help; and influenced by different cultural norms (MOSAIC BC, 2019).

While there are initiatives to address sexual violence in post-secondary schools, they have historically been optional and continue to not be geared to international students' cultural norms or needs. In 2016, the BC Government enacted the *Sexual Violence and Misconduct Policy Act*, requiring post-secondary institutions establish and implement a sexual misconduct policy. In addition, the BC Ministry of Advanced Education developed policy guidelines to support post-secondary schools in developing policies and procedures to prevent sexual misconduct.

Given the need, MOSAIC BC, a non-profit that supports newcomers, has developed initiatives specifically focused on international students. In 2019, they launched Peer Cafes, an educational workshop program to provide sexual violence support to international students. They also developed training materials and workshops for staff at post-secondary schools. One Voice Canada has received several requests from female international students for assistance in situations of sexual abuse and harassment. The most challenging cases are when a young woman is economically dependent on her abuser or harasser. In most cases, the culprit is either their employer or landlord. Most often the young women want help to get out of their situation but are reluctant to take legal action against their abuser or harasser.

In situations involving employers, these students feel bound to their employer not only for income, but also a work permit after their studies. Some may even be working illegally and in violation of their study permit. One Voice Canada knows of a case where an employer threatened to report their female student employees to immigration officials, if they did not

cooperate. Economic desperation has placed many young women in situations where others can easily exert their position of privilege and abuse their power and authority.

Cultural stigma poses an additional challenge for women to report against their abusers. Many young women fear they will receive more shame and blame than support. They may also not want to create any 'trouble' by taking legal action against their abusers, because their families have made sacrifices to send them here. Again, disturbingly, being verbally, physically and sexually abused is part of the international student journey in Canada.

## COVID-19 Impact

The Coronavirus pandemic has exposed the weaknesses and flaws in societies across the world. In Canada, this includes the international student program, where many of the issues raised in this paper have become pronounced and exacerbated realities.

Those students who had in-campus accommodation became homeless, as universities and colleges shut-down. Those students who had been working illegally could not obtain benefits the federal government was providing. Specifically, with no evidence of income in 2019, they were excluded from the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB). This particularly impacted the January intake of students. One Voice Canada saw increased mental health concerns financial instability - including inability to pay fees - and food insecurity.

During COVID-19, Khalsa Aid Canada had free grocery operations in 17 locations across the country and gave out tens of thousands of groceries, predominantly to international students. One Voice Canada, with the support of Guru Nanak's Free Kitchen, also started an initiative to support international students dealing with food insecurity.

One of the most unsettling facts is that cases of suicide persisted and increased. In August 2020, Damandeep Kaur, a 20-year-old international student in Montreal, Quebec, committed suicide, reportedly due to the burdens of a young student studying abroad (Singh, 2020). Harminder Singh, a 22-year-old former international student seeking permanent residency, committed suicide in Brampton, Ontario (Sirhindi, 2020). Vishal Rai, a 21-year-old international student, also in Brampton, hanged himself (Global Punjab, 2020).

# Awareness of Student Vulnerability within Canadian Institutions

The Canadian government and post-secondary schools are aware of the problems associated with the international student program. In 2014, Citizenship and Immigration Canada conducted an evaluation of the international student program covering 2009 to 2013. This evaluation identified concerns of fraud and misuse of the program with respect to genuineness of students and educational institutes (CIC, 2015).

In 2017, a House of Commons Committee studied the exploitation of international students and other vulnerable people with precarious immigration status by unscrupulous immigration consultants. The Committee learned that consultants are known to ask for \$15,000 to \$20,000 to help an international student gain permanent residency. (House of Commons, 2017). The study also acknowledged that ICCRC and federal government agencies have not been able to address the problem of unregulated representatives referred to as 'ghost consultants' (House of Commons, 2017).

In 2018, Ontario's Niagara College re-tested hundreds of Indian international students in English language proficiency because they were academically struggling due to poor English skills. Other colleges have followed in Niagara College's footsteps and have also retested their international students. The college also decided to advise international students in need of local food banks and other support services (LaFleche, 2018), increasing the burden on the social services sector.

Despite these recognized issues and attempts by civil society to address them, there have been no publicized reforms to address the drawbacks of the international student program. The only planned changes to the international education sector are for the federal government to assist Canadian schools to diversify their international student body and be less reliant on India and China (Global Affairs Canada, 2019a).

We note that the desire for less Asian students has a questionable rationale if the goal is to improve the Canadian international student program. As noted earlier, many of these students are attracted to Canada by inaccurate marketing and by the pre-existing diaspora populations, both of which could be harnessed to improve the transition, if their well-being matters. Then changing the places of origin of students will not change the structural and systemic challenges they face studying and surviving in Canada.

# Recommended Path Forward

This report should raise concerns around the integrity of the international student program, the welfare of international students in Canada, and Canada's reputation on the world stage. We ask that the issues raised, and potential solutions be discussed among authorities, policy makers and stakeholders. To contribute to this discussion, this report proposes the following three recommendations:

**(1) Conduct an evaluative study of the International Student Program, examining the period between 2014 and 2020.**

Since June 2014 reforms, the international student population has significantly increased while fraud and adverse impacts persist. Important questions that should be answered about this six-year period include:

- How is the international student program being marketed and are the representations made to potential students and their families accurate and complete?
- How widespread is fraud and misuse (student non-compliance or non-genuine educational institutions and programs)?
- What are the graduation and employment outcomes of international students in Canada?
- How effective is the program at filling labour market gaps?
- Given the number of private colleges catering to international students, do the courses and qualifications offered by these schools align with labour shortages identified by public institutions?
- How does the program recognize socio-cultural transition and adaptation and envision this will be handled by educational institutions and international students?

**(2) Regulate and reduce tuition fees for international students.** The concerning problems facing international students stem predominantly from the financial burden of studying in Canada and the uncertainty about how much will be charged year per year. Moreover, stress from the financial burden can also hinder their ability to reach their academic potential. Canada should consider comparable countries approaches to international students and how to address them holistically, rather than simply as a revenue source.

**(3) Increase funding and training for specialized services within post-secondary international student offices.** The Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement Services proposed this recommendation based on research examining assessing support for international students in Canada. Their research found post-secondary international student offices have not responded to the unique needs of an increasing international student body (Dauwer, 2019). These offices are best-positioned to provide settlement services including off-campus housing support and assisting in determining pathways to permanent residency (Dauwer, 2019). Further, we note that pathways for international students to access legal information and advice, from organizations such as the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario and the South Asian Legal Clinic of British Columbia, are yet to be created.

## Concluding Remarks

Simon Marginson argues international students are in a precarious position with incomplete human rights because they are not fully protected by their country of citizenship or the host country (Marginson, 2011). Being migrants, they still face challenges to their security due to communication difficulties; challenges in entering the labour market; lack of information about the housing market; and greater likelihood of feeling isolated (Marginson, 2011). The protections they are afforded is akin to consumer protection (Marginson, 2011). Given increasing global mobility and that international students are economically desired, countries should ensure they provide human rights protection regardless of citizenship.

The findings in this report are concerning evidence of the international student experience in Canada. The increased vulnerability of and risks to students must be addressed. Whether from undesignated immigration consultants, unscrupulous landlords, exploitative employers or insensitive educational environments, require serious attention. Institutions must better consider and act on the financial strain and uncertainty they impose on international students as well as their mental health and well-being needs.

Above all, there is strong evidence that the current international student program has a social cost which is not being considered seriously. Most disconcerting are the systemic failures which are leading to the abuse of the most vulnerable international students, such as young women and men from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The challenge in advocating for reforms to help international students is that the status quo is very profitable for Canada. We hope that government authorities, public and private educational institutions, law and policy makers and other stakeholders will seriously address international students' needs and human rights, as they seek quality education, rather than seeing them as a commodity with which to generate revenue and support economic development.

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## Appendix: The Khalsa Aid International Students within Canada Survey findings regarding financial stability and mental health

**Table 1: Basic Demographic Information**

Question	Category	Female (N=148)	Male (N=155)	Overall (N=303)
Age	n	147	153	300
	Mean (SD)	22.4 (3.14)	22.4 (3.74)	22.4 (3.45)
	Median	22.0	21.0	21.0
	Min-Max	18-36	18-43	18-43
Home Country	India (n, %)	146 (98.7)	152 (98.1)	298 (98.4)
	Pakistan (n, %)	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)
	Other (n, %)	1 (0.7)	3 (1.9)	4 (1.3)
Marital Status	Single (n, %)	118 (79.7)	147 (94.8)	265 (87.5)
	Married (n, %)	28 (18.9)	8 (5.2)	36 (11.9)
	Common-law (n, %)	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)
	Divorced (n, %)	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)
Partner in Canada	Yes (n, %)	13 (8.8)	5 (3.2)	18 (5.9)
	No (n, %)	16 (10.8)	3 (1.9)	19 (6.3)
Dependents in Canada	0 (n, %)	2 (1.4)	3 (1.9)	5 (1.7)
	1 (n, %)	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)	2 (0.7)
	2 (n, %)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
	3 (n, %)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.3)
	>3 (n, %)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
	Not Applicable (n, %)	145 (98.0)	150 (96.8)	295 (97.4)
Relatives in Canada?	Yes (n, %)	69 (46.6)	55 (35.5)	124 (40.9)
	No (n, %)	81 (54.7)	100 (64.5)	181 (59.7)
Province Studying in	Alberta (n, %)	2 (1.4)	8 (5.2)	10 (3.3)
	British Columbia (n, %)	88 (59.5)	62 (40.0)	150 (49.5)
	Manitoba (n, %)	5 (3.4)	2 (1.3)	7 (2.3)
	New Brunswick (n, %)	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)	2 (0.7)
	Nova Scotia (n, %)	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)	2 (0.7)
	Ontario (n, %)	45 (30.4)	62 (40.0)	107 (35.3)
	Quebec (n, %)	5 (3.4)	16 (10.3)	21 (6.9)
	Saskatchewan (n, %)	1 (0.7)	3 (1.9)	4 (1.3)
Approached to do following	Criminal or Gang Recruitment	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)	2 (0.7)
	Prostitution or other Sex Work	3 (2.0)	4 (2.6)	7 (2.3)
	Drug Dealing	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)	2 (0.7)
	Other	2 (1.4)	2 (1.3)	4 (1.3)
	None of the above	141 (95.3)	148 (95.5)	289 (95.4)

**Table 2: The Financial Stability of Respondents**

Question	Category	Female (N=148)	Male (N=155)	Overall (N=303)
Somewhat or Very Concerned about paying for	Accommodation (n, %)	140 (94.6)	147 (94.8)	287 (94.7)
	School Expenses (n, %)	143 (96.6)	147 (94.8)	290 (95.7)
	Social Activities (n, %)	118 (79.7)	120 (77.4)	238 (78.5)
	Food, Clothing, Transport (n, %)	137 (92.6)	137 (88.4)	274 (90.4)
	Medical/Health (n, %)	131 (88.5)	132 (85.2)	263 (86.8)
	Immigration Expenses (n, %)	142 (95.9)	147 (94.8)	289 (95.4)
Do you have familial debt or loan for Education?	Yes (n, %)	97 (65.5)	114 (73.6)	211 (69.6)
	No (n, %)	51 (34.5)	41 (26.5)	92 (30.4)
Are you expected to help pay off debt or loan?	Yes (n, %)	89 (60.1)	117 (75.5)	206 (68.0)
	No (n, %)	59 (39.9)	38 (24.5)	97 (32.0)
Support for Fees	Parents, Relatives or Guardians (n, %)	123 (83.1)	121 (78.1)	244 (80.5)
	Partner (n, %)	23 (15.5)	5 (3.2)	28 (9.2)
	Scholarship (n, %)	15 (10.1)	12 (7.7)	27 (8.9)
	Personal Savings (n, %)	76 (51.4)	76 (49.0)	152 (50.2)
	On-campus work (n, %)	10 (6.8)	17 (11.0)	27 (8.9)
	Off-campus work (n, %)	87 (58.8)	107 (69.0)	194 (64.0)
	Paid Internship (n, %)	4 (2.7)	12 (7.7)	16 (5.3)

**Table 3: WHO-5 Well-Being Index results**

Question	Category	Female (N=148)	Male (N=155)	Overall (N=303)	p-value*
Score (0-100)	n	148	155	303	
	Mean (SD)	38.8 (22.74)	46.5 (23.59)	42.7 (23.47)	
	Median	36.0	44.0	40.0	
	Min-Max	0-92	0-100	0-100	
	Less than or Equal to 50 (n, %)	103 (69.6)	89 (57.4)	192 (63.4)	0.032
	Less than or Equal to 28 (n, %)	59 (39.9)	44 (28.4)	103 (34.0)	0.040

\* Fisher's exact test