

Why Student Migration Is Popular — Until It Isn't

Alexander Kustov

International student migration has long been one of the most popular forms of mobility across borders. Yet some countries have moved to restrict it in the past several years. This article applies the lessons on “persuasion by better policy design” from *In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular* to explain why student migration usually works politically—and how bad policies can destroy that consensus.

Immigration backlash is reshaping global politics. Yet one form of immigration has long enjoyed remarkably broad support: international student migration. Students pay tuition, fill classrooms, boost local economies, and stay to become skilled workers. In most democracies, the public has [viewed international students favorably](#)—even when attitudes toward immigration in general have soured.

That consensus, however, is now fraying. Canada, the UK, and Australia—three of the world’s top destinations for international students—have all moved to restrict student immigration in the past several years. What happened? And what do these events tell us about how democracies can manage immigration more effectively?

Research across democracies shows that voters largely care about their compatriots and prefer immigration policies that benefit their own countries. Public support for immigration rises when policies are “demonstrably beneficial” (i.e., when ordinary citizens can see, in practical terms, how immigration serves the national interest). Most voters feel neither unconditionally hostile nor unconditionally welcoming toward immigration. The vast majority hold conditional preferences—supporting it when they believe the system is working and opposing it when they do not. But persuasion through better messaging alone does not cut it; what wins voters’ trust are better policies.

Why Student Migration (Mostly) Works

International student migration is a powerful illustration of this framework. Student migration is overwhelmingly popular. Its popularity stems from the fact that students bring money into publicly financed universities, reinvigorate the communities where they study, and are expected to be skilled after they graduate. Interestingly, the most prominent concern people have about international students is not their impact on the host country but the possibility that students may return home rather than staying to contribute.

In the US, international students [contribute over \\$40 billion](#) to the economy annually. In Australia, Canada, and the UK, international tuition [effectively subsidizes](#) the cost of education for domestic students. Beyond revenue, those who stay after graduation contribute to innovation and fill labor shortages. Those who return home create lasting networks and spread the host country’s culture. This combination of economic contribution and institutional orderliness—students come through a legal channel with clear gatekeeping by universities—makes student migration intuitively appealing across the political spectrum, [much like skilled work migration more broadly](#).

When the Consensus Breaks

Canada offers the most dramatic cautionary tale. Its international student population roughly tripled in a decade, [exceeding one million by 2023](#). Much of this growth was driven not by selective universities but by colleges—including many that Canada’s own immigration minister [labeled](#) “diploma mills”—that enrolled students in low-quality programs where the primary value was a postgraduation work permit and pathway to permanent residence, not the education itself.

When the product being sold becomes immigration status rather than education, the demonstrable benefits of student migration evaporate. Students were paying high fees for programs with minimal instruction, living in overcrowded housing in suburbs like Brampton and Surrey, and working multiple part-time jobs with poor employment prospects. Local communities bore visible costs—housing pressure, strained infrastructure—without seeing corresponding benefits.

Public support for immigration—previously a [Canadian point of pride](#)—plummeted in what [observers described](#) as the sharpest shift in Canadian immigration attitudes in the history of the country’s polling. As a result, the Canadian government decided to impose a cap on new study permits in 2024, which helped but did not fully resolve the situation or fully win people’s trust back.

Similar dynamics unfolded in the UK and Australia, where rapid growth in student numbers—amplified by a [dependent visa surge in the UK](#) and a [poorly regulated vocational education sector in Australia](#)—eroded public trust in the student migration system. In both countries, governments moved to tighten restrictions, and the political debate shifted from whether international students were welcome to whether the system was out of control.

In all three countries, the backlash followed a pattern consistent with the demonstrably beneficial framework. Student migration became politically toxic not because voters suddenly turned against education or foreign students, but because policy design failures—diploma mills in Canada, the dependent loophole in the UK, the unregulated vocational sector in Australia—severed the link between student migration and visible public benefits. When students come for education and stay for skills, it works. When the education system becomes a backdoor immigration channel, trust collapses.

The Curious Case of Germany

Germany offers a striking contrast—but perhaps a fragile one. Its public universities provide [effectively free higher education](#) to all students, including those from outside the EU—a taxpayer subsidy that might seem like a political flashpoint. Yet international students in Germany have so far generated [comparatively little controversy](#).

German universities still maintain rigorous academic standards. The post-study pathway ties continued residence to securing qualified employment. The 2023 Skilled Immigration Act even expanded work opportunities for foreign graduates—framed not as an immigration concession but as an economic competitiveness strategy to address Germany's well-documented skilled worker shortage. And because domestic students also pay no tuition, international students are not perceived as receiving a special deal.

Germany's stability, however, should not be mistaken for inevitability. If German universities—or a parallel private sector—were to begin using degree programs primarily as immigration pathways for foreigners, outside of democratic oversight and labor market alignment, the same erosion of trust

as experienced in Canada could follow. The lesson is not that Germany has found a permanent solution but that its system currently maintains the conditions under which student migration remains demonstrably beneficial: genuine educational quality, labor market linkage, gradual growth, and a framing that emphasizes mutual benefit.

What This Means for Higher Education

For higher education professionals, the central lesson is not to take the popularity of international students for granted. The public support that student migration has traditionally enjoyed is *conditional*; it depends on the system working to benefit citizens, alongside students, as advertised. When universities or governments prioritize enrollment numbers and revenue over educational quality and labor market alignment, or take the role of immigration admissions, they undermine the very foundation of that support. The backlash in Australia, Canada, and the UK is not evidence that student migration is inherently unpopular or that xenophobia permeates everywhere. It is evidence that badly designed student migration policies become unpopular—a distinction with enormous practical implications.

Obviously, replicating Germany's tuition model is not feasible in most countries, where international student fees effectively subsidize domestic education. But governments do have design levers available: robust accreditation that shuts down programs functioning primarily as immigration pathways, post-study work rights tied to qualified employment rather than granted automatically, and enrollment growth calibrated to housing and labor market capacity. None of these require eliminating the revenue benefits of international students; they require ensuring the revenue model does not swallow the educational one.

International student migration can remain popular by design, but only if higher education systems and governments maintain quality, transparency, and visible benefit. The countries that get this right will attract global talent, strengthen their universities, and build durable public support. The countries that do not will discover—as Australia, Canada, and the UK already have—that even the most popular form of immigration can become toxic when voters conclude the system is no longer working in their interest.

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