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STUDENTS FOR SALE
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International students are lied to, cheated, and exploited on multiple fronts. They’re also propping up higher education as we know it

BY NICHOLAS HUNE-BROWN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CORNELIA LI

THE SINGH FAMILY home is a one-storey building of brick and cement on one of the main streets in Bibipur, a village of 1,000 in Punjab, northern India. The house has cracks in its walls and a roof of wood and mud that leaks during monsoon season. It was built about sixty years ago, and every decade or so since, whenever government workers have repaved the road outside the house, they’ve simply added another layer of asphalt on top of what was already there. Over time, the road has grown higher and higher, and the house has seemed to sink in contrast.

Kushandeep Singh was born here in 1999, and by the time he was a teenager, the house sat well below grade. Whenever it rained, water would stream in off the road and the family would rush to try to hold it back as best as they could with brooms and buckets.

Like just about everyone in Bibipur, the Singhs are farmers. The family owns a small plot—twelve acres of wheat and rice with a few cows and buffalo. On warm days as a child, Kushandeep would run off with his friends and bathe in the same pond the cows lolled around in. As landowners, the Singh family was far from the poorest in town, but they were a long way from wealthy. Fourteen people lived in the three-bedroom house: Kushandeep, his younger sister, and his parents in one room; one set of grandparents in another; and his uncle, aunt, and cousins in the third.

The family’s biggest investment by far was Kushandeep. Most of the kids in his village learned while sitting on the floor of the local government school, but Kushandeep’s father insisted on sending him to the nearest city, Patiala, to attend a private school with basketball courts and a cricket pitch and instruction in English. “My father never compromised on my education,” says Kushandeep. The tuition alone cost almost a third of the family’s income.

His father hired a rickshaw to ferry Kushandeep an hour to school each way, picking up other students en route. Over the years, on long rides down dusty highways, Kushandeep would sit back and watch the billboards float past—an ever-shifting window into the world outside Bibipur. When he was young, all the ads were for local restaurants and stores. As he grew older, billboards for multinationals like McDonald’s followed. Finally, as Kushandeep neared the end of secondary school, a new product began to appear: postsecondary education in Canada.

A decade ago, few people in rural Punjab were thinking about schools in Canada. It was a cold, mysterious place that didn’t hold much appeal. “But, in the past five or six years, it’s become a hot topic,” says Prithvi Raj, a student in India who was preparing to study overseas when he spoke with me. “Canadian education is being sold like hotcakes. You don’t even have to sell it—people will just come and buy.”

The product being advertised on billboards in Patiala is the same one that thousands of recruiters are hawking at education fairs in Beijing and private-school visits in Rio de Janeiro: a new version of the Canadian immigrant dream. The pitch is straightforward. First, get a student visa to study in Canada—the specific school doesn’t particularly matter. After that, get a postgraduate work permit that lets you live and work in the country for up to three years. Then apply for permanent residency. When described by a seasoned recruiter, the process seems simple. Details about what to study, or the actual odds of becoming a permanent resident, aren’t particularly important. What’s important is the idea that, if you run that gauntlet, you can build a life beyond anything you could dream of in a place like Bibipur. “Every student is going to these agents and saying, ‘I want to go to Canada,’” says Kushandeep.

At eighteen, Kushandeep was a baby-faced teenager with big brown eyes and a thoughtful, earnest way of expressing himself. He did well in school, though not as well as some of the richer kids in his class. His English was improving, but he had never left the state, let alone the continent. He had one distant cousin on his father’s side who had studied in British Columbia. But, as far as he knew, not a single person from his village had ever gone to school overseas. When Kushandeep did well on his
English proficiency exams and education abroad began to seem like a real possibility, his family considered borrowing money from every relative and friend they knew. But the numbers didn’t add up. For an international student, tuition at a Canadian school started at $20,000 a year, excluding the cost of living. In a good year, if the harvests went well, the Singh family earned about $9,000 in profit. Eventually, it was decided: the family would mortgage their farm.

Students like Kushandeep have complicated the usual picture of international study. The 2000s-era stereotype of the pampered young foreigner, usually from mainland China, who drives flashy sports cars and shops for Gucci bags between classes was always a caricature, but now it’s entirely divorced from reality. In 2019, 34 percent of the more than 642,000 international students in Canada were from India, well ahead of China’s 22 percent.

Many of these students are from Punjab, and they generally attend small community colleges, not internationally renowned universities. A recent study by Rakshinder Kaur and Kamaljeet Singh, professors of education at Punjabi University Regional Centre, surveyed students attending an English-language training school in preparation to study abroad: 80 percent came from farming families, most from small farms. When asked where they wanted to study, 78 percent said Canada. Mortgaging land to cover tuition has become common, with more and more families literally selling the farm to send their children to community colleges.

These students are driving an international education industry that has exploded in recent years, their numbers tripling in the last decade. Today, Canada says it’s the third most popular country for study in the world behind only the United States and Australia. In press releases and reports, the federal government brags that foreign students bring over $21 billion into the economy each year—more than auto parts, more than lumber. Those numbers are the result of a decade of careful nurturing, a triumph of salesmanship, and carefully calibrated government policies.

International students are also the product of a system that has blurred the lines between immigration and education in an unofficial, ad hoc arrangement meant to appeal to potential immigrants while avoiding any responsibility for their settlement. It’s a system that is quietly transforming postsecondary institutions, which have grown dependent on fees from foreign students and therefore on the shadowy world of education agents who deliver them. And it’s a system built on attracting teenagers like Kushandeep from small villages across the world, taking their money, and bringing them to campuses from small-town Nova Scotia to suburban BC with lofty promises for the future but little regard for what actually happens to them once they arrive.

THE AGENTS

When Kushandeep wanted to figure out how to begin a life in Canada, he did what everyone does: he went to an education agent.

These salespeople aren’t difficult to track down in India. “You could find an agent shop on every corner, on every street, on every road,” says Kushandeep. One agent I spoke with put their numbers in the tens of thousands in India alone, though there is no way to know the exact figure—it is a largely unregulated business, open to anyone.

Agents connect students like Kushandeep with postsecondary institutions overseas. They often find the school, complete the paperwork, and apply for the visa. Despite this, they’re generally not paid by the students but by the institutions. Schools aren’t often forthcoming about their commissions, but multiple agents told me that the industry standard is 15 to 20 percent of a student’s first year of tuition—a rate that can net them anywhere from $1,500 to $5,000 a head.

It’s a commission the institutions are more than willing to pay since it will be recouped by an international tuition close to five times higher than domestic fees. Today, attracting overseas students is a financial imperative. The result is a booming secondary economy built on top of the international student market, with immigration consultants and recruiters mushrooming up around the world.

Mel Broitman can remember the business in its infancy. In the mid-1990s, when the former CBC journalist began his education-consultancy company with his lawyer friend Dani Zaretsky, the market in Canada was modest. He explains that China was sending a few thousand students a year. There was the odd European. “When we first started working, in ’97, there were maybe 400 Indian students,” Broitman says.

Broitman started building his business in Bangladesh, travelling to elite high schools and giving his little presentation about life in Canada. “It was sleepy times,” he says. Over the next two decades, he watched the evolution of what’s now a multibillion-dollar industry. In the early 2000s, he went to China—for decades the single biggest source of overseas students—and saw a potential goldmine. Agents, he says, were double-charging, taking money from students as consultants and then taking commissions from the institutions. They were falsifying grades, failing English-proficiency tests—anything to get kids into a Canadian school. Broitman was appalled. He remembers calling up his partner and asking facetiously, “Dan, you want to make $3 million a year, cash? We only have to be a little bit crooked.”

In 2011, Canada attracted 239,131 students. It was around this time that the federal government decided it needed to double that number in the next decade. In “International Education: A Key Driver of Canada’s Future Prosperity,” the 2012 report that would become the blueprint for the country’s strategy, the authors urge the government to act quickly. “We believe Canada is facing a unique window of opportunity that requires coordination of our promotional efforts.” These students, the report argues, are necessary to address skilled labour shortages and relieve demographic pressures as Canada’s working population ages.

The factors that make Canadian education attractive to international students have little to do with the schools themselves and much more to do with the
fact that Canada is an English-speaking country, it has a reputation for safety, and most importantly, it has tweaked its immigration policies. Canada allows students to work up to twenty hours a week off-campus—a necessity for indebted students like Kushandeep. Students are allowed to stay in the country and work for up to three years after graduation. During that time, they can also apply for permanent residency. Under the Express Entry program, students enter a pool with other prospective immigrants and are given points according to a number of criteria from language skills to education to work experience. The government selects those with the most points, the cut-off changing each selection period depending on who else applies.

Adjusting those two variables, the ability to work and the pathway to permanent residency (PR), is how governments try to control the flow of students. Create a more favourable path to PR—by, for example, assigning more points to those getting a Canadian degree, as Canada did in 2016—and you open the faucet wider. Restrict the ability to work post-graduation, as the UK did in 2010, and the market dries up.

Over the last decade, Canada has done its best to increase that flow. In 2019, 642,000 international students came to Canada—three times as many as when the 2012 report was drawn up. And, as the number of students has grown, the recruitment business has grown with it. Broitman claims that his company delivered some 6,300 students to the University of Windsor over fifteen years, worth approximately $400 million in tuition. But that figure is tiny compared to the behemoth agencies in China and India moving kids at volume. New Oriental, a publicly traded company out of Beijing that combines private education, English tutoring, and international recruitment, has a market cap of more than $17 billion.

According to Broitman, the economics of the system reveal a fundamental truth: a student who walks into an agent’s shop is not the client—they’re the product.

If an agent is getting commissions from an unremarkable community college in rural Ontario, then their only motivation is to get every teenager who walks through their door, no matter how brilliant or hopeless, to enroll in that one college. “That’s how the business works,” says Broitman. “You just direct people to where your bread is buttered.”

The students I spoke with described fast-talking salespeople pitching an unrealistic vision of Canada and, in particular, of students’ chances for permanent residency. “They push a lot,” says Rajpreet Sohal, a student from India who studied at Lakehead University. “Even if a student is poor, they say, ‘Don’t worry, you can ask for money.’”

Sohal remembers visiting an agent who kept encouraging him to apply to small colleges in Canada despite his excellent grades and his desire to pursue graduate school. When Sohal eventually went to Lakehead University for a master’s in mechanical engineering, he decided to become an international-student ambassador. There, he spoke with students from around the world, from Nigeria to Thailand, all of whom, he recalls, described the same agent behaviours in their home countries. Some had been pushed toward certain private schools that aren’t eligible for postgraduate work permits. Others had been given false information about tuition fees. One student had boarded a plane after being told they were enrolled in one college only to arrive and find they hadn’t actually been signed up.

“This thing is getting nasty,” says Sohal. “It’s a dirty business.”

Beyond the clear-cut instances of fraud, the entire system in Canada is built around the false premise that education, not work and immigration, is the primary aim for most students. According to a survey by the Canadian Bureau of International Education, 60 per cent of students intend to apply for permanent residency, a percentage that is likely far higher if you look solely at students attending community colleges. “Everybody knows it’s just a pathway to PR,” says Prithvi Raj. “That’s what the government is encouraging. That’s what the agents are selling. Any way you slice it, everybody is in on this.”
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If students want permanent residency, they need to pick an area of study that will eventually earn them enough points through Canada’s Express Entry immigration system. It may be easy to get accepted into one community college’s pastry chef program, but what are the odds of that degree turning into a “skilled labour” job that will lead to a future in Canada? For agents on the streets of Patiala, however, who have never been to the institutions they’re representing and may have little knowledge of the intricacies of the Canadian immigration system, the incentive is simple: get every student, and their fees, into whatever program will accept them.

“What you see on the ground are a bunch of education agents who are absolutely taking advantage of your average consumer,” says Earl Blaney, an immigration consultant and education agent who works in the Philippines and has been outspoken about abuses in the business. “The bottom line is these kids are being set up for failure, left and right, by these education agents overseas who don’t know anything about the Canadian labour market and do not care.”

The government doesn’t release numbers on the percentage of students who apply for permanent residency and actually receive it. But Express Entry is a competitive process, with nineteen-year-old community college students entering the same pool as overseas doctors, French-speaking engineers, and married professionals with twice as much work experience. In 2015, Statistics Canada found that the “transition rate” for international students becoming permanent residents was between 20 and 27 percent. If the vast majority of community college students from India are hoping for PR, the math isn’t complicated: a lot of families who have wagered everything on a future in Canada are losing that bet.

In 2019, Broitman left the world of recruiting for good. “The problem with this business is there’s so much money at stake,” he says. Agents, he tells me, are only part of the problem. Universities and colleges are just as culpable.

**THE SCHOOLS**

**WHEN KUSHANDEEP went to meet his education agent in Chandigarh, a bustling city a two-hour drive away, all he knew was that he wanted to study in British Columbia, the province where his distant cousin lived. The agent did the rest. Kushandep, the man decided, should take a two-year business program. He directed him to a sprawling west-coast school that Kushanep had never heard of: Kwantlen Polytechnic University.**

KPU is a community-college-turned-polytechnic-university with 20,000 students spread out over five campuses across BC’s Lower Mainland. It offers a huge selection of degrees, diplomas, and certificate programs from anthropology to appliance-servicing.

Over the last decade, the percentage of KPU’s funding that comes from the government has dropped, as it has for most schools. Historically, colleges and universities received most of their funding through the province. Canada-wide, this share of total funding has fallen, from 38.6 percent in the 2013/14 academic year to 35.4 percent in 2018/19. Without much discussion, Canada’s publicly funded institutions have ceased to receive most of their funding from the public. In 2015/16, for the first time since the 1950s, more than half of university and college revenues didn’t come from the government.

That money is being replaced by students like Kushanep. In 2007/08, KPU had just 525 international students. A decade later, it had 6,002 and was receiving so many applications that it had to temporarily shut down international enrolment. Those students were almost wholly responsible for the school’s growth. In 2018, the university approved a 15 percent increase on international student tuition, bumping yearly fees up to nearly $20,000—four times higher than domestic rates. That year, the school posted a $22 million surplus.

Those numbers are extraordinary, but they’re representative of the kind of growth seen at any number of otherwise unexceptional institutions. Today, international students are responsible for almost 40 percent of all tuition fees across Canada. This year, when Sudbury’s Laurentian University went bankrupt, industry watchers had one specific piece of criticism: the university hadn’t worked as hard as its competitors to lure in students from abroad.

The biggest growth hasn’t been at universities, however. It’s been in smaller community colleges that offer the same path to a work permit and permanent residency with comparatively cheaper tuition and programs that can be completed in just two years. At Langara College, in Vancouver, international enrolment skyrocketed from just 968 students in 2010 to 4,728 a decade later. At Lambton College in Sarnia, Ontario, international students grew a whopping twelvefold between 2009 and 2019. That year, Lambton earned twice as much revenue from international students as it did from domestic students and government funding combined.

The international-student business has an institutional face in the Canadian Bureau for International Education, a nonprofit based in Ottawa. When the CBIE talks about this growth, it uses high-minded language about the benefits that come with these students. “I think, increasingly, over time, the work of international education is the stuff that binds us together,” says president Larissa Bezo.

“Part of that comes from the richness and the presence of international students on our Canadian campuses, where our Canadian students and domestic learners are exposed to the really rich depth of those individuals’ lived experiences.” The word institutions use to describe that process is *internationalization* — a term plastered across websites and accompanied by photos of smiling multicultural students. The students themselves have a different term for it: they say they’re being used as cash cows.

As universities and colleges have become dependent on international students, their relationships with agents and consultants overseas have come under scrutiny. The institutions I spoke with all described a careful vetting process for their agents. Brad Van Dam of Langara College says his institution
rejects dozens of new agents a year who want to work with Langara but aren’t up to its standards.

KPU works with approximately 100 agents around the world, according to Carole St. Laurent, associate vice-president of KPU International. “We get three solid [employment] referrals. And then we sign a one-year contract,” she says, adding that the school takes complaints from students about agent behaviour extremely seriously and has had to dismiss agents in the past.

But some agents say schools benefit from a system that’s far more freewheeling, with little to no oversight from the institutions ostensibly managing hundreds of recruiters from an ocean away. And the problem isn’t limited to Canada. In Australia, a 2019 parliamentary inquiry found that “international students were vulnerable, open to exploitation by unscrupulous education agents, and a lack of regulation enabled [agents] to operate without any consequences for their actions.” In 2016, after discovering that hundreds of agents in India were submitting fraudulent documents, New Zealand began cracking down on overseas recruiters. Both countries have tried to introduce legislation to protect international students. In Canada, Manitoba is the only province with specific legislation to regulate overseas recruiters. In the rest of the country, it seems, anything goes.

“The whole system is all messed up,” says Gautham Kolluri, an Indian-born former international student who worked as a recruiter for Mohawk College and Conestoga College before starting his own consulting business.

In the last few years, Kolluri has seen a troubling new trend—the rise of “aggregator recruiters” who bring the lessons and funding of Silicon Valley to the world of postsecondary education. These venture capital-backed companies work on a simple, disruptive model: sign up thousands of agents and hundreds of colleges and universities, then act as the go-between, making it easier and cheaper than ever for institutions to sign up students at scale.

One of the largest players in this industry is ApplyBoard, a Canadian startup founded in 2015 by three Iranian-born brothers, former international students themselves. Meti Basiri, one of the co-founders, says there are plenty of reasons companies like his are attractive to institutions. “Universities don’t have the resources to go to every single village or smaller and bigger cities of India,” says Basiri. ApplyBoard, meanwhile, has thousands of recruiters across the country, meaning schools no longer have to do the expensive, time-intensive work of managing their own agents. Institutions just sign up, and ApplyBoard will funnel in all the students they need. According to Basiri, one out of five Indian students in Canada arrived through ApplyBoard agents.

According to critics, aggregate recruiters allow institutions to avoid any accountability for the actions of the agents representing them. “It eliminates the link between the colleges themselves and the agents,” says agent Earl Blaney. “The schools are now not even responsible or connected to these agents, but they’re the ones selling the school.” It’s a $21 billion dollar industry, he says, with hardly any rules.

ApplyBoard says it vets all its recruiters, rejecting 46 percent of applicants. Approved agents are then trained through online webinars and an interactive course. But institutions seem to understand the potential for abuse that comes with working through aggregators. In the past, Langara refused to allow its agents to work with subagents. “The reason for that is because then we lose the control of who these people are, how they’re representing the institution,” says Van Dam. Last year, despite those qualms, Langara signed an agreement to work with ApplyBoard in what Van Dam describes as a trial period. In theory, there’s nothing stopping an agent that Van Dam rejected yesterday from signing up with ApplyBoard and sending kids to the college soon afterward.

KPU also recently signed up with the company, as did hundreds of other Canadian institutions that may have once had similar misgivings, from Western University, the University of Manitoba, and Acadia University to colleges.
like Medicine Hat College and Loyalist College. “A lot of schools want international students,” explains Basiri. “And some of the schools want international students fast.”

“The whole business has become student-trafficking,” says Kolluri. A few years ago, he went back to Punjab, where he was born, and saw shopping malls full of fly-by-night agencies selling Canadian education. It’s clear that the business was creating a lot of winners. “The losing side is international students,” says Kolluri. “If they don’t get the correct guidance, their whole life is messed up.”

WORK

The day Kushandeep left Bibipur, the entire village lined the streets to see him off. People he’d never even met came out to wish him well, to give him ten or fifteen rupees and implore him to remember them when he made it to Canada. “It felt like I’d already accomplished something,” he says.

By the time he landed in Vancouver, on December 11, 2017, after a two-day journey, he felt much less assured. His distant cousin, the one person he knew on the continent, picked him up at the airport and drove him out to a basement apartment in Surrey, leaving him with three strangers—his new roommates.

That first month, Kushandeep had never felt more lonely in his life. Surrey was cold, his roommates were constantly working, and life in Canada was expensive. He was paying $400 a month for his portion of the apartment, where he shared a queen mattress with one of his new roommates. His bus pass was $50, groceries another $200. When classes began, he enjoyed them. But his classroom experience was only a tiny part of his new life: before he could even worry about school, he needed to find a job.

Kushandeep dropped his resume everywhere, finally landing employment at a home-fixtures manufacturer. The owner was Indian-born, also from Punjab, and he hired Kushandeep over the phone, no questions asked. “He told me, ‘I will see you for a month and see how you work, then I will decide how much I want to pay you,’” Kushandeep remembers.

For a month, Kushandeep loaded and unloaded vans. He lugged heavy sheets of plywood. “I was just like a donkey who was just putting loads from one place to another,” he says. At the end of his trial period, after Kushandeep had worked over eighty hours, the owner gave him $600—a rate that worked out to just shy of half of minimum wage.

Over the following months, Kushandeep’s boss insisted on paying him per day rather than hourly. Knowing that Kushandeep’s visa had strict rules about the number of hours he could work each week, his boss would often bring him out in the van for day-long jobs. “He knew I couldn’t take the pay,” he says. “But they used to say you have to do work or you lose your job.”

His situation was hardly unique. The growing body of international students has created a massive labour force ripe for exploitation. “We call them migrant students, not international students,” says Sarom Rho, an organizer with Migrant Students United, an offshoot of the advocacy group Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. Like other migrants, from farm workers to care workers, international students are defined by their precarity. “What having temporary status means is that power is taken away from us,” says Rho. “We have less access to basic rights and protections, including labour protections. Employers have all the power.”

Rho has spoken with countless students who report being taken advantage of by their bosses. “We were hearing about students working in cleaning and restaurant jobs for far below minimum wage. Employers not paying their wages on time or at all.”

Students can work only twenty hours off campus a week, by law. That rule is, in theory, supposed to discourage those who want to come to Canada simply to make money. In reality, students desperate to pay rent often end up working under the table. And, once they’re working illegally, they’re at the mercy of their employers.

Sunanda (whose name has been changed to protect her privacy) was eighteen when she arrived at Langara College. After losing her job at Walmart, she took a job at a restaurant in Vancouver. “They were winking at me, always telling me that, if I want to meet a famous Punjabi singer, they can help me, and they can give me more money,” says Sunanda. “Once, my bosses took me to a building in Surrey,” she remembers. “They offered to pay all my fees, I just have to live with them.”

Her employers never directly asked for sex, but Sunanda knew what they were suggesting. She was already depressed and anxious, and their insinuations took a profound toll. She knew other students who’d been harassed and sexually exploited by bosses. She quit a few days later, never going back to the restaurant. “I’m from a very small village. I had never experienced this,” she says. “It was mental torture.”

Puneet Dhillon, an analyst at the Brampton location of Punjabi Community Health Services, says young female students often arrive in Canada without any support. They lack knowledge of the legal system and have no financial safety net. “All that makes them more vulnerable to any form of sexual exploitation than any other members of the community,” says Dhillon.

For Kushandeep, nearly eight months of being paid below minimum wage was all he could take. He quit, eventually finding work at another manufacturing company that agreed to pay him minimum wage.

He began work a few days later, in early December of 2018. During winter vacations, when schools are closed, international students are allowed to
Examining history and failures in public policy exposed by COVID-19, acclaimed scholar Andrew Potter asks: what if there is something to the notion of “the decline of the West” after all?

A SOCIETY IN CRISIS

Prize-winning author and journalist Elaine Dewar spins a compulsive whodunnit on the origins of COVID-19 and how leading science journals got it wrong.

The Walrus

work full-time, and Kushandeep was eager to get as many hours as he could. Like at his previous job, he says, his new employer hadn’t given him any training or made him sign any employment papers. There were no official breaks, and he found himself pushing through exhaustion.

On January 3, he was loading a van with an enormous mirror when it broke in his hands. He felt the sharp edge flick across his wrist. Then he couldn’t feel his hand at all. When Kushandeep looked down, the cut was gruesome: a U-shaped gash that had sliced through the sinews, cutting right down to the bone. He says a coworker rushed over to see if he was okay and then immediately got on the phone—not to the paramedics but to their boss. He came back with instructions: Put him in a van and take him to emergency and say he got hurt at home.

Kushandeep staggered out of the shop, bleeding profusely, and passersby eventually called an ambulance. When he woke up, he was in the hospital. The doctors told him the cut had severed his nerves and tendons. His artery had also been damaged. There was a fifty-fifty chance he would never use his hand again.

That night, Kushandeep spoke to his boss. “He didn’t ask how I was,” Kushandeep remembers. The next day, he says, his boss explained that he didn’t have insurance and Kushandeep wasn’t covered. If Kushandeep told authorities he was hurt on the job, the man said, it would mean trouble for everyone.

When the worker’s compensation board called, Kushandeep told them the truth about what had happened. After that, things changed. Kushandeep says his employer refused to pay his hours on the job; when worker’s compensation interview the boss, he told them Kushandeep was a stranger who was trying to blackmail him. “He knew that I had no family here in Canada,” says Kushandeep. “Who would be guiding me? I had no resources.”

After the accident, Kushandeep fell into a depression. He ignored his parents’ calls for weeks; he couldn’t bear to tell them what had happened. He tried speaking with his school about how he was feeling, but it seemed like there was no way for them to help him. He didn’t know if his insurance claim would go through, and as a temporary worker in this country, he had no recourse to disability. “Who would pay my rent? Who would get my groceries?” he wondered. He knew his English wasn’t good enough to get a customer-facing job. “I was just a hard worker. I could lift heavy things. But, if I was without that, I would have no more options.”

Failing in Canada was unthinkable. It would mean returning to India with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It would mean losing the farm, destroying not just his future but his entire family’s as well. “I was really scared,” says Kushandeep. “I used to think that, if my hand never started to work, I would commit suicide.”

CONSEQUENCES

About three years ago, Kamal Bhardwaj began to notice a disturbing trend. The British-born fifty-three-year-old is a prominent member of the South Asian community and the owner of a pair of funeral homes in Brampton and Toronto. He’s someone Indian Canadians know to call when they need a “ship out”—someone to prepare a body for transfer overseas. Dealing with tragedy is his business. But, when Bhardwaj began seeing more and more young people showing up at his funeral homes, it gave him pause.

“When international students pass away, people contact us,” says Bhardwaj. He was hearing from landlords, from the deceased’s classmates, and from distant relatives. Bhardwaj says the cause of death isn’t always shared with him. “But sometimes it’s quite obvious,” he says. “There are ligature marks on the neck. Those are the easy ones to know. Other cases, it could be drug overdose, drug related, and so forth. But we know that a percentage of those will be suicide.” For the last few years, Bhardwaj says, he’s been getting several such cases each month.

Shivendra Dwivedi, an anesthesiologist and the president of Canada India Global Forum, says that, last year, during an informal lunch he was hosting, the
high commissioner of India to Canada told him that he was concerned about the rise in suicides. According to the High Commission’s official numbers, seven international students took their own lives in 2020. But those numbers show only part of the problem, says Dwivedi. The taboo around suicide and mental illness in Indian culture means that other deaths are kept quiet. “If there is a suicide, many families tend to hide it,” he says.

When he first noticed these deaths, Bhardwaj got in touch with the Punjabi Community Health Centre in the Peel region, a suburb of Toronto with a large South Asian population. Together, Bhardwaj and the PCHC decided to launch a new support group, Sunoh. Anupma Cvejic, CEO of the PCHC, wants the group to partner with Canadian universities to let students know there’s help for them. Ultimately, though, she knows she needs to reach students before they arrive. “We want to have these conversations with students before they even apply,” she says. “They’re being told all these fake promises and fake dreams that are shattered the moment they get here. Their first experience here is of abandonment, of isolation and loneliness.”

There are countless reasons an international student may suffer serious mental health issues, but for Cvejic and Bhardwaj, it was clear that the immense pressure students face in a foreign country is one of them. The smallest mistakes here—something that would be inconsequential for a Canadian student—can have devastating repercussions. Not remembering to sign up for a course, changing your program, failing a class, working too many hours—all can result in study permit problems. At worst, they can even lead to deportation.

In 2018, twenty-five students at St. Clair College, a small school in Windsor, Ontario, were denied their postgraduate work permits when a course they were taking, which they believed to be part of their business management program, was deemed ineligible by the government. Without their permits, they would be forced to leave the country. The students described feeling sick with the news, unable to sleep or eat. “I’m broken and I’m very upset,” one told the CBC. Shortly afterward, another of the students, Ajesh Chopra, died by suicide.

In late May 2021, news of another suicide broke. The information on the GoFundMe page asking for donations laid out the barest of details, but the outlines were familiar. Lovepreet Singh had come to Canada in 2018 to study at Centennial College. He came from a very poor family in the village of Charik, in Punjab, and was “stressed about his situation since last year due to financial and immigration problems.” Singh had dropped out of Centennial and was living on the streets. He took his own life by jumping in front of a train.

According to Daljeet Kaur, a family friend and former international student herself, Singh’s parents had sold their farm. “They’re $70,000 in debt,” she explained. The money being raised in the group wasn’t to return his body, which was not fit to be transported. It was for a funeral and to help his parents.

In recent years, there is some evidence that schools have started to recognize the gravity of the problem on campuses: some have rolled out peer support groups, others have brought in counselling in students’ first languages. But the fundamental way the system is set up ignores the reality of the pressures these students face. Community colleges and even large universities aren’t equipped to manage an immigration settlement program for teenagers. They’d rather think of themselves as institutions of higher learning, not convenient waystations for young people in search of better lives. “It’s wilful denial,” says Earl Blaney. “Purposeful denial. They don’t want to be responsible.”

In the weeks after his accident, his dominant hand still bandaged and useless, Kushandep spent a lot of time praying at the gurdwara near his apartment. There, he saw a poster for a support group targeted at international students, One Voice Canada, which was holding a meeting at the temple.
The meeting, with more than 100 people filling the gurdwara, was eye opening. “It’s not just me,” Kushandeep realized. “We leave our parents, we leave our home country. Our families spend all their resources on us just for us to have a good future here. That’s a lot of pressure on your brain. An eighteen- or nineteen-year-old brain is not a brain that can handle all of that.”

The organization, formed by concerned members of BC’s South Asian community, helped Kushandeep fight his employer. They made sure his insurance claim went through and he was able to receive compensation for his hours worked as well as the time he had to take off due to his injury. Kushandeep couldn’t work for nearly a year, but slowly, his hand healed back almost to what it was.

When I first spoke with him, in the fall of 2019, Kushandeep was finishing off the final three credits of his two-year program at KPU. He was working again, still living in Surrey, and trying to make sense of the long road to permanent residency still before him.

In the time since, the world has turned upside down. The pandemic wreaked havoc on international education, leaving some students stranded in Canada and others stuck overseas, paying premium prices for middle-of-the-night Zoom tutorials. With travel restricted, enrolment plummeted. The Canadian government responded with various enticements to keep the students flowing, introducing a two-stage admissions process to encourage students to begin their studies online and tweaking postgraduate work-permit eligibility to allow those studying abroad virtually to qualify later. Despite that, colleges and universities saw losses.

For the students and former students who were already in the country, the lockdowns brought new hardships. In the Peel region, volunteer groups popped up to deliver free meals to the many who had lost their jobs. Others lost the “skilled labour” employment that might have led to a permanent spot in Canada and instead found jobs as essential workers. “We know current and former international students who are working overnight in grocery stores,” says Sarom Rho. “The warehouses in Peel region and Scarborough are filled with international students.” Sunanda, the young woman who quit her restaurant job after fearing sexual harassment, eventually dropped out of school. During the pandemic, she worked as a security guard at an Amazon fulfillment centre.

But, despite the pandemic slump in the international-student market, those who know the industry best are betting on it returning stronger than ever. In June, ApplyBoard finished its latest round of funding, raising $375 million, which values the company at more than $3 billion (US). Cofounder Meti is confident that Canada will remain a big draw for students in the semesters to come. If anything, he says, it could soon be even bigger: if the country is willing to allow hybrid virtual teaching models, removing class-size limitations, the potential is limitless. “Canada can double up their international numbers in the next three years,” he says.

For Kushandeep, the pandemic has proven a boon. When I spoke with him in the spring, as vaccines rolled out across Canada, he was able to receive compensation for his hours worked and the time he had to take off due to his injury. His hand healed back almost to what it was, and he was able to continue his studies at KPU.
the country, he was living in Winnipeg. Manitoba needed workers, and he had been happy to oblige.

Now a KPU graduate with a three-year work permit, he was making cabinets on an assembly line (a skilled trade, according to the government, putting him in a good position for permanent residency). Life, he told me, was mostly good. He was living in a shared house on the outer limits of the city and earning $18.50 an hour—enough to send money home on occasion. He was working from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. every day, then driving for Uber until he was exhausted.

He was determined to do whatever it takes to buy his family’s land back. His coworkers were kind Canadian-born men his father’s age. “They think of me as a kid,” he said. The other weekend, on one of the first warm Sundays of the year, they took him out to a golf course, showing him how a lefty holds a club.

Kushandeep, in some ways, could be seen as proof that the system is working as it should. After all, immigration has always been difficult; people have always found ways to make money facilitating it; why not postsecondary institutions? In this light, it’s a win-win-win story: a college gets tuition, a Winnipeg cabinet manufacturer gets a worker, and Kushandeep gets a shot at life in a country he’d have had no chance of immigrating to any other way.

In a few months, he’ll have completed a year of skilled work in Canada, and he plans to apply for PR. And, this year, because the pandemic has slowed other forms of immigration, graduates like him have been given extra spots to help Canada hit its quota. It has never been easier for an international student to immigrate. The dream of a permanent home here seems well within Kushandeep’s grasp.

On the phone from Winnipeg one evening, he talked about his plans for the future. The first thing he would do, of course, was pay his family back. But, after that, who knows? Cabinetmaking wasn’t something he’d ever thought about before, but he liked it. More than that, he was good at it. Maybe one day he’d own his own business.

He warmed up as he spoke, spinning out a vision of the future. “By that point, maybe I will be married,” he said. He wouldn’t stay in Winnipeg—the Sikh community, like the city itself, felt too small, and the weather was awful—but maybe he could find a job back in BC. Most of all, Kushandeep wanted to bring his parents here. “They deserve it,” he said. “I want to show them the world outside their village.”

None of it would be easy, but Kushandeep was determined. And he’d already come so far. “I’m the first kid from my village in Canada,” he said.

It was an appealing vision—a twenty-first-century version of the immigrant dream. It’s the kind of story that travels, carrying the promise of a better future. It’s something you could sell on a billboard.

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**WE WANT WHAT WE WANT**

Alix Ohlin

Thirteen glittering and darkly funny stories of people testing boundaries, from two-time Scotiabank Giller Prize finalist Alix Ohlin