

Through Our Eyes

A Photovoice Study of Belonging, Precarity, and Possibility with International Students in Higher Education

*Different Journeys
A Shared Tomorrow*

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I respectfully acknowledge that Thompson Rivers University is located on the traditional territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, within Secwépemc'ulucw, and I am grateful to live, work, and learn on this land.

01 · THE QUESTION

Canadian universities recruit international students as essential revenue while positioning them at the margins of belonging. How do international business students experience and theorize the gap between institutional inclusion theories and lived belonging?

Malperformative inclusion: "the institutional capacity to demonstrate awareness of exclusion while maintaining the conditions that produce it" (Tucker, 2026, pp. 1–2).

02 · METHODOLOGY · BLENDED WITNESSING

Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) braided with Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004) in a critical-transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009), with SHOWed dialogue, kitchen-table analysis, IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and NVivo coding for absence.



RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Thompson Rivers University Research Ethics Board, H25-03256
Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board, H25-00572
Third-party recruitment, ongoing consent, pseudonyms, trauma-informed practice; participants control use of their images.

05 · IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE · SIP GOAL 2, OBJECTIVE 1

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|  <p>1. Curricular Work Integration
Acknowledge and plan for the realities of paid work in course design, deadlines and assessment.</p> |  <p>2. Accessible Support Services
Extend hours and delivery options (including evenings and online) to align with students' work and study schedules.</p> |  <p>3. Open Doors & Protected Spaces
Ensure key student spaces (e.g., lounges, study areas, prayer spaces) are accessible when students are available.</p> |
|  <p>4. Relational Teaching Practices
Begin each class with relational presence. Create opportunities for students to share experiences and expertise.</p> |  <p>5. Recognition of Existing Knowledge
Value the skills, perspectives and lived experiences international students bring to the classroom and campus community.</p> |  <p>6. Student-Led Accountability
Involve international students in ongoing consultation and decision-making about services, spaces and policies.</p> |

ALIGNMENT WITH SIP GOAL 2, OBJECTIVE 1

 **Goal 2:** To continue providing exceptional support services that ensure academic and personal success of international learners and contribute to the local region and global community.

Objective 1: Provide outstanding international support services to continue to enhance and support the student experience and academic success.

This research advances TRU's commitment by identifying gaps between formal commitments and lived experiences. Through participant-generated photography and narrative reflection, it offers evidence-informed recommendations to strengthen belonging, improve access to support services, and create more equitable conditions for international students' academic and personal success.

Real People. Real Experiences. A More Inclusive Tomorrow.

03 · FINDINGS · FOUR THEMES

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|  | 01 Malperformative aesthetics
Spaces perform inclusion symbolically while withholding it materially. |
|  | 02 Architecture of empty promises
Facilities stand empty because the students who funded them are at work. |
|  | 03 Refuges of enough
Student-made counter-spaces of sufficiency against institutional scarcity. |
|  | 04 Ghost data
Gamma's withdrawal shows precarity silencing participation before it begins. |

Across themes: the time tax of immigration, economic, linguistic and affective labour (Tucker, 2026).

04 · SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

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|  | Empirical · The time tax
Shows how immigration, employment, linguistic and affective labour reduce time for study, belonging and well-being. |
|  | Theoretical · Malperformative aesthetics
Extends Ahmed (2012) to explain how spaces can appear inclusive while withholding material support. |
|  | Methodological · Blended witnessing & ghost data
Integrates participant photography, researcher reflexivity and absence as data to illuminate precarity. |
|  | Conceptual · The mindset of enough
Highlights how students create spaces of care, agency and belonging while challenging institutional scarcity. |

SELECTED REFERENCES

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