

# BALANCING ACT: EMPOWERING WELLNESS FOR INTERNATIONAL POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS WORKING AND STUDYING

## INTRODUCTION

This resource sheet aims to enhance service providers knowledge of occupational health and safety and its relation to mental health, and how it can have an impact on international students' well-being and health and safety in the workplace.

First, we will examine the lived realities of international students who are working and studying, addressing some of the challenges they often encounter. The next section will focus on occupational health and safety, including information and resources from WorkSafeBC as well as the importance of mental and physical well-being for staying safe at work. The last part of this resource sheet will include practical tips, resources, and services to support service providers sharing information on the mental and physical health of international students working and studying.



## STATISTICS

International students make up a large proportion of the temporary resident population in Canada. At the end of 2024, there were 997,820 international students in Canada at all levels of study<sup>1</sup>.

As of July 31, 2025, there were 499,365 people who held only a study permit, and 286,465 who held both a study and work permit<sup>2</sup>. British Columbia is one of the top two provinces home to the highest number of international students.

In July 2024, there were approximately 217,600 international students enrolled in BC public and private post-secondary institutions, with 111,900 in public institutions and 105,700 in private institutions<sup>3</sup>.

**997,820**

international students at all levels of study were in Canada at the end of 2024.

**39%**

of post-secondary students enrolled in BC public and private institutions were international students (based on study permits) in July 2024.

**286,465**

individuals held both a study and work permit as of July 31, 2025.

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2024). 997,820 international students in Canada at all levels of study at the end of 2024. <https://cbie.ca/media/facts-and-figures/international-students/>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada. (2025). Understanding student and temporary worker numbers in Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/statistics-open-data/immigration-stats/students-workers.html>

Government of Canada. (2024). Temporary Foreign Worker Program work permit holders by province/territory of intended destination, intended occupation (4-digit NOC 2011) and year in which permit(s) became effective. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/360024f2-17e9-4558-bfc1-3616485d65b9/resource/4ff7924d-d606-4320-85e2-581af8f12b6b>

<sup>3</sup> International Students in BC's Education Systems – Summary of Research from the Student Transitions Project (2025). [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp2023\\_international\\_research\\_results\\_2025-02-07\\_final2.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp2023_international_research_results_2025-02-07_final2.pdf)

# REALITIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WORKING AND STUDYING

To better understand and support the needs of international students, we must first address their lived realities and acknowledge the challenges that come with juggling work, study, and life. For many students, securing a job to have sufficient income to sustain themselves while studying is a top priority.

At the same time, finding time to balance work, study, life, while finding time to rest, can prove to be challenging. Other barriers include the difficulty of obtaining employment related to their field of study, and the limit to 24 hours of off-campus work per week<sup>4</sup>, which then restricts the type of employment students can typically engage in.

Specifically, it can lead to accepting work that is low-wage, which can have implications for health and safety in the workplace in that part-time, temporary, and low-wage work has been associated with higher risk of injury or illness in the workplace<sup>5</sup>.



All of these factors could worsen the negative mental and physical health effects that come with having a lack of work-life-study balance. Exhaustion and fatigue from lack of sleep or rest could also pose as risk factors for accidents and injuries in the workplace. In addition, not knowing workplace rights as a worker and being aware of work conditions that may be unsafe can create further stressors for international students who are already overburdened from managing multiple responsibilities.

It is also important to acknowledge the impact of cultural contexts on students' values around work, success, and mental health. For example, different cultural beliefs and attitudes around mental health can manifest in stigma, which then impacts the level of help-seeking. For some cultures, mental health issues can be perceived as a sign of personal weakness or lack of willpower, which can discourage individuals from seeking support when they need it<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada. (2024). Work off campus as an international student. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugeescitizenship/services/study-canada/work/work-off-campus.html>

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Work & Health. (2024). Higher risk of work injuries found among those in precarious jobs: IWH study. <https://www.iwh.on.ca/plain-language-summaries/higher-risk-of-work-injuries-found-among-those-in-precarious-jobs-iwh-study>

<sup>6</sup> Ahad, A. A., Sanchez-Gonzalez, M., & Junquera, P. (2023). Understanding and Addressing Mental Health Stigma Across Cultures for Improving Psychiatric Care: A Narrative Review. *Cureus*, 15(5), e39549. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.39549>

## CASE EXAMPLES

To further illustrate the lived realities and challenges international students face while working and studying, the following case examples are presented. These case examples are provided by members of the WorkSafeBC Project Settlement Advisory Panel who work with and support international students. We would like to thank these individuals for contributing these real-life stories to this resource sheet to support the understanding of the needs of international students. Please note that any identifying information has been removed, to protect the privacy of students.

### **Case Example #1:**

*Po attended a small college in BC hoping to build a better future and eventually bring his family to Canada. However, he struggled with English, making it difficult to keep up with classes. He stayed up late every night trying to understand the material. The stress, lack of sleep, and isolation took a toll on his mental health and affected him at his part-time job in a local restaurant. He was constantly exhausted and often made mistakes and was eventually let go. He didn't know how to ask for help, and this added pressure caused him to stop attending classes. Eventually, he dropped out entirely, which cost him his tuition, eligibility for a Post-Graduation Work Permit, and the chance of gaining permanent residency. Feeling ashamed, he delayed telling his family but ultimately returned home using the last of his savings.*

In this case example, there were **indicators of exhaustion and fatigue from the lack of sleep** as the student tried to catch up on their studies. Although there were luckily no unsafe incidents in the workplace in this example, this highlights the potential risk that poor mental health and physical fatigue can pose to a student's occupational health and safety.

### **Case Example #2:**

*Inga moved to a small town in British Columbia to attend college. The program she enrolled in wasn't something she was passionate about, but she hoped it would help her qualify for permanent residency and eventually pursue the career she actually wanted. Rent took up most of her monthly budget, so to make ends meet, she got a part-time job at a local hotel as a cleaner. Her employer also rented her a basement suite. Due to the limited staff roster, Inga would often be asked to work 12 hour shifts twice a week, sometimes consecutively. However, she noticed that her coworkers rarely received consecutive, extended workday shifts like she did. Initially, she felt that more hours would help her save money more quickly, but after a few weeks on the job, she started noticing that when driving home from work, she would have difficulty staying alert and would nearly fall asleep at the wheel sometimes. This was starting to affect her academic performance as well, as she started having trouble focusing in class and memorizing content for quizzes. Inga contemplated bringing her concerns to her employer, but was afraid that if she mentioned anything, she would lose her job and potentially her housing as well.*

In this case example, we see **symptoms of fatigue arise as a result of extended workdays**, which is common in industries such as healthcare, transportation, and hospitality. It is important to keep in mind that the impact of fatigue resulting from long hours of work and shorter length of time between shifts can have widespread effects in both the workplace and beyond.

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY AND MENTAL & PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

## Connections between Mental & Physical Well-Being and Occupational Health and Safety

As illustrated in the above two case examples, international students face an intersection of various stressors as they strive to sustain a new life in Canada. These stressors from trying to balance multiple roles and responsibilities such as working, studying, personal life and rest, often interact, thus compounding the effects on students' mental and physical well-being.



According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), work-life balance is a state of well-being that allows an individual to effectively manage multiple responsibilities at work, at home and in their community. Having a work-life balance looks different for everyone and supports physical, emotional, and community health and does so without grief, stress, or negative impact.<sup>7</sup> A lack of work-life (and study, in the case of international students) balance may have negative consequences for mental health and occupational safety, such as experiencing burnout and fatigue.<sup>8</sup>

Challenges in the workplace including unsafe work conditions or not knowing workers' rights can amplify stress for international students who are already overburdened. Consequently, it is imperative for those supporting international students to equip them with information and knowledge around workplace health and safety.

## The impact of fatigue and poor mental health on workplace health and safety

According to WorkSafeBC, fatigue is the state of feeling very tired or drowsy and is a common form of impairment in the workplace that can lead to increased risk of incidents and injuries to themselves and others.<sup>9</sup> Most commonly, poor sleep quality or lack of sleep are two main causes of fatigue. It can also be caused or worsened by factors such as having night shifts, extended workdays, and irregular shift rotation patterns.

Fatigue can lead to reduced alertness and vigilance, reaction time, memory and recall, ability to make decisions or communicate effectively. In the workplace, fatigue reduces an individual's capacity to work safely and increases the risk of injury when certain hazards are present.

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Mental Health - Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace. [https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/mh/mentalhealth\\_risk.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/mh/mentalhealth_risk.html)

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial. Work-Life Balance. [https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife\\_balance.html#section-2-hdr](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife_balance.html#section-2-hdr)

<sup>9</sup> WorkSafeBC. Fatigue impairment. <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/fatigue-impairment>

As touched on previously, the type of employment international students are able to engage in can often be limited to temporary, lower-wage, and part-time work. Data from Statistics Canada showed that the top industry for international students in 2018 was accommodation and food services<sup>10</sup>, which generally includes shift work.

According to WorkSafeBC, shift workers are at the highest risk of experiencing fatigue because they may work at times when the body has the strongest desire to sleep, typically between 2 and 4 a.m. and 1 and 3 p.m. Incidents occur more often during night shifts, extended shifts, and when there are insufficient breaks in terms of both quantity and quality. As such, it is important to recognize the signs of fatigue and the implications it has in the workplace.

## Responsibilities related to Fatigue Impairment

In addition to being aware of the signs of fatigue, it is important to understand both workers' and employers' responsibilities when there is potential impairment, including from fatigue. According to WorkSafeBC's Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, a worker with a physical or mental impairment (including fatigue) which might affect their ability to safely perform assigned tasks must inform their supervisor or employer of the impairment and must not knowingly do work where the impairment may create an undue risk to the work or anyone else, and the employer must not assign them to such activities<sup>11</sup>.

While the worker is responsible for disclosing the potential impairment (from any source), employers should ensure adequate supervision of work is in place to effectively manage reported or observed impairment. This includes identifying workplace tasks where being fatigued could increase the risk of harm, in what ways, and who could be impacted. Once these factors have been determined, employers should look to eliminate the hazard where possible or redesign activities so that they do not contribute to fatigue.

*WorkSafeBC resources on fatigue impairment and related occupational health & safety regulations:*

[Fatigue impairment | WorkSafeBC](#)

[Managing the risk of fatigue in the workplace | WorkSafeBC](#)

[Occupational Health & Safety Regulation – 4.19 Physical or mental impairment | WorkSafeBC](#)

[Occupational Health & Safety Regulation – 4.20 Impairment by alcohol, drug or other substance | WorkSafeBC](#)

<sup>10</sup> Crossman, E., Choi, Y., and Hou, F. (2021). International students as a source of labour supply: Engagement in the labour market during the period of study. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2021011/article/00001-eng.htm>

<sup>11</sup> WorkSafeBC. Occupational Health and Safety Regulation Part 4: General Conditions. 4.19 Physical or mental impairment. <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/law-policy/occupational-health-safety/searchable-ohs-regulation/ohs-regulation/part-04-general-conditions#SectionNumber:4.19>

## **WorkSafeBC Occupational Health & Safety Resources: Rights, Responsibilities, and Guides**

International students are often overburdened by the pressures of working and studying at the same time, leaving little time or energy for other activities including sleeping and resting. When it comes to occupational health and safety, students may not be aware of more complex matters such as what to do if injured at work, beyond reporting to the supervisor, nor have the mental capacity and time to learn about occupational health and safety and WorkSafeBC. On top of that, the significantly higher tuition compared to domestic students elevates the pressures to financially sustain themselves while studying, which may disincentivize international students from seeking out information or supports around occupational health and safety, out of fear of repercussions such as reduced hours or losing their job.

Service providers and post-secondary institutions can equip themselves with knowledge and information on how to support international students with staying safe at work, understanding their rights and responsibilities, and knowing the steps to take when needing to report unsafe working conditions or workplace injuries. This information can also be shared with international students prior to their arrival as part of a pre-arrival "Welcome Package", allowing adequate time for students to process before they arrive and have to start balancing work, study, and life.

*Below are some key Occupational Health & Safety Resources and How-To Guides from WorkSafeBC:*

### **Staying Safe at Work**

This guide outlines workers' health and safety rights and is written for individuals who are new to Canada and is available in multiple languages. It also describes the steps workers need to take if they have concerns around health and safety or an injury occurs on the job.

### **Safety on the Job is Everyone's Responsibility**

This poster outlines the main rights and responsibilities of workers, supervisors, and employers, and is a reminder of everyone's roles in maintaining health and safety in the workplace.

### **Young and New Workers**

This section of resources was created specifically for young workers under age 25 and new workers of any age who are new to the workplace or location of work.

### **Hidden Hazards in the Workplace: A Young Worker's Guide**

This guide outlines hidden hazards in the workplace that young workers may not be aware of, and how to recognize them and stay safe.

### **Getting a Job? Ask Questions About Safety**

This brochure was created to provide young and new workers with useful tips about how to address concerns about safety in the workplace. It is available in multiple languages.

# How to Guides:

## **The Process for Refusing Unsafe Work**

Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work. This guide outlines the steps to follow when work might be unsafe.

## **Report an Unsafe Workplace**

This online form can be used to report an unsafe workplace. To report anonymously, WorkSafeBC recommends calling their Prevention Information Line at 604.276.3100 or toll-free at 1-800-621-7233 (1-888-621-SAFE).

## **Health & safety assistance - WorkSafeBC**

This page includes key contact information for reporting workplace injuries, questions about health and safety, and additional contacts.

## **Prohibited action complaints - WorkSafeBC**

Workers may not be disciplined or penalized for refusing unsafe work or raising a health or safety issue at work. If workers experience negative actions from an employer or union after raising a health and safety concern, they can follow these steps to submit a prohibited action (formerly known as a discriminatory action) complaint.

## **Workers: How to Report an Injury and What to Expect**

If an injury occurs at work, workers can use WorkSafeBC's [online form](#) to submit an injury report (requires account creation – see [video for instructions](#)) to start an insurance claim. Video instructions on [reporting an injury online can be found here](#).

This can also be done over the phone by calling WorkSafeBC's Teleclaim team at 604.231.8888 (or toll-free at 1.888.967.5377). Interpreters for over 140 languages are available and can be requested when calling Teleclaim.

More details about the process of [making a WorkSafeBC claim can be found here](#).



# TIPS, RESOURCES, AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WORKING & STUDYING

Prepared by: Mahboubeh Asgari, PhD

As we understand, international students often struggle with finding time to rest as they balance multiple facets of their realities. Over time, this can lead to negative consequences for their physical and mental well-being as well as safety in the workplace, underscoring the need for more dedicated resources in these areas.

The following resources and strategies collectively support international students in maintaining physical and mental well-being while balancing study, work, and life in British Columbia. We encourage service providers or post-secondary institutions to utilize and share these resources with the international students they support.



## Physical Well-being

- **Nutrition & food security:** Access to healthy food is essential for physical and mental health. [BC food banks](#), or on-campus food banks, subsidized meals, and cooking workshops can help, while community options like [Storehouse Society](#), [Vancouver Community Kitchens](#), discounted or free meal programs such as [Share Hot Meals](#), or apps like [Too Good To Go](#), [Vancouver Food Runners](#) provide alternatives. Food insecurity can lead to anxiety, stress, eating disorders, poor sleep, and reduced academic performance.
- **Recreation & fitness:** Participation in campus gyms, intramural sports, yoga, or outdoor activities reduces stress, increases energy, and builds social connections. Community resources include [YMCA BC](#), [Vancouver OneCard](#), [Vancouver Parks & Recreation](#) Flexipass. Peer-led wellness groups with multicultural focus enhance student engagement.
- **Sleep:** Adequate sleep is vital for physical health, concentration, and energy, especially for students balancing work and study. Resources include UBC's [strategies for better sleep](#), SFU's [improving sleep habits](#), [Emergency Care BC sleep hygiene guidelines](#), [CCOHS's suggestions for Sleep Hygiene](#), or apps like [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), [BetterSleep](#), and [Breathr Mindfulness](#).
- **Healthcare access:** International students may face challenges navigating BC's healthcare system and Medical Services Plan ([MSP](#)). [WelcomeBC](#) and Health Insurance BC (1-800-663-7100) offer guidance for coverage and accessing services.

## Mental Well-being



- **Awareness & self-care:** International students face unique stressors, including adjusting to a new culture and social rules, managing language barriers, balancing academic and work responsibilities, and climate adaptation. Orientations on [stress management](#), [time management](#), campus counselling, and resources such as [CMHA BC](#), [Beyond the Blues](#) program (self-assessments for depression, anxiety, and substance use) and [BounceBack](#) (support to manage mood, anxiety & depression) offer valuable support.
- **Homes and belonging:** Studying in BC offers international students growth and new experiences, but homesickness and acculturation stress can be challenging. Supporting students [cope with homesickness](#) helps them feel connected, belong, and adjust to their new environment.
- **Social connection & cultural integration:** Encourage engagement in campus clubs, cultural events, gatherings with food or music, and connect students to peer networks or campus/[community volunteer opportunities](#) to socialize, build community, and integrate into BC. Resources include [MOSAIC International Student Hub](#), [Multicultural Helping House Society](#), and [Vancouver Cultural Events & Festivals](#).
- **Peer support:** Participation in mentorship programs, student-led groups, and affinity networks reduces isolation and builds supportive relationships. Resources (free) include [Foundry BC](#), CMHA National [Peer Support Training](#), and BC Campus [Provincial Peer Training Curriculum](#).
- **Workplace navigation & occupational health:** International students may encounter unfamiliar workplace expectations. Support students in communicating with supervisors, reporting hazards, and understanding safety protocols. [WorkSafeBC](#) guides include training for ergonomics, lifting safety, and injury prevention.
- **Seasonal & climate adaptation:** Students from warmer climates may need support adjusting to Canada's cold, darker winters and shorter daylight hours. CMHA BC [Seasonal Affective Disorder resources](#) and light therapy workshops can help.
- **Financial Support:** High tuition and living costs can create financial stress. Supporting students with budgeting guidance, access to campus financial supports, and connections to community resources such as [MOSAIC](#) settlement/emergency funding, [CMHA BC scholarship and bursary programs](#), [Yes2Me](#), and the [Youth Harm Reduction Award](#) can help alleviate some of these pressures.

## 24/7 Crisis and Support Resources

- **Here2Talk:** Free, confidential mental health counselling for all post-secondary students in BC ([app](#), phone, or online).
- **BC Mental Health Support Line:** 3-1-0
- **Suicide Crisis Helpline:** Call or text 9-8-8 for support if experiencing thoughts of suicide.
- **Crisis Centre:** Mental health crisis line: 310-6789 or [online chat](#).
- **Help Starts Here:** Information and support for addiction, mental health, substance use, wellness, and counselling.
- **Here to Help:** Mental health and substance use resources for BC residents, including newcomers.
- **HealthLink BC** (8-1-1): Access nurse advice, clinic information, and health guidance online or by phone.
- **Trans Lifeline:** Peer support and crisis line for 2SLGBTQIA+ students; 1-877-330-6366.
- **Canadian Mental Health Association BC:** Resources, peer support, [mental health support of post-secondary institutions](#) (HM | HC).
- **MOSAIC** International Student Hub: Specialized programs, peer connections, and services supporting international students academically, personally, and professionally; [internationalstudents@mosaicbc.org](mailto:internationalstudents@mosaicbc.org)
- **CISUR:** General substance use information and [self-help resources](#)



### Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of British Columbia

Metrotower II, Suite 2308, 4720 Kingsway, Burnaby, B.C., V5H 4N2

1 888 355-5560 | 604 718-2780  
[amssa@amssa.org](mailto:amssa@amssa.org) | [www.amssa.org](http://www.amssa.org)