

Research Article

Conditional Educational Citizenship: Governing International Students Through Higher Education Policy

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Article History	Abstract
Received: June 22, 2026 Accepted: July 13, 2026 Published: July 20, 2026	Purpose: International students are frequently framed as contributors to global diversity and international engagement in U.S. higher education, yet their access to stability, belonging, and institutional protection remains deeply conditional. This article examines how international student precarity emerges as a governance outcome within higher education institutions. Design/Approach/Methods: Drawing on Critical Policy Analysis and theories of citizenship and social justice, this conceptual study analyzes how institutional policies and governance practices shape international students' educational experiences. Prior qualitative research is used illustratively as policy evidence to examine the role of higher education institutions as intermediary governance actors. Findings: The analysis demonstrates that tuition dependence, immigration compliance practices, and discretionary administrative systems collectively produce forms of conditional inclusion. These governance mechanisms distribute risk to international students while maintaining institutional flexibility, creating a model of conditional educational citizenship in which participation depends on compliance, financial capacity, and administrative navigation. Originality/Value: This article reframes international student precarity as a governance issue rather than an individual adjustment challenge. It highlights the need for education policymakers. International students are frequently framed as contributors to global diversity and international engagement in U.S. higher education, yet their access to stability, belonging, and institutional protection remains deeply conditional. This article argues that international student precarity should be understood not as an unintended consequence of immigration policy or individual adjustment, but as a governance outcome produced through the enactment of higher education institutions' policies. Drawing on Critical Policy Analysis and theories of citizenship and social justice, the article examines how tuition dependence, immigration compliance practices, and discretionary administrative systems shape international students' access to educational rights, resources, and security. Informed by prior qualitative research used illustratively as policy evidence, the analysis positions higher education institutions as intermediary governance actors that actively distribute risk while maintaining institutional flexibility. The article reframes international students as subjects of conditional educational citizenship whose inclusion depends on compliance, financial capacity, and administrative navigation rather than educational entitlement. Implications are discussed for education policymakers and institutional leaders, emphasizing the need to reconceptualize international student support as a matter of governance accountability and social justice rather than as a matter of individual resilience. Keywords: International Students, Educational Citizenship, Higher Education Governance, Social Justice, Critical Policy Analysis.

1. Education, Citizenship, and Conditional Belonging

Throughout U.S. higher education, international students are often celebrated as symbols of global engagement, cultural diversity, and institutional prestige. Universities emphasize international enrollment in marketing materials, strategic plans, and internationalization policies, portraying global mobility as a sign of academic quality (Altbach and de Wit, 2024). However, for many international students, participating in higher education often comes with legal vulnerabilities, financial hardships, and inconsistent institutional protections. This contradiction prompts an essential question for education policy and social justice studies: how can students be actively recruited into educational systems while only being conditionally included within them?

This article contends that international student precarity is best understood as a governance outcome created through higher education institutions' policy implementation rather than as an unintended consequence of immigration law or individual adaptation. While immigration regulations set the official conditions for international student participation, education systems and institutions are the main sites where those conditions are interpreted, executed, and enforced. Through tuition policies, advising systems, and compliance practices, institutions influence how international students experience stability, belonging, and risk.

Viewing international students only as migrants or consumers masks their role as learners governed by educational institutions. As students, they face academic expectations, institutional policies, and participation norms. However, unlike many domestic students, their stability depends on continuous legal compliance, limited employment options, and often fragmented, discretionary administrative systems. This creates a form of conditional educational citizenship where inclusion depends on ongoing financial stability and bureaucratic navigation rather than an inherent educational right.

Within social justice scholarship, belonging is often regarded as an emotional or relational outcome influenced by campus climate and interpersonal interactions (Strayhorn, 2019). While these aspects are important, they are not enough to understand the structural factors that impact international students' lives. Belonging without protection does not guarantee safety. A missed deadline, an unexpected expense, or an administrative mistake can quickly lead to loss of enrollment or legal status. In such cases, the limitations of symbolic inclusion become clear.

This article reinterprets international students' experiences as evidence of governance rather than mere adjustment. Guided by Critical Policy Analysis and citizenship theories, it explores how tuition reliance, immigration compliance efforts, and discretionary administrative systems work together to create conditional inclusion. Instead of presenting new empirical research, the article uses insights from previous qualitative studies as illustrative policy evidence to analyze how higher education institutions serve as governance actors. The main argument is that international student precarity highlights broader tensions between market-driven education and social justice commitments.

2. Citizenship, Social Justice, and Higher Education Governance

Citizenship is often linked to legal status and national membership, but education scholars increasingly argue that citizenship is also created within institutions through everyday practices that determine who belongs, who is protected, and who bears responsibility for navigating systems. In higher education, citizenship is demonstrated through access to resources, recognition as a legitimate member of the academic community, and the level of institutional responsibility taken for student well-being. Educational citizenship does not depend on legal nationality (Ong, 2006). Instead, it shows how institutions grant or deny stability, voice, and protection. International students often find themselves in an unclear position within this framework. They are part of academic programs and expected to contribute fully, yet they lack many protections given to domestic students, including access to public financial aid, flexible jobs, and institutional safety nets (Cantwell and Lee, 2010).

Social justice in education involves the fair distribution of resources, rights, recognition, and risk. From this view, justice is not just about representation but about how systems are designed. When institutions recruit international students but rely on governance structures that leave them vulnerable to financial and legal risks, social justice issues arise at the policy level.

Higher education institutions are not passive recipients of immigration laws or market pressures. They actively shape tuition systems, advising frameworks, and administrative routines that influence how policies

are experienced. Decisions regarding pricing, payment flexibility, emergency funding, and compliance communication reflect institutional priorities and values. These choices determine whether international students see education as a stable opportunity or a risky gamble.

Market-oriented governance intensifies these trends. As public funding decreases, international tuition becomes a financial strategy. While this boosts incentives to recruit students abroad, it does not always result in reinvestment in student protections. Instead, financial risk is shifted to individuals, and precarity becomes a normal part of participation.

3. Analytical Framework: Critical Policy Analysis in Education

This article uses Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) as a framework to examine how international student precarity is created through higher education governance. CPA moves beyond seeing policy as just neutral rules or official texts and instead views policy as a dynamic process carried out through institutional practices, administrative routines, and discretionary decisions. From this perspective, policy is not only written but also performed, interpreted, and experienced, often in unequal and politically significant ways (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Diem and Young, 2015).

In education research, CPA has been used to examine how power, ideology, and institutional priorities influence policy implementation and outcomes. Instead of asking whether a policy “works,” CPA questions whose interests are served, whose risks are increased, and how responsibility is shared through policy enactment. This method is especially useful for studying international student governance, where immigration law, financial systems, and educational institutions intersect to affect students’ daily lives.

Higher education institutions hold a unique role as intermediary governance entities. While immigration regulations are set at the federal level, these institutions interpret and implement them through academic policies, advising systems, and compliance procedures. Likewise, although market pressures influence tuition dependence, institutions decide how to manage, mitigate, or shift financial risk to students. CPA highlights these institutional decisions by emphasizing implementation, discretion, and the redistribution of responsibility.

A CPA lens is particularly helpful for understanding international students because it questions dominant stories that portray precarity as either an individual adjustment issue or an unavoidable result of immigration law. These stories hide the role of educational institutions in shaping how rules are communicated, coordinated, and enforced. CPA instead views institutions as active policy players whose governance choices impact who is protected, who bears risk, and who is expected to self-manage uncertainty.

This article applies CPA to international student governance in three main ways. First, it considers tuition dependence as a policy tool rather than just a neutral financial situation. Decisions about tuition rates, payment plans, and reinvestment are viewed as governance choices that influence students’ exposure to financial instability. Second, it looks at immigration compliance not only as a legal requirement but also as an institutional process that allocates labor and accountability. The coordination—or lack of it—between academic advising, financial offices, and immigration compliance units is examined as a place where risk is shifted onto students. Third, it highlights discretion as a key aspect of policy implementation. Variations in advising quality, responsiveness, and interpretation are seen as governance outcomes rather than mere flaws.

Importantly, CPA enables the use of empirical material without relying solely on empirical methods. This article draws on insights from previous qualitative research not to present new findings but to demonstrate how governance mechanisms function in real-world settings. Student narratives are regarded as policy evidence that shows how institutional systems work in practice, where policies are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes challenged. This approach to empirical illustration aligns with CPA’s focus on understanding policy as experienced and enacted, rather than just designed.

By adopting CPA, the article also aligns with social justice scholarship that emphasizes structural accountability over individual resilience. International students’ reliance on peer networks, self-navigation, and informal coping strategies is not viewed solely as evidence of adaptability but as a sign of governance gaps. CPA allows these practices to be seen as compensatory responses to institutional design rather than personal strengths that absolve institutions of responsibility. Finally, CPA supports the article’s broader argument that international student vulnerability is a governance outcome embedded within higher education systems. Tuition dependence, immigration compliance, and discretionary administration do not operate

independently. They form an interconnected governance system that normalizes uncertainty for students while maintaining institutional flexibility. Understanding this system requires an analytical framework attentive to power, implementation, and the political consequences of administrative design.

In the following sections, this framework is used to examine how higher education institutions manage international students through financial structures, compliance systems, and discretionary practices. Instead of treating these areas as separate issues, the analysis demonstrates how they work together to create conditional educational citizenship and prompts important questions about justice, responsibility, and accountability in education.

Empirical insights from previous qualitative research are used illustratively as policy evidence, not as definitive findings. This approach keeps the analysis conceptual while grounded in real institutional practice.

4. Governing International Students in Practice

Viewing international student precarity through a governance perspective reveals how higher education institutions actively shape risk, responsibility, and protection through the daily implementation of policies. Tuition dependence, immigration compliance systems, and discretionary administrative practices do not function as separate issues. Instead, they form a mutually reinforcing governance framework that creates conditional educational citizenship. This section explores how these mechanisms operate in practice and how they influence international students' access to stability within education systems.

4.1. Tuition Dependence and Risk Externalization

Tuition reliance has become a key aspect of higher education governance, especially in private and tuition-dependent institutions. As public funding declines, many colleges and universities increasingly rely on international student tuition to maintain financial stability. International students are often charged higher rates and have limited access to institutional or public financial aid, making them both financially important and structurally vulnerable.

From a governance perspective, tuition dependence shifts risk (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Institutions maintain budgets by enrolling students who pay high upfront costs, while the main burden of financial disruptions falls on students and their families. Currency shifts, unexpected medical bills, housing issues, or delays in family support can quickly threaten a student's enrollment. However, institutional financial systems often lack strong tools to absorb or lessen these shocks for international students.

This arrangement mirrors a broader shift toward market-based governance in education, in which students are regarded as individual investors responsible for managing financial risks (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Marginson, 2011). In this framework, financial precarity is viewed as a personal budgeting issue rather than a predictable outcome of institutional pricing and policy decisions. Governance structures often prioritize recruiting and enrolling students over reinvesting in long-term protections, such as emergency funding, flexible payment options, or targeted financial advice that considers visa-related employment restrictions.

Tuition dependence also influences institutional priorities related to responsibility. While institutions gain financially from international enrollment, students' financial struggles are often seen as outside the scope of educational governance. This separation enables institutions to keep financial flexibility while normalizing instability for students. Consequently, access to education is provided without guarantees of financial security, reinforcing a model of inclusion that is conditional rather than protective.

4.2. Immigration Compliance as Delegated Labor

Although higher education institutions are formally responsible for maintaining reporting systems and ensuring compliance with federal regulations, much of the daily effort required to maintain status is delegated to students. Monitoring enrollment requirements, interpreting visa regulations, meeting deadlines, and coordinating documentation across offices become individual responsibilities with little room for error. Within this system, mistakes can have serious consequences, but accountability remains distributed. Immigration compliance adds a second, equally important governance mechanism.

This delegation is intensified by the organizational separation of immigration advising from academic and financial advising. Students often must navigate conflicting requirements across multiple offices, effectively serving as their own compliance coordinators. Mistakes or misinformation can lead to serious consequences, including loss of legal status and forced departure, highlighting how legal precarity can result in forms of

institutional vulnerability and harm (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). Yet accountability for these outcomes is rarely addressed within institutional governance structures.

From a Critical Policy Analysis perspective, this transfer of compliance labor is a governance choice instead of an inevitable outcome. By framing compliance as an individual responsibility, institutions lower their own liability while ensuring formal adherence to regulatory requirements. The burden of managing complexity is shifted downward, and mistakes are treated as student failures rather than as signs of systemic design flaws.

This interrelated arrangement also hides power imbalances. International students must navigate complex legal systems, often in a second language, while handling academic and financial pressures. In contrast, institutions have legal expertise, administrative resources, and organizational authority. When compliance relies on students managing themselves without sufficient institutional protections, institutional configuration structures increase vulnerability and conceal institutional accountability.

Importantly, immigration compliance is interconnected with tuition dependence. Legal status relies on ongoing enrollment and full-time academic participation, so financial disruptions can quickly lead to legal issues. Governance systems that do not combine financial planning with compliance efforts increase the risk that minor disruptions will cause major consequences.

4.3. Discretion and Unequal Protection

Discretion shapes how policies are enforced. Access to correct guidance depends on individual staff interactions, which can lead to inconsistent protections. Students often rely on peer networks to compensate for institutional gaps, revealing dependence on informal “shadow infrastructures.” Discretion is the main tool used to enforce tuition dependence and immigration compliance.

Although policies may look uniform on paper, their implementation heavily depends on individual advisors, administrators, and office practices. Access to accurate information, timely responses, and informal advocacy varies greatly, leading to unequal educational protection among students who are subject to the same official rules.

Discretion allows institutions to manage complexity without establishing strict policy rules (Lipsky, 2010). However, it also reduces clarity in accountability. When different staff members provide varying results, responsibility for errors becomes diffuse. Students who receive clear guidance and proactive support are better at avoiding problems, while others must rely on fragmented information or learn through trial and error.

In response to these inconsistencies, international students often create informal peer networks to share information, interpret institutional communications, and alert each other about potential compliance risks. These peer-based systems act as shadow infrastructures that fill in gaps in formal governance. While they show student agency and collective care, they also highlight an institutional dependence on unpaid student labor to maintain compliance and persistence.

From a governance perspective, the emergence of shadow infrastructures is not random. It indicates that institutional systems lack full transparency, coordination, or reliability. Discretion allows institutions to seem flexible and responsive while avoiding the implementation of standardized accountability mechanisms that would lower risks for all students. This reliance on informality unfairly disadvantages students with limited social capital, weaker networks, or less familiarity with bureaucratic systems.

Discretion thus serves a dual purpose: it maintains institutional flexibility while causing unequal protection. When governance relies on discretion rather than structural safeguards, educational citizenship depends on access to the “right” relationships rather than on rights embedded in institutional design (Lipsky, 2010).

4.4. Conditional Educational Citizenship as a Governance System

Taken together, reliance on tuition, delegation of immigration compliance, and discretionary administrative practices create an integrated governance system that normalizes instability for international students. Financial hardship, legal vulnerability, and administrative uncertainty are not separate issues but interconnected results of policy design and implementation. Institutions benefit from international enrollments while shifting the responsibility for risk management to students through institutional configuration structures that emphasize individual self-management.

This system regards international students as conditionally included members of higher education. They are expected to perform academically, contribute financially, and comply with administrative requirements, yet they lack consistent institutional protection when disruptions happen. Educational citizenship, in this context, is temporary and revocable, shaped by ongoing compliance rather than by educational entitlement.

Understanding international student precarity as a governance outcome clarifies why isolated reforms often fail. Efforts focused only on cultural inclusion, resilience training, or information provision do not address the core risk distribution. Without governance reforms that include financial protection, compliance coordination, and accountability, institutions keep relying on discretionary support and student-led workarounds that perpetuate inequality.

By examining governance in practice, this section underscores the need to shift social justice analysis in education from focusing on individual experiences to examining institutional design. International students' vulnerability is not due to personal shortcomings but is a predictable outcome of how higher education systems organize responsibility, protection, and belonging.

5. Conditional Educational Citizenship as a Social Justice Problem

Conditional educational citizenship illustrates how forms of inclusion that lack institutional safeguards ultimately undermine social justice. International students might feel socially accepted but still face structural risks. Personal risk becomes more visible, while institutional responsibility is correspondingly diminished.

Justice demands that we examine how systems distribute risk. Addressing precarity requires governance reform, not merely the expansion of programs. Viewing international student precarity as a governance issue shifts it from being an individual challenge to a social justice concern rooted in educational systems. When higher education institutions open access without ensuring stability, protection, or institutional accountability, they perpetuate inequalities that weaken the ethical basis of education.

Social justice in education goes beyond symbolic inclusion or representation. It involves how systems allocate resources, rights, recognition, and risk. In this context, international students are often rhetorically included as members of the academic community but remain structurally excluded from protections that sustain their educational participation. Their access to education depends on ongoing compliance, financial means, and the ability to navigate administrative processes. When these conditions are threatened, students face the consequences individually, even though the risks are collectively created through institutional design.

Conditional educational citizenship becomes clear when belonging is separated from protection. International students might have strong peer relationships, supportive faculty interactions, or feel culturally included on campus, but these forms of belonging do not protect them from legal vulnerability or financial hardship. A missed deadline, an unexpected expense, or an administrative mistake can quickly lead to loss of enrollment or legal status. In such situations, the limitations of emotional inclusion are revealed. Belonging without institutional safeguards provides recognition but not security.

This condition raises important questions for social justice scholarship. If education is seen as a public good that creates opportunity, participation, civic engagement, and student development, then access to education without protection offers only a partial and unequal realization of that good (Marginson, 2011, 2014). International students are expected to contribute academically, culturally, and financially, but the systems that govern their participation are designed to favor institutional flexibility over student security. This imbalance challenges claims that higher education institutions function as fair or just spaces.

Furthermore, conditional citizenship hides responsibility. When risk is shifted onto individuals, institutional accountability decreases. Financial difficulties are seen as personal mistakes, compliance issues are blamed on students, and administrative chaos is viewed as misunderstanding instead of a failure of governance. This perspective not only reduces institutional responsibility but also supports stories that make precarity seem like an acceptable part of participation. Viewing international students through a social justice lens requires shifting focus from individual outcomes to institutional structures and examining how educational inequality is produced through institutional arrangements (Patel, 2021). Justice calls for institutions to examine how their financial systems, compliance protocols, and administrative practices distribute risk. It also involves recognizing that international students' vulnerability is not accidental but created by predictable governance arrangements. Therefore, tackling this vulnerability calls for governance reforms rather than just expanding programming.

6. Implications for Education Policy and Institutional Leadership

For education policymakers and institutional leaders, the instability faced by international students must be addressed as a governance concern.

Institutions should reinvest tuition revenue into financial protection, implement compliance systems across offices, decrease reliance on individual discretion, and view internationalization as a commitment to justice rather than merely branding. Reframing international student vulnerability as a governance issue has important implications for education policy and institutional leadership. If vulnerability results from institutional design, then genuine reform must focus on how higher education systems assign responsibility, ensure protection, and uphold accountability.

First, financial protection must be regarded as a governance obligation rather than optional support. Institutions that depend on international tuition revenue have an ethical duty to mitigate foreseeable financial risks. This includes creating transparent cost estimates, offering flexible payment options, and establishing emergency funds accessible to international students. Financial advising should clearly consider visa-related employment restrictions and the limited choices available to students during disruptions. Without these measures, institutions shift financial instability onto students while maintaining budgetary flexibility.

Second, immigration compliance should be managed through coordinated institutional systems rather than separate offices. Viewing compliance as an isolated task increases risk by requiring students to handle academic, financial, and legal requirements on their own. Cross-functional governance models that combine academic advising, financial planning, and immigration guidance can lessen the load on students and strengthen institutional accountability. Effective communication protocols, shared case management, and clear escalation procedures for high-stakes issues are vital parts of such systems.

Third, institutions must address the role of discretion in creating unequal protection. While discretion offers flexibility, excessive reliance on informal decision-making can obscure responsibility and lead to inconsistent outcomes. Governance reforms should focus on increasing transparency, consistency, and clarity in advising practices. This includes implementing standardized training for staff working with international students, maintaining clear documentation of policies and procedures, and institutional accountability for errors when systems fail. Reducing dependence on informal “workarounds” helps shift responsibility back to the institution instead of onto students and peer networks.

Fourth, institutional leaders must engage with international student support as a matter of social justice rather than as a retention strategy or branding tool. Diversity narratives that celebrate international enrollment while ignoring structural vulnerability risk reproducing inequality under the guise of inclusion. Leadership commitment to justice requires examining the institutional interests that shape internationalization and aligning internationalization goals with governance structures that protect students’ stability, dignity, and rights (Yao and Viggiano, 2019).

Finally, higher education institutions play a vital intermediary role within broader policy environments. Although they do not have control over immigration laws, they influence how policies are experienced. Institutions can use this position to advocate for regulatory reforms, present evidence of systemic harm, and collaborate with professional organizations to promote policies that ensure student stability. Advocacy based on governance accountability redefines international students not as exceptions but as essential members of educational communities who deserve protection.

7. Conclusion

This article argues that international student precarity should be viewed as a governance outcome shaped by higher education institutions’ policies, rather than as an unintended result of immigration laws or individual adaptation. By analyzing tuition reliance, immigration compliance practices, and discretionary administration through a Critical Policy Analysis perspective, the study shows how educational systems actively create conditional inclusion.

International students are recruited as contributors to global education and institutional sustainability, yet they are governed through systems that normalize uncertainty and shift risk downward. Their educational citizenship is temporary, dependent on continued compliance and financial ability rather than on educational entitlement. This situation exposes a fundamental tension between market-driven higher education governance and social justice commitments.

Reframing international students as subjects of conditional educational citizenship shifts the focus of policy analysis from student resilience to institutional responsibility. It emphasizes the need for governance reforms that incorporate financial protection, compliance coordination, and accountability into the design of educational systems. Without these reforms, institutions risk perpetuating forms of inclusion that are rhetorically broad but structurally unequal.

International student precarity is not accidental. It results from higher education governance systems that prioritize flexibility over protection. Reframing international students as subjects of conditional educational citizenship highlights the ethical stakes of institutional design and calls for accountability-driven reform.

For scholars, policymakers, and educational leaders, this analysis highlights the importance of examining how governance structures influence access, belonging, and justice in education. International students reveal the effects of governance decisions that favor flexibility over protection. Addressing their precarity is not only about supporting international students but also a test of higher education's dedication to justice, responsibility, and the ethical delivery of education itself.

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