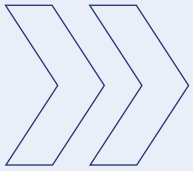




# SPECIAL REPORT

Access denied: Unveiling disparities  
in study permit approvals for  
African students in Canada

**JUNE 2024**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canada is recognized globally as a preferred destination for students from around the world. But international students face vastly disparate chances of successfully attaining a Canadian study permit. This report by MPOWER Financing, a leading provider of international education loans, offers an in-depth analysis of study permit approval for international students who pursued a postsecondary education in Canada from 2018 to 2023. Encompassing both pre- and post-pandemic periods, this report seeks to understand the impact of study permit adjudication on international student flows into Canada.

The main theme highlighted is that African students – especially those from Francophone nations – encounter formidable barriers in securing Canadian study permits. The report shows consistently lower study permit acceptance rates relative to students' global peers.

In light of these findings, the report advocates for a recalibration of Canada's study permit adjudication processes to foster greater equity and inclusivity.

## Key Observations:

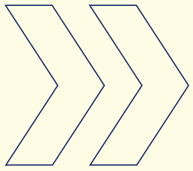
- ◆ **Persistent disparities:** Over the six-year period from 2018 to 2023, African students systematically received study permit approvals at rates substantially lower than their classmates from other countries (27% for African students versus 74% for students from other nations on average over the six-year period). This difference persisted when comparing across educational levels and controlling for non-SDS study permit applications. In addition, students from Francophone African nations were accepted at even lower rates when compared with students from non-Francophone African nations (22% versus 29% on average over the six-year period).
- ◆ **Impact of policy and the COVID-19 pandemic:** A notable decline in 2020 in African student study permit acceptance rates (from 24% in 2019 to 16% in 2020), likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the impact of external factors such as global health crises on study permit outcomes. The gradual pandemic recovery, post-2020,

suggests adaptive policy measures to better calibrate acceptance rates. But the pace of improvement remains uneven across different African regions (25% in Central Africa versus 44% in North Africa).

- ◆ **Missed opportunities:** This trend of lower acceptance rates for African students represents a significant missed opportunity for potential students. It also impacts Canadian academic institutions that benefit from the diverse perspectives and contributions of African scholars. Specifically, the data points to a substantial number of qualified candidates: Over 46,000 postgraduate students over the six-year period were systematically sidelined due to stringent study permit approval processes for African students.
- ◆ **Takeaway:** If Canada hopes to maintain its position as a top-tier destination for global academic talent, it will need to realign its adjudication processes to increase equity and inclusivity.

Considering the findings, the report also calls for the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to show greater transparency in study permit decisions, particularly for African students. To dismantle the existing barriers faced by African students, the department also should implement tailored interventions to address regional disparities and in recognition of the importance of financing. These actions are particularly relevant given recent and upcoming changes to Canada's study permit program and postsecondary institutions' widespread desire to diversify student intake.





# CONTEXT

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Higher education is the key to global socioeconomic mobility, and the ability to complete a postsecondary education from a Canadian institution can be transformative to a student's life – and that of their families.

As IRCC and the Canadian government rethink the study permit program<sup>1</sup> for postsecondary students, there's an opportunity to improve their adjudication. The credibility of the program can be improved and access to education for promising students from around the world increased by studying approval rate disparities and working to remedy them.

According to the Economic Times<sup>2</sup>, students are most commonly denied study permits due to incomplete documentation, immigration officers' perceived risk of students overstaying or violating the conditions of their study permits, and doubts regarding students' financial capability. Because these factors are subjective, students from certain countries may be held to a much higher standard than their classmates from other countries. These biases potentially contribute to the higher

refusal rates observed in these regions.

Testimonials from students<sup>3</sup> and online discussions abound with concerns that even students who meet every admission and financial requirement for a study permit are still denied the opportunity to achieve their educational dreams in Canada. An independent investigation by IRCC<sup>4</sup> confirmed that racial biases, particularly against Nigerian students, may have been a key factor in high rejection rates, prompting calls for a fairer study permit process.<sup>5</sup>

Despite some modest improvements in recent years, African students consistently experience significantly lower study permit approval rates compared to their counterparts from other parts of the world. The situation is even more pronounced for students from Francophone Africa, reflecting unique challenges faced by bilingual and Francophone universities seeking to recruit international students.

In 2023, less than half of the study permit applications for African postgraduate (master's degree and Ph.D.) students were

approved, in contrast to over 80% approval rates from non-African students (see Figure 1). This represents a considerable missed opportunity for both these students and for Canada, as more than 46,000 potentially qualified African postgraduate students were denied permits to study in Canada between 2018 and 2023.

**Footnote:**

**1** Government of Canada, “Canada to stabilize growth and decrease number of new international student permits issued to approximately 360,000 for 2024” Date modified: 2024-01-24.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/01/canada-to-stabilize-growth-and-decrease-number-of-new-international-student-permits-issued-to-approximately-360000-for-2024.html>

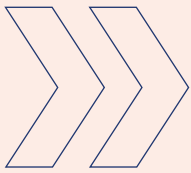
**2** ET Spotlight, “There Are 100 Reasons Why Your Canada Student Visa Could Get Rejected,” Economic Times, last modified July 31, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/study/there-are-100-reasons-why-your-canada-student-visa-could-get-rejected/articleshow/102309160.cms>

**3** Africanews with AFP, “African Students Face Discrimination in Battle for Canada Visas,” Africanews, last modified November 17, 2022, <https://www.africanews.com/2022/11/17/african-students-face-discrimination-in-battle-for-canada-visas/>

**4** Christian, Gideon, “Submission to House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) Study on Recruitment and Acceptance Rates of Foreign Students,” African Scholars Initiative (ASI-Canada), Pollara Research.

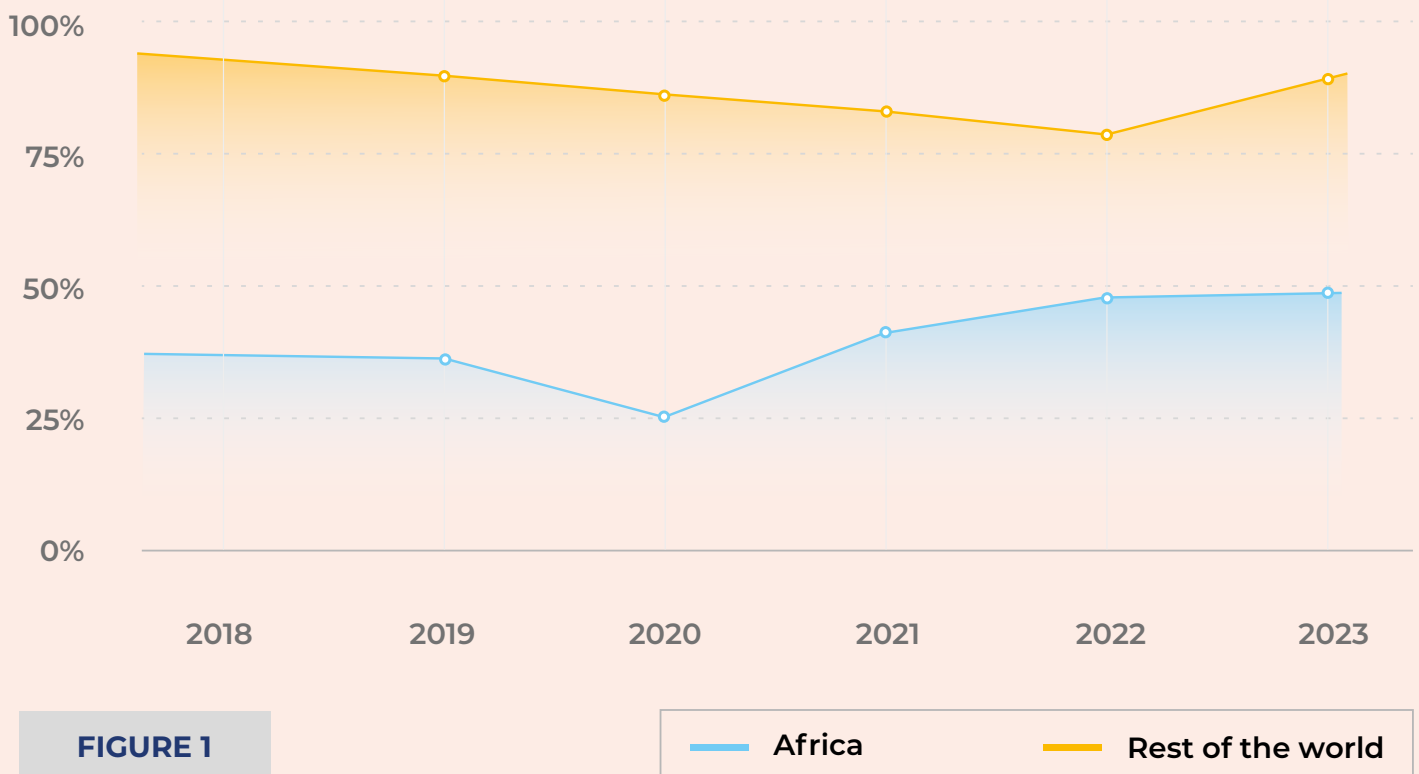
**5** Mooten, Nalinie, “Racism Discrimination and Migrant Workers in Canada: Evidence from the Literature,” Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, July 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/research/racism-discrimination-migrant-workers-canada-evidence-literature.html>.





# AFRICAN INTEREST IN CANADIAN STUDY ACCELERATING

## Study permit approval rates across regions for postgraduate students

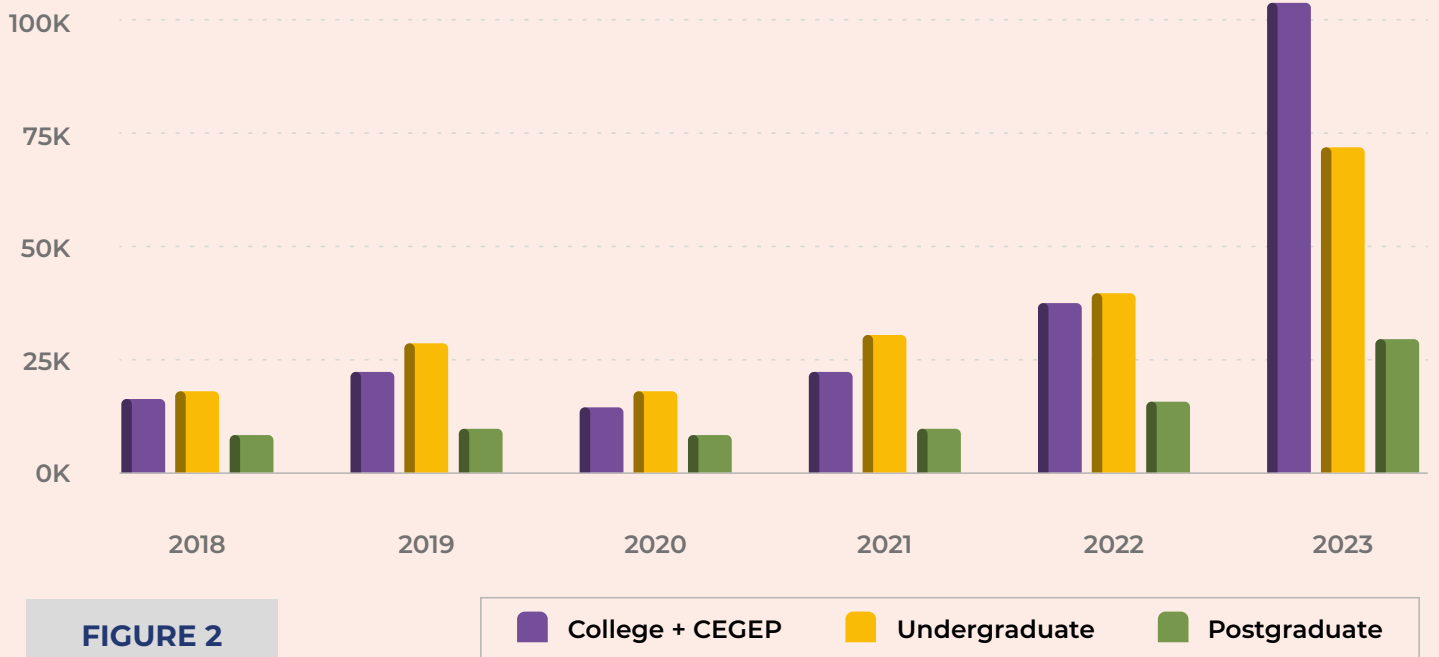


African students continue to be interested in studying in Canada despite the low acceptance rates for study permits. The number of African students applying for study permits for a Canadian postsecondary education surged 128% in 2023, driven by college<sup>6</sup>, CEGEP<sup>7</sup> and bachelor's degree programs (see Figure 2). Postgraduate programs saw a large but lower growth of 70%. For all programs, this increase was primarily driven by students from West Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana.

### Footnote:

- 6** Colleges in Canada offer diplomas and certificates with a strong emphasis on practical and technical skills, serving as vital institutions for career-oriented education.
- 7** In Quebec, CEGEPs (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) serve as the province's equivalent to colleges, providing both pre-university and technical education, thus bridging the gap between high school and higher education.

## Study permit applications received from Africa, by level of education



But amid this surge in application volume, only one-third of postsecondary study permit applications from African students were approved (see Figure 3). These bleak approval rates were significantly lower than those for students from other countries/regions.



# Study permit approval rates for African students, by level of education, 2023

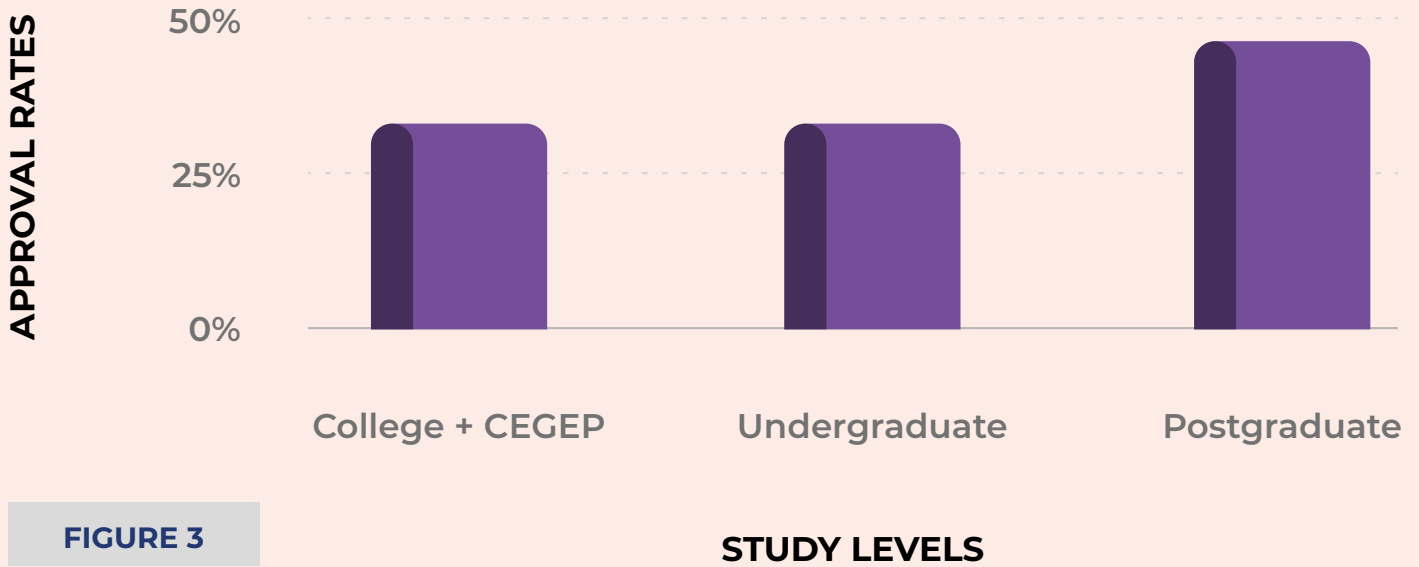
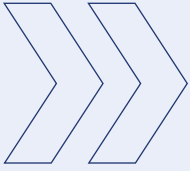


FIGURE 3

STUDY LEVELS







# PARSING STUDY PERMIT APPROVAL RATES

Comparing study permit approval rates for students from Africa and elsewhere requires consideration of the Student Direct Stream (SDS) program, which provides for expedited processing and far higher study

permit approval rates. The SDS option is only available for students from select countries (see Figure 4), causing further imbalance in study permit applications and approvals.



**FIGURE 4**

Because very few African nations qualify for SDS, the discrepancy in their study permit approval rates compared to other countries is exacerbated by the lack of access to the specialized program.

For example, in 2023, postgraduate students from India had overall study permit approval rates of 82%, but Indian SDS applications had

far greater approval rates (92%) than their non-SDS counterparts (46%). Indian students' non-SDS approval rates are similar to African students' rate of 47% (see Figure 5), but African students overwhelmingly cannot take advantage of an SDS or similar path which would greatly raise their chances of receiving a study permit.

## Postgraduate study permit approval rates for Indian and African students, 2023

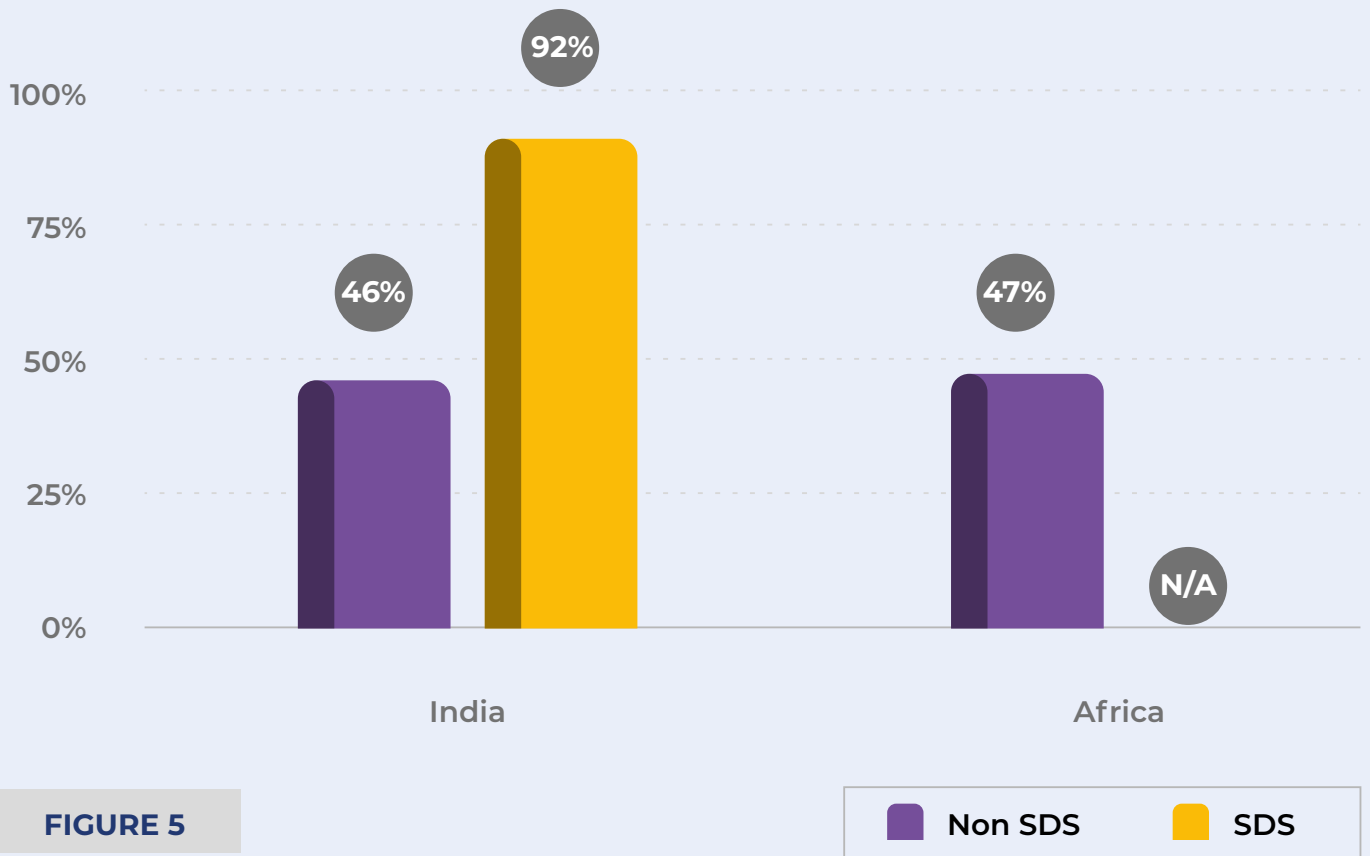
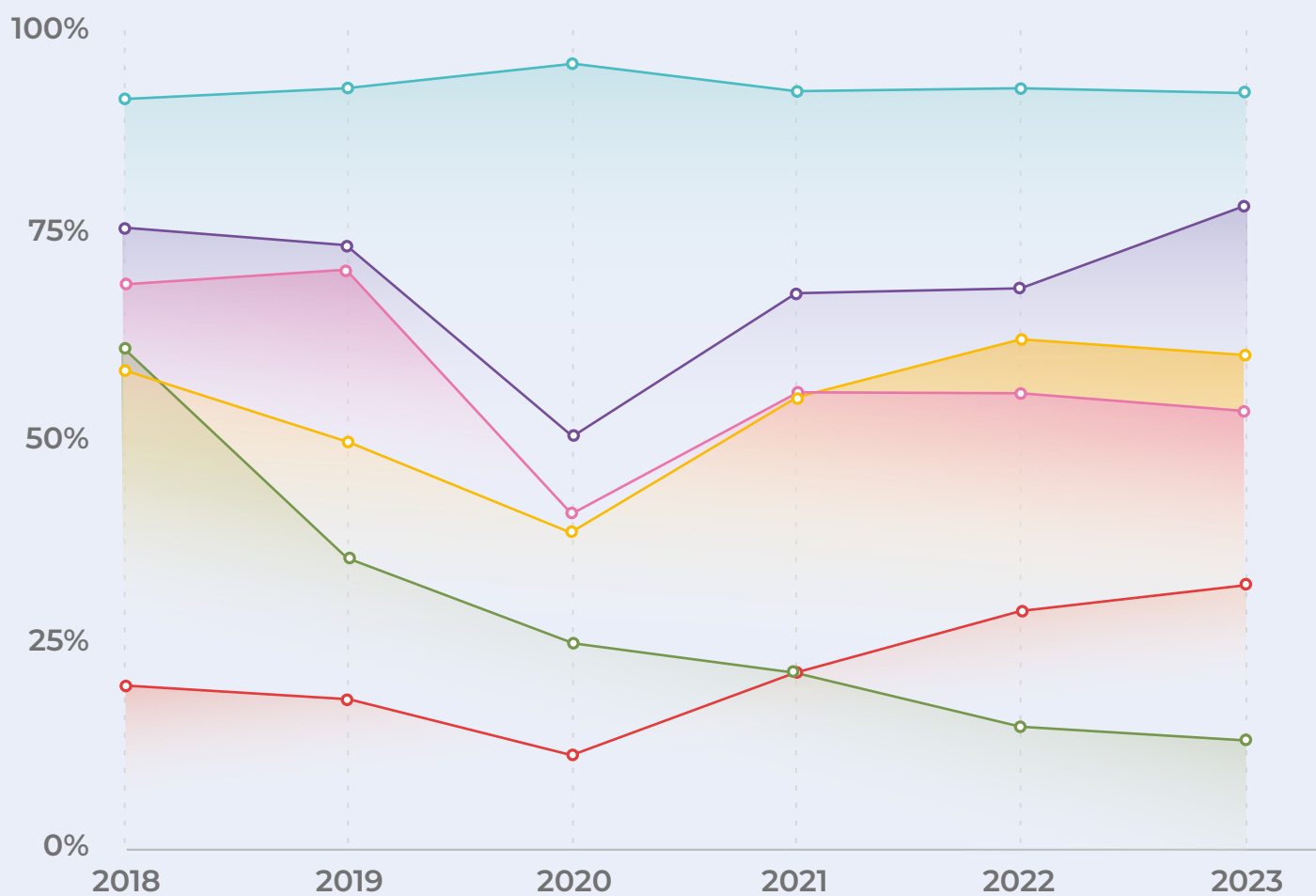


FIGURE 5

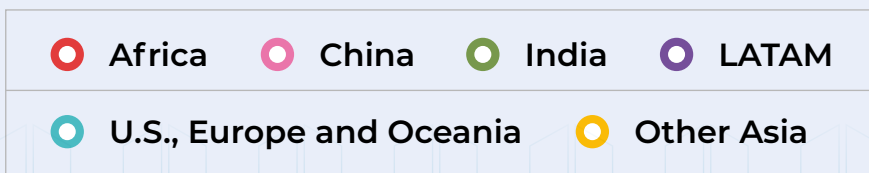
Despite some improvements in recent years, the study permit approval rate for African postgraduate students remained low across levels of education. There are further significant disparities when controlling only for non-SDS permit applications (Figures 6-8);

only Indian students exhibit lower non-SDS study permit approval rates, though these students may have access to the SDS path for faster processing and a far greater chance of receiving an approval.

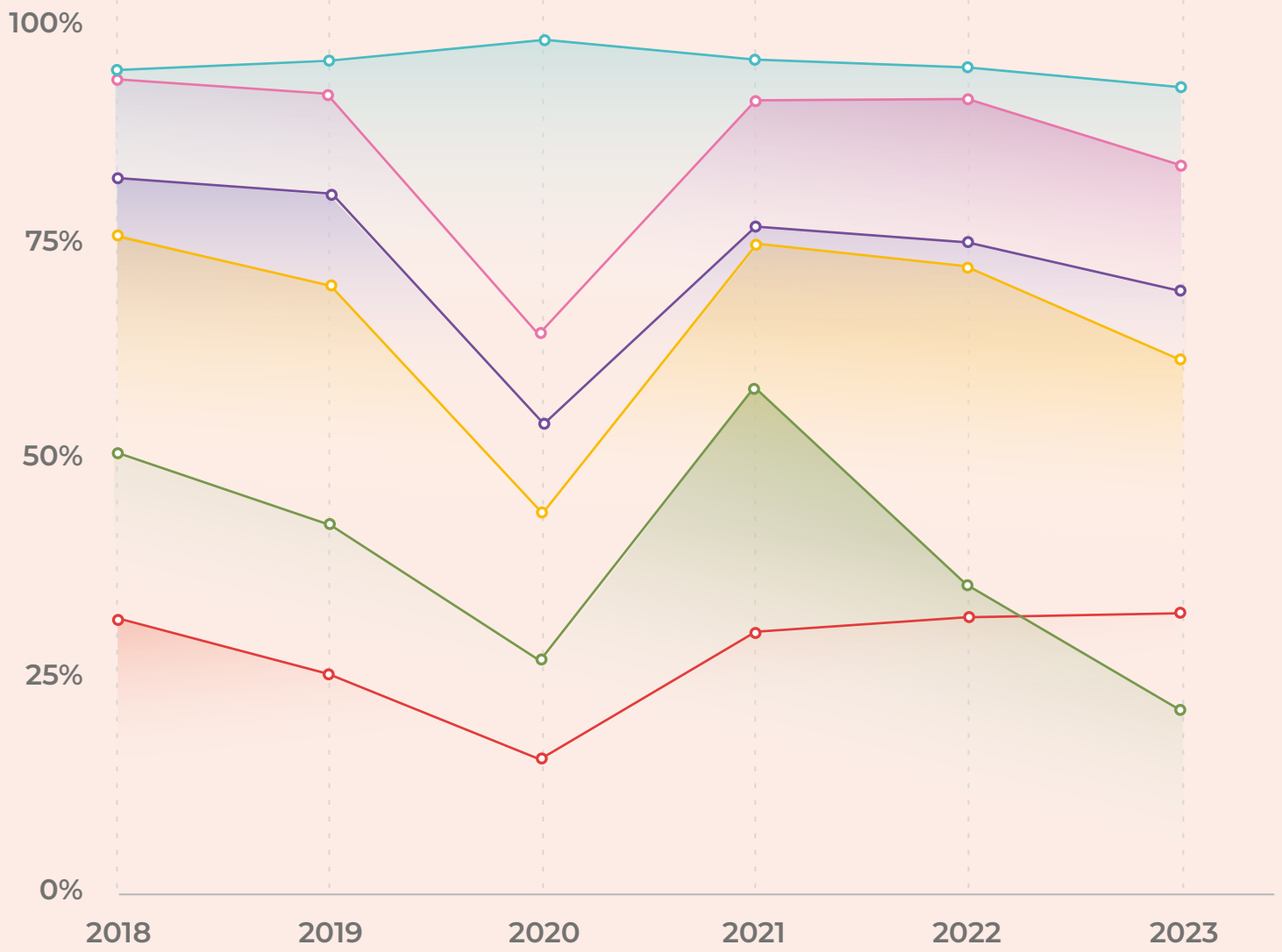
## College + CEGEP study permit approval rates, Non SDS applications



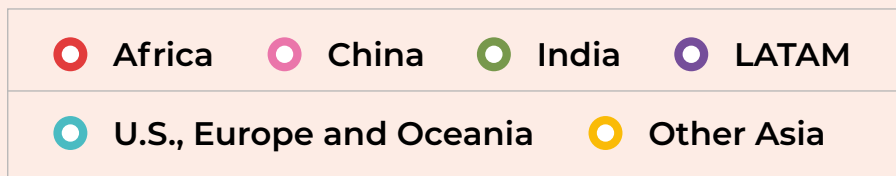
**FIGURE 6**



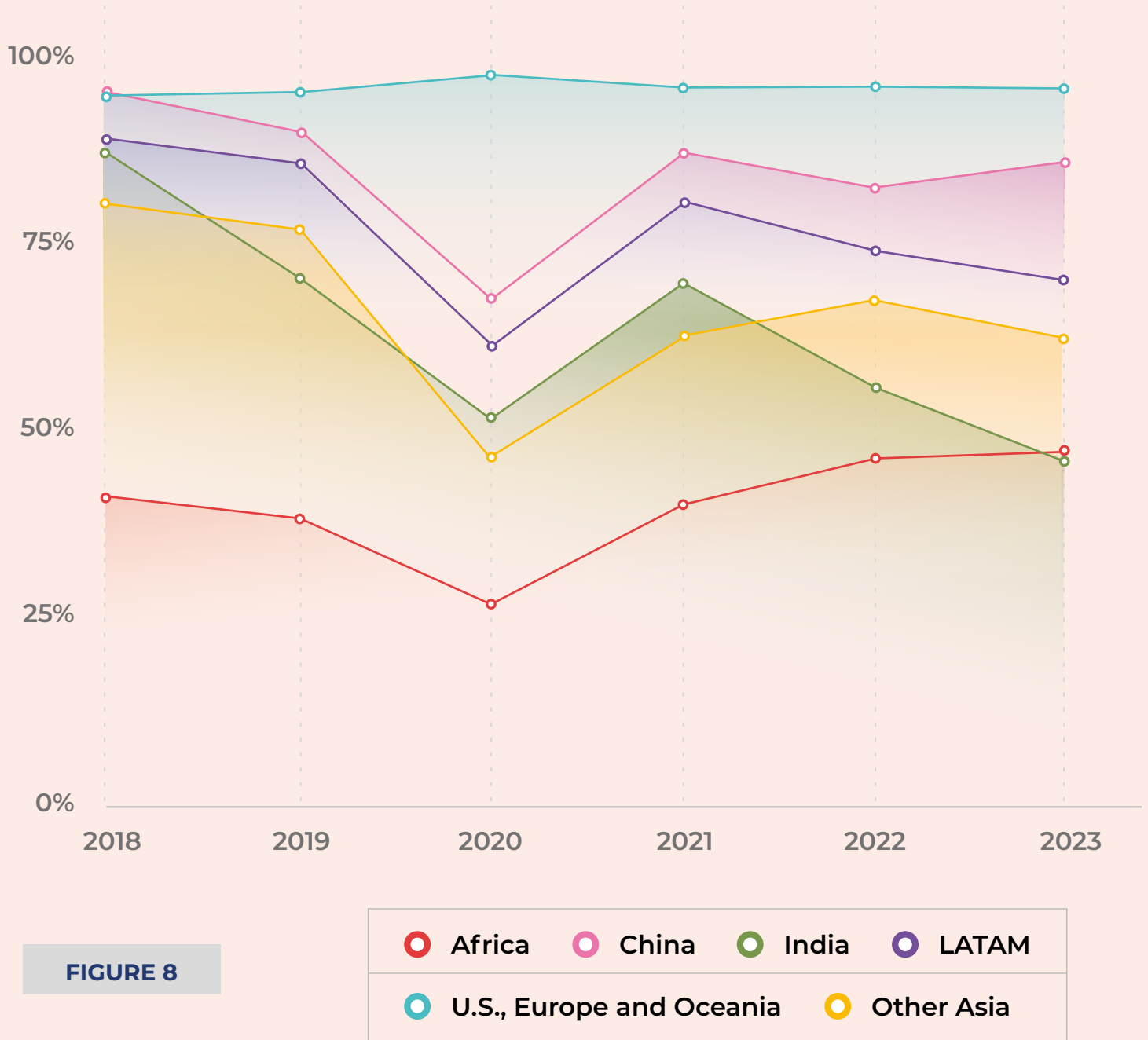
# Undergraduate study permit approval rates, Non SDS applications

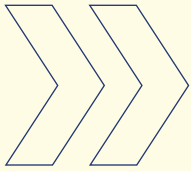


**FIGURE 7**



# Postgraduate study permit approval rates, Non SDS applications





# REGIONAL DISPARITIES

When reviewing different regions of Africa, the data reveal pronounced variations in study permit approval rates across different regions worldwide (see Figures 9 and 10).



## West Africa:

- 1 Benin
- 2 Burkina-Faso
- 3 Cape Verde Islands
- 4 Gambia
- 5 Ghana
- 6 Guinea
- 7 Guinea-Bissau
- 8 Ivory Coast
- 9 Liberia
- 10 Mali
- 11 Mauritania
- 12 Niger
- 13 Nigeria
- 14 Senegal
- 15 Sierra Leone
- 16 Togo

## Southern Africa:

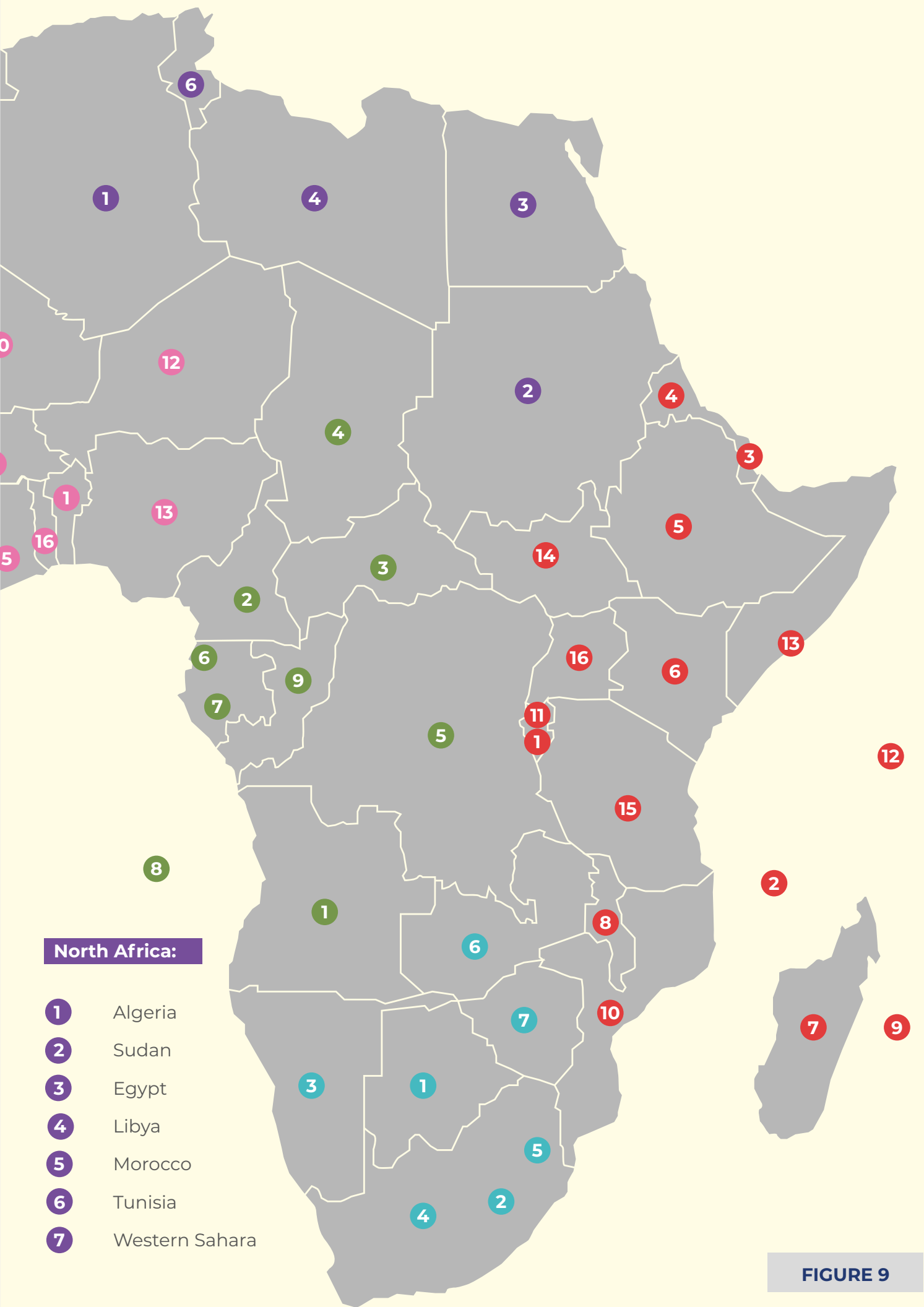
- 1 Botswana
- 2 Lesotho
- 3 Namibia
- 4 South Africa
- 5 Eswatini
- 6 Zambia
- 7 Zimbabwe

## Central Africa:

- 1 Angola
- 2 Cameroon
- 3 Central African Republic
- 4 Chad
- 5 Democratic Republic of Congo
- 6 Equatorial Guinea
- 7 Gabon
- 8 São Tomé and Príncipe
- 9 Republic of Congo

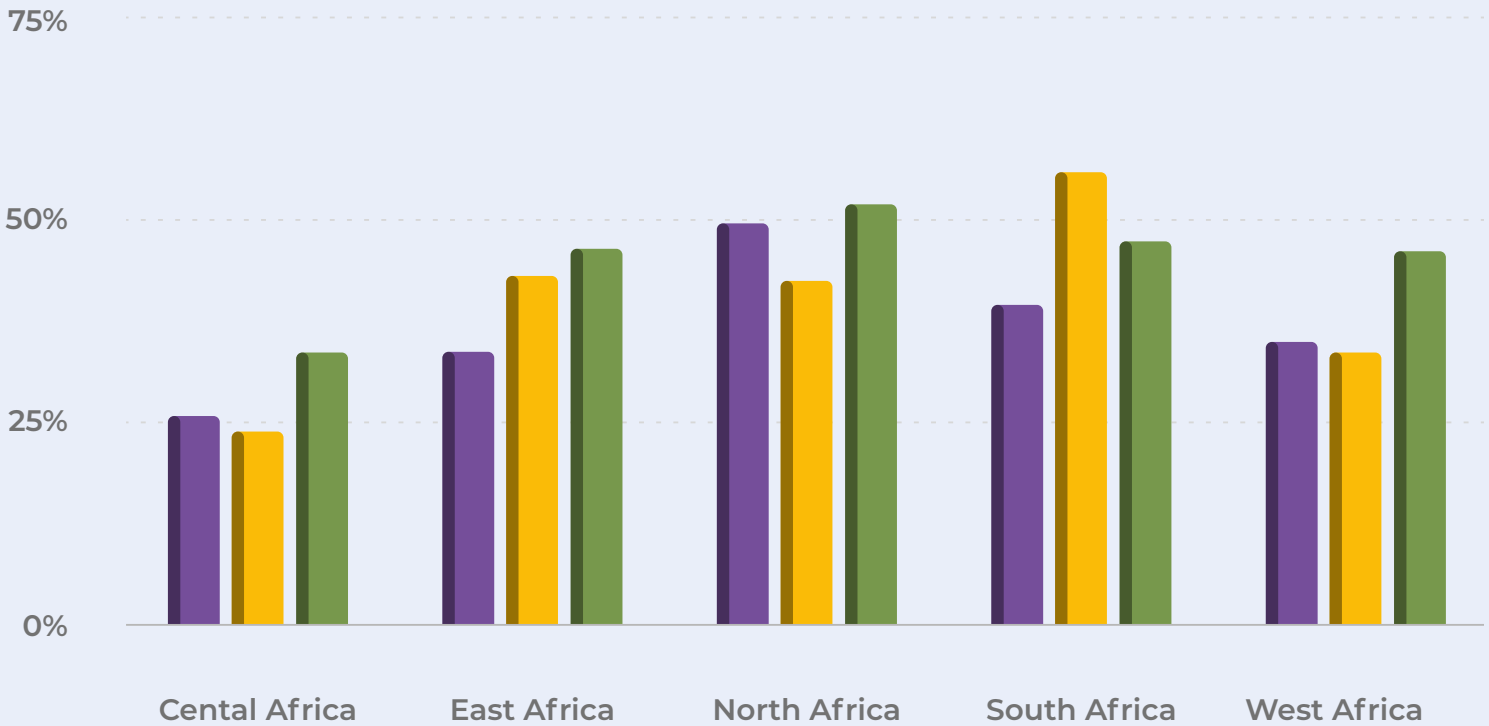
## East Africa:

- 1 Burundi
- 2 Comoros
- 3 Djibouti
- 4 Eritrea
- 5 Ethiopia
- 6 Kenya
- 7 Madagascar
- 8 Malawi
- 9 Mauritius
- 10 Mozambique
- 11 Rwanda
- 12 Seychelles
- 13 Somalia
- 14 South Sudan
- 15 Tanzania
- 16 Uganda



**FIGURE 9**

# Study permit approval rates by African regions and level of education, 2023



**FIGURE 10**

■ College + CEGEP    
 ■ Undergraduate    
 ■ Postgraduate

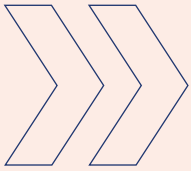
Central Africa consistently recorded the lowest study permit approval rates across Africa, while Northern Africa enjoyed the highest study permit approval rates. However, across Africa, rates still languished beneath students from other nations.

West Africa was the largest source region for international students, driven primarily by Nigeria and Ghana. However, West African nations experienced lower study permit acceptance rates relative to many other African regions, marking a specific concern for the Canadian higher education industry. For postgraduate students, only those from North Africa received study permit approval rates above 50% – and even then, only slightly.









# AFRIQUE FRANCOPHONE

Francophone African nations (as depicted in Figure 11) have faced consistently low study permit approval rates (see Figure 12). This is particularly relevant at a time when the Canadian government is working to remedy linguistic imbalances and recruit more students from Francophone nations.

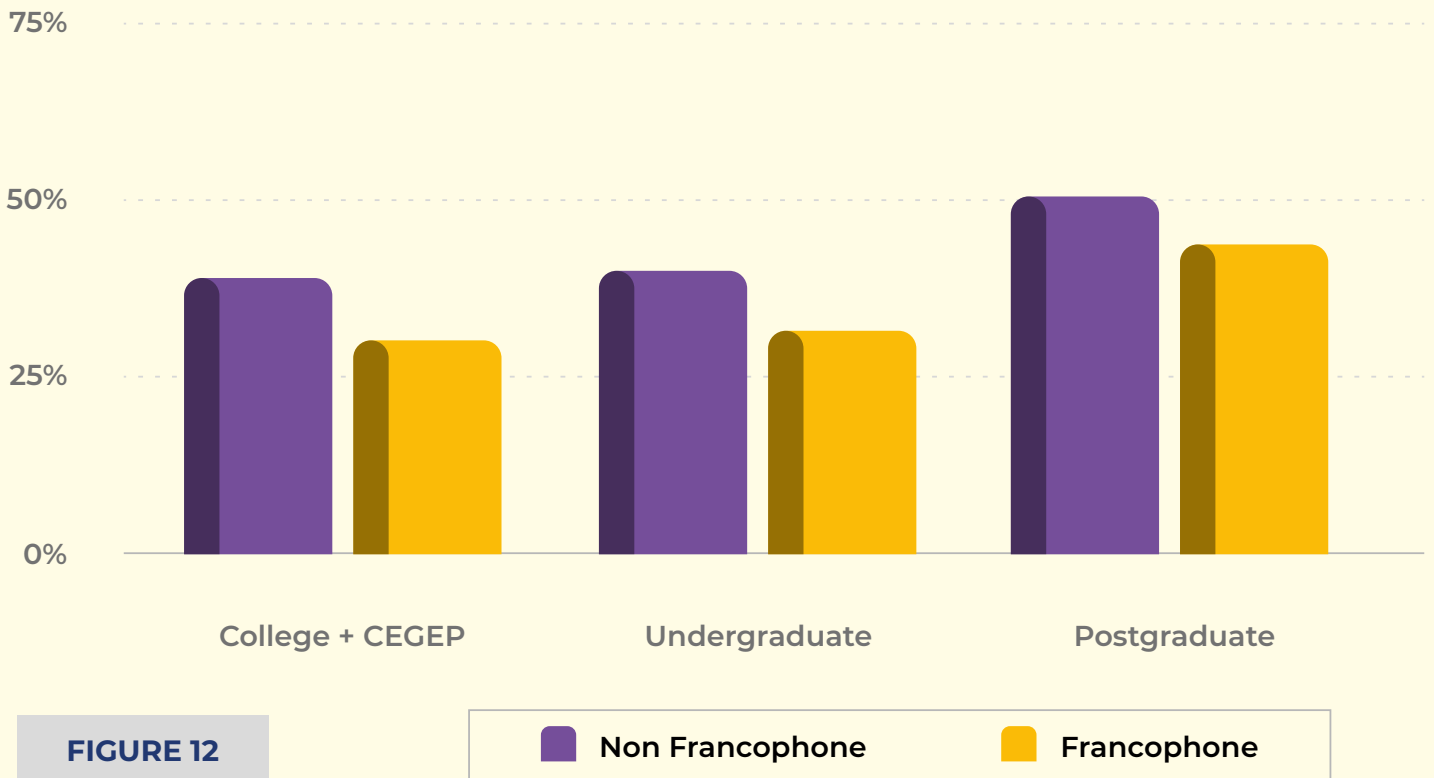
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FIGURE 11



# African study permit approval rates by Francophone status and level of education, 2023

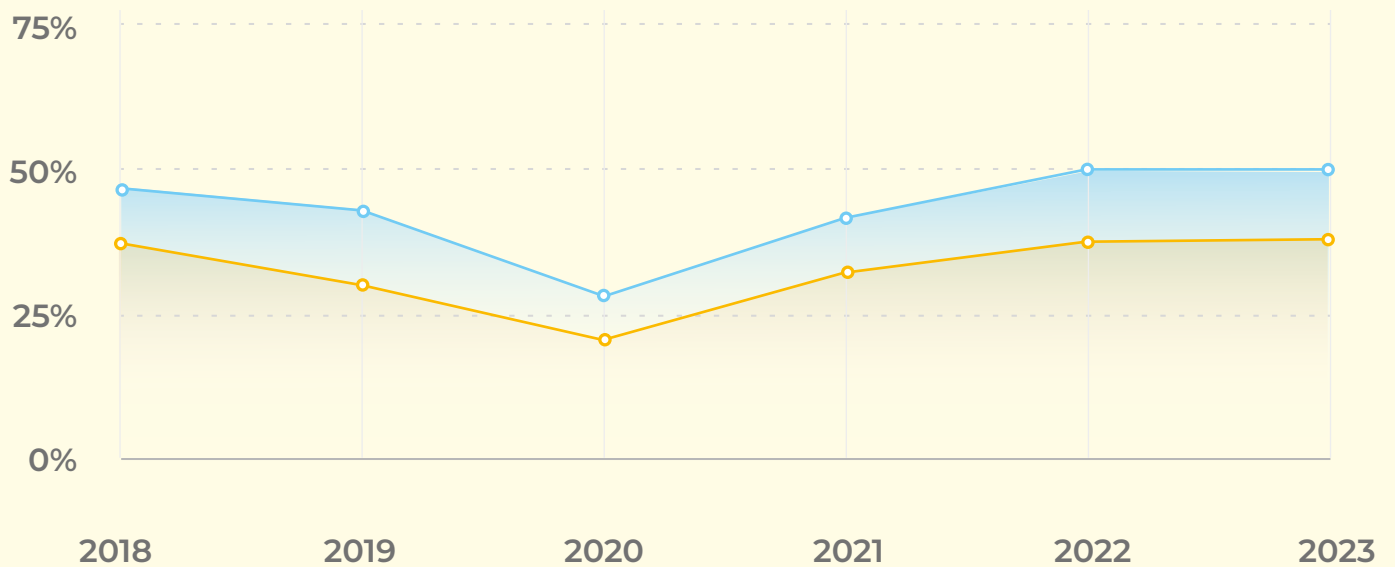


Across levels of study, students from Francophone African nations have consistently experienced a study permit approval rate approximately 10 percentage points lower than students from non-Francophone African nations (see Figure 13).

This persistent gap, which has only widened post-pandemic, suggests that systemic issues, such as biases or variances in application processing, may disproportionately affect Francophone African applicants.

As the Canadian government seeks to attract additional students from Francophone nations, addressing this disparity will be critical. Implementing targeted measures to support Francophone African applicants, such as reviewing and revising existing policies, enhancing transparency in the application process, and providing additional resources and support, could help bridge this gap and strengthen the appeal of Canadian education to a broader international audience.

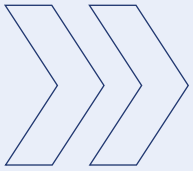
## African study permit approval rates by Francophone status for postgraduate students



**FIGURE 13**

— Non Francophone — Francophone





# WHY THIS MATTERS

Canada's study permit program is more than just a reflection of Canadians' welcoming attitude and openness to diverse perspectives – it's vital to Canada's economic success and dynamism.

MPOWER Financing, a financier of international students, estimates that international students contributed C\$36 billion to the Canadian economy in 2022<sup>8</sup> by paying tuition, renting apartments and buying groceries and other daily incidentals. This economic injection sustained thousands of jobs and is vital to the financial health of Canadian postsecondary institutions and to many communities across the nation.

Poor study permit success rates for African students point to a significant loss for students and citizens alike. The tens of thousands of potentially qualified African students who were denied study permits to Canada during this period reflect a substantial deficit to these students and their families' socioeconomic mobility.

Additionally, Canadian postsecondary institutions are looking to rapidly diversify their intake of students and are increasingly looking to Africa for its large population of talented potential students.

Other destination countries are eager to have these students study at their own schools, and Canada will have to compete to attract these students. Strikingly, African

students have a higher chance of receiving an American F-1 student visa than a Canadian study permit.

IRCC recently introduced caps on study permits<sup>9</sup> that wisely exempt postgraduate students, which will help increase the number of international students who study in Canada. However, more needs to be done to remedy study permit disparities in the interest of promoting equity for bright students from around the world and ensuring that Canada remains a welcoming educational destination for all.

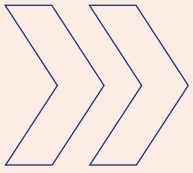
## Footnote:

**8** MPOWER Financing, "International Students Contribute C\$36 billion to Canadian Economy," | Last updated: October 25th, 2023, <https://www.mpowerfinancing.com/blog/international-students-contribute-c36-billion-to-canadian-economy>.

**9** Government of Canada, "Canada to stabilize growth and decrease number of new international student permits issued to approximately 360,000 for 2024" Date modified: 2024-01-24.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/01/canada-to-stabilize-growth-and-decrease-number-of-new-international-student-permits-issued-to-approximately-360000-for-2024.html>





# SUMMARY: SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

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As IRCC and the Canadian government actively rethink the study permit program, there's an opportunity to enhance study permit adjudication for students from all countries to remedy inequities and enhance the credibility of the program. This is especially crucial for students from Africa, who face higher disapproval rates as part of the current study permit program.

IRCC is aware of these disparities, thus signaling a desire to shift towards more equitable study permit processing practices. However, properly addressing inequities in the system will require a whole-of-government effort with cross-sector support. This is crucial to ensure Canada is well-positioned to educate the next generation of leaders and is not left behind as other nations realize the opportunity African students represent.

To seize this opportunity, Global Affairs Canada should make a concerted effort to promote the EduCanada brand through in-person workshops in key African cities like Lagos, Nigeria; Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; and Accra, Ghana. Several Canadian business schools already hold in-person events in these cities, and there's an opportunity for EduCanada to consolidate resources and present a joint Canadian brand, segmented by level of study, to better promote a Canadian education across the African continent.

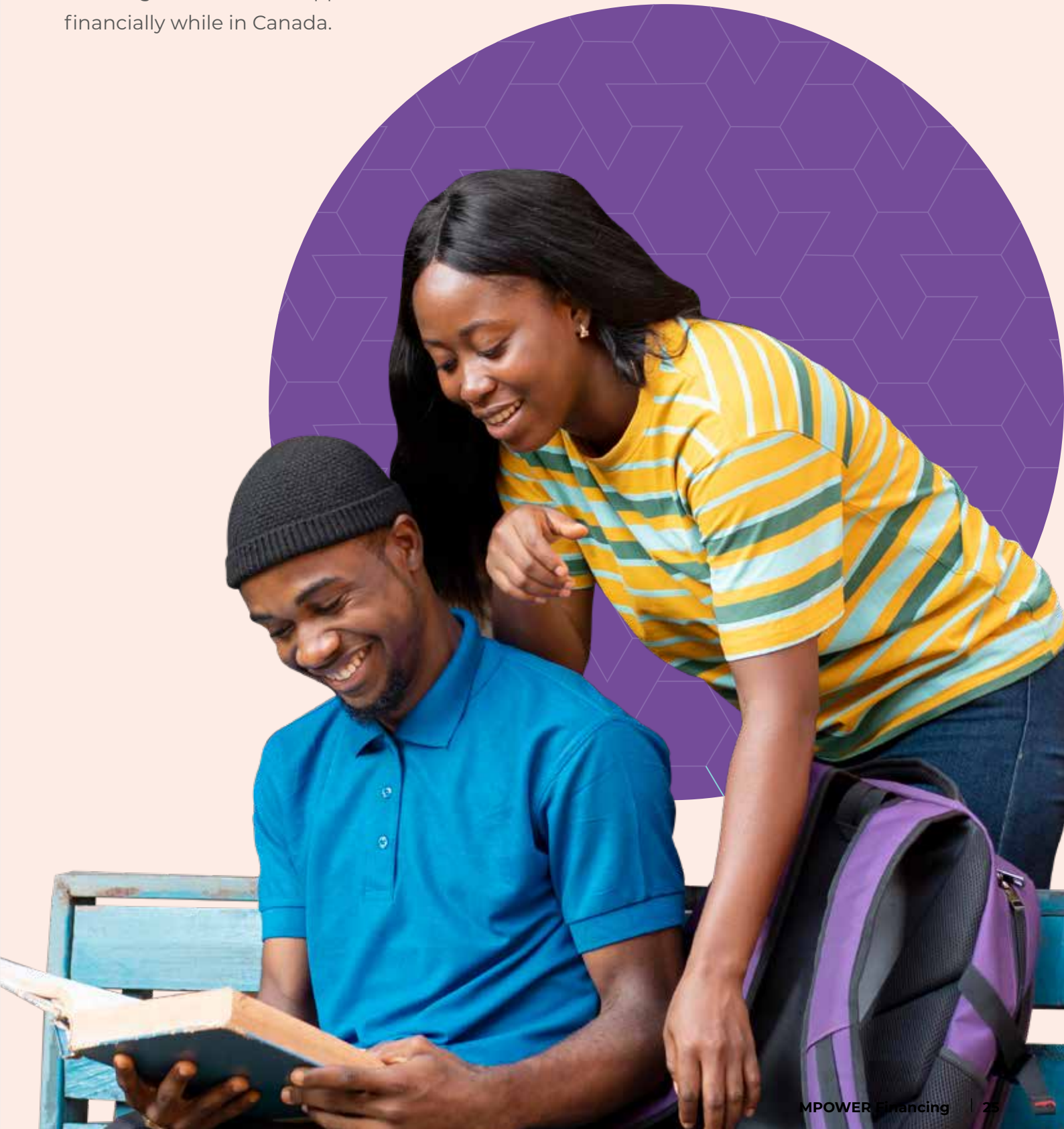
To recruit additional Francophone students, IRCC should implement targeted measures to support Francophone African applicants. This should include reviewing existing policies and revising them where appropriate, bolstering transparency in the application process, and providing students with additional resources and support.

EduCanada should establish a module specifically devoted to the mission of raising Francophone enrollment and partner with its counterparts in French-speaking destination countries such as *Campus France*. Canada, France and other French-speaking destination countries such as Belgium and Switzerland should jointly host recruitment events in key French-speaking origin countries such as Morocco and Algeria. Doing so would ensure Canada is "at the table" for Francophone students seeking to study abroad.

Particular effort should be paid to the upmarket higher education segment (master's degree and Ph.D. programs), which now have more flexibility in receiving study permits because of the new cap exemption. As a result, universities across Canada are increasingly looking to grow their course-based master's degree programs. EduCanada could work with universities to hold both in-person and virtual events specifically tailored to an older and more educated student demographic.



Further, EduCanada, IRCC and Canadian institutions must recognize the role that financing plays in getting international students to actually attend Canadian schools. Students across Africa are highly aspirational but frequently lack the financial resources required for paying an international tuition and other expenses. Reputed global lenders like MPOWER Financing are critical to ensuring students can support themselves financially while in Canada.





*If it weren't for MPOWER, we would not have the number of African students that we do, which would have effectively reduced the diversity of our international student population*

**CHRIS JONES**

**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF RECRUITMENT AND ADMISSIONS,  
ROTMAN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT - UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO**

Institutions will have greater success recruiting African students – and those from countries worldwide – when offering fee waivers or flexible enrollment deposit policies and when registrar offices have an understanding of how to best work with global lenders.

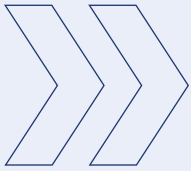
Finally, IRCC must resolve study permit approval discrepancies. Even with funding secured, African students must contend with low study permit approval rates. IRCC should investigate these disparities and ensure these students aren't held to a different standard than their classmates from other countries. IRCC should implement a *Recognized Financier Framework* for SDS-like benefits for students who've received funding from a reputed financier.

To achieve this, IRCC may adopt best practices from other nations. In the U.S., for example, educational institutions verify and document students' financial plans before issuing the I-20 form, a critical document for student visa applications. IRCC could adopt a similar approach in Canada, with modifications to suit the Canadian education

system. This would involve higher education institutions presenting a detailed ledger of expected expenses and verified sources of funding on the Letters of Acceptance, ensuring a clear financial picture for study permit officers.

IRCC might consider launching a pilot program with select trusted institutions to implement this verification process and should establish clear guidelines on acceptable sources of funding and required documentation. Such enhancements to the financial verification process through additional checks on students' financial plans would reduce the risk of financial instability and ensure students are well supported during their studies in Canada.

The future of Canada's economic growth is dependent on the country's receptiveness to recruiting students no matter their background or country of origin. Canada should continue rolling out the welcome mat to talented students from around the world, including from Africa, to fuel its economy and to drive its economic dynamism.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was authored by MPOWER Financing's Corporate Strategy Team: Martin Lalmalsawma, Sasha Ramani and

Rutvi Vadera. Unless otherwise cited, the data were obtained from IRCC, through an Access to Information Act request.





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