

Issue 18

EDUCATED SOLUTIONS

From Global to Local:
**The Complexity of
Internationalization**

Land Acknowledgment

The Home Office of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is situated on the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River and is covered by Treaty 13 of the Upper Canada Treaties.

Our member institutions exist on Lands that have been the homes of Indigenous Peoples for time immemorial and have remained homes despite efforts of the settler-colonial state we know as Canada. As a coalition of student unions, we are also aware that all levels of education have a long history as violent tools for assimilation and as disseminators of settler-colonial practices. As this issue of Educated Solutions aims to explore the impact of internationalization on Ontario post-secondary education, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the interconnected nature of all the systems that unfairly treat vulnerable international student populations and those that dispossess Indigenous Peoples across the province. Settler-colonial practices are dependent on the disenfranchisement of those deemed as other, and it is vital that work is done to break down these harmful cycles.

Some institutions are taking meaningful steps to improve access for Indigenous students - for instance, the University of Waterloo is waiving tuition fees for prospective students from the two Nations closest to their campus.¹ Some are also attempting to meaningfully support international students, like Brock University, which aims to provide robust supports and community-building opportunities.²

However, there needs to be more targeted and sustained efforts across all educational institutions to address the historical and ongoing disparities faced by Indigenous communities.

We recognize that the path to true reconciliation requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands systemic change, respectful engagement, and an unwavering commitment to amplifying Indigenous voices. In honouring the past, acknowledging the present, and committing to a more just future, we recognize that internationalization needs to be enacted responsibly, equitably, and in a way that meaningfully engages these incoming newcomers. We also recognize that this responsibility must be intertwined with reconciliation efforts. We implore all settlers to critically engage with the specific histories of the Land you occupy. Learn about the injustices that have and continue to occur where you are, and get to know the Indigenous communities near you – engage in dialogue, learn about what you can do to support these specific communities, and commit to tangible action.

As we move forward towards decolonization in the face of a rapidly changing internationalization policy landscape within the post-secondary sector, we must ask ourselves: How can we entrench care into the system at hand, in a way that moves towards the empowerment and liberation of Indigenous peoples and fosters respect for international students and all marginalized students simultaneously?

¹ Latif, Anam. "University of Waterloo Will Waive Tuition for Students from 2 Ontario First Nations." CBC. Last modified May 25, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-of-waterloo-will-waive-tuition-for-students-from-2-ontario-first-nations-1.6854417>.

² <https://brocku.ca/international/>

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Minister's Foreword



I am delighted to have the opportunity to address members of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) in the annual edition of Educated Solutions. This year's theme on how best to address the needs of international students is timely given the important steps we took this year to ensure international students have a positive and rewarding experience while studying in Ontario.

International students play an important role in fostering the talent, skills, and future prosperity of our province. In response to the federal government's cap and to continue supporting their access to our postsecondary system, our government took a fair, transparent and data-driven approach to allocating study permit applications.

There are several sectors of Ontario's economy where international students could help fill in-demand jobs in areas such as the skilled trades, health human resources, STEM, hospitality and childcare. That's why we're prioritizing permit applications for postsecondary programs that will help prepare graduates for these in-demand jobs. This approach will help us attract the best and brightest international students to Ontario to study in areas that are critical to our labour market.

Another way we're supporting the needs of international students is by helping to ensure they have a place to live when they come to Ontario. Now, Ontario's publicly assisted colleges and universities must have guaranteed housing options available for incoming international students. When students are far away from home, having a safe place to live can make all the difference in the world.

Supporting the well-being of international students once they arrive in Ontario, is also an important step that our government is taking. Last year, we invested more than \$2.5 million in four projects to support the mental health of international students. The supports range from access to peer mentoring and mental health courses, to access to peer support networks and cultural awareness programs.

This past spring, we also passed the Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, 2024 that requires all public colleges and universities to have a mental health policy in place that outlines the available supports for students at their institution. Institutions are also required to have policies in place to support safe and inclusive campuses.

Our goal through these initiatives is to ensure that when international students get to Ontario, they have the supports they need to succeed in their studies and their transition to the workforce. Working together with our postsecondary institutions, and partners like OUSA, we can ensure international students achieve their full potential in Ontario.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nolan Quinn'.

The Honourable Nolan Quinn
Minister of Colleges and Universities

President's Note

For years, Educated Solutions has provided a platform to explore the most pressing issues in the post-secondary sector. This year, we turn our focus to the internationalization of Ontario's post-secondary education landscape.

Internationalization is not just about increasing numbers; it is about the profound impact these students have on our campuses and the challenges they face. As provincial funding for post-secondary institutions has declined, many schools have turned to international tuition as a necessary supplement. This has created a short-term financial lifeline, but also added additional complexities to supporting a large, diverse international population of students.

International students find themselves navigating an unwelcoming environment, dealing with issues from xenophobia to a nationwide housing shortage, and shouldering the burden of being seen as a solution to broader institutional funding gaps.

In this issue of Educated Solutions, experts from across the sector address these issues, looking at how our institutions and educators have risen to the changing needs of today's increasingly diverse student body. However, as this publication shows, there is still much work to be done.

The articles in this year's edition remind us of the power of collaboration and unity in addressing the challenges in the post-secondary sector. They challenge us to reflect on how we can better support international students, not just as a means of balancing budgets but as a commitment to inclusivity and excellence in education.

As we look back on the insights gathered here, it is clear that internationalization and international students are a part of the present and future of post-secondary education in Ontario. My hope is that we can continue to build on this, working together to create a more equitable and supportive environment for all students.



Michelle Wodchis-Johnson
(she/her)

OUSA President 2024-2025

Editors' Note

In the last decade, internationalization has become an integral part of Ontario's post-secondary education landscape. As provincial contributions have shrunk, international student recruitment has risen in an attempt to balance diminishing budgets. However, despite this population expansion, institutions have persistent issues balancing budgets and meeting students' needs. This has caused international students to face unjustified vitriol from broader Canadian society for government policy failure, including being blamed for the housing crisis, refusal of services at food banks, and hostility from local residents to name a few. Many international students are racialized, which often adds a layer of xenophobia to the hostility they face.

Additionally, in the wake of the Federal government's announcing a cap on student visas, leading to a dramatic reduction of international students, provinces are grappling with the future of the post-secondary institutions. As provincial funding dwindles nationally, institutions have become overly reliant on exorbitant international student tuition to maintain their financial stability. However, international students are not just the source of revenue, but a valuable student population that adds to the rich community that makes up post-secondary education.

In the face of these challenges, educators and sector partners have found ways to employ innovative teaching practices to meet the needs of their evolving student populations. Student and institution-led initiatives have also aimed to meet the needs of this growing population through various programs.

For the 18th Edition of Educated Solutions, our sector partners explored the present and future of internationalization in the post-secondary sector. Our intention is to dive into the many facets of internationalization in post-secondary education in Ontario, from the broader policy landscape to international students' varied experiences on their campuses. By sharing insights from across the sector, we hope to foster a deeper understanding of how internationalization can be approached to not only enhance student learning but also build a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

We extend our gratitude to all the authors for their contributions to this year's edition of Educated Solutions. OUSA deeply values the diversity of perspectives and fresh insights you have brought to the table, enriching the discourse and broadening our understanding of the multifaceted nature of internationalization within Ontario's post-secondary landscape. It is our hope that this edition acts as a catalyst for meaningful discussions, ignites innovative approaches to not only student learning but also builds a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Through this, we strive to provide a future-facing education that meets the diverse needs of all students.

Managers of Research and Policy



Octavia Andrade-Dixon
(they/them)



Abishane Suthakaran
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Collision Course: The internationalization of Canadian higher education and its looming sustainability crisis

By Trevor Potts and Alex Nguyen (CASA)



Trevor Potts is the Senior Policy Advisor with the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA). Previously, Trevor worked in the Global Operations team at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and as Program Coordinator with Aga Khan University in Kampala, Uganda. He completed his Masters in Global Health at Western University, and has been involved in public policy, research, and federal advocacy for the last 7 years.



Alex Nguyen is a Master of Public Policy student at the University of Calgary and currently serves as a Research Associate at the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA). With extensive experience in student governance, Alex previously served as President of the St. Thomas University Students' Union (STUSU), and currently serves as Vice President Internal of the University of Calgary Master of Public Policy Students' Association (UC MPPSA). She further co-leads the Canadian Red Cross National Youth Resource Group.

Introduction

On January 24, 2024, the Federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship announced that the Government of Canada would introduce a temporary cap on total approved study permits for the next two years.¹ The announcement came in the wake of public outcry against international students for ostensibly fuelling the ongoing housing crisis, as well as growing concerns over the rise in incidents of exploitation and abuse of international students by unscrupulous actors.

At the root of these issues lies a common thread: the *internationalization* of Canada's post-secondary sector. After decades of stagnant provincial transfers, Canada's post-secondary institutions have increasingly come to rely on international student enrolments to supplement dwindling revenues. In fact, over the last decade, international tuition in Canada has seen triple-digit increases, up 196% (undergraduates) and 163% (graduate students).² Currently, the average international student can expect to pay a total annual cost of education of \$48,444.97, nearly 400% higher than the average domestic student.

These growing – and increasingly overwhelming – financial challenges have had devastating consequences for Canada's international students. According to Abacus Data, international students pay 368% more in tuition than their domestic counterparts, 1 in 2 skipped meals due to financial costs, and a further 1 in 10 experienced homelessness during their last academic year.³

¹ Refugees and Citizenship Canada Immigration, "Canada to Stabilize Growth and Decrease Number of New International Student Permits Issued to Approximately 360,000 for 2024," News Releases, January 22, 2024, <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 Statistics Canada, "Canadian and International Tuition Fees by Level of Study (Current Dollars)," June 27, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb1/en/tv.action?pid=3710004501>.

³ Canadian Alliance of Student Association, Abacus Report 2024.

These impacts are not only costly for international students in the short term, but have potentially crippling consequences for Canada's post-secondary institutions long term. With nearly half of Ontario's 23 public post-secondary institutions currently running deficits, which are projected to total \$273 million this upcoming year,⁴ Canada's post-secondary sector seems certain to face a significant sustainability crisis in the coming years.

Historical Context

In the wake of the 2007-08 global financial crisis, provincial governments scaled back their funding transfers to their post-secondary institutions.⁵ In addition, many provincial governments began introducing specific measures to control domestic tuition levels, including tuition freezes, which further constrained financial revenue for Canada's struggling post-secondary institutions (PSIs). As a result, institutions have had to increasingly rely on income from international student tuition fees to supplement lost revenue streams.

In Ontario, provincial transfers have not only stagnated, but are lower than pre-financial crisis levels, with funding levels now 12% lower than in the last decade.⁶

Concerns

Rapidly increasing tuition

Over the past two decades, international student tuition fees across the country have escalated at an alarming rate.⁷ In 2006, international graduate students already paid

106.0% more in tuition fees than their Canadian counterparts, while international undergraduate students faced a 204.0% higher cost.⁸ By the 2022/2023 academic year, this disparity had significantly widened, with international undergraduate students paying 429.0% more than Canadian students.⁹ Most recently, the annual total cost of international student tuition has reached \$48,444.97,¹⁰ standing four times higher than the average tuition for Canadian counterparts. Notably, international students in Ontario face the highest average tuition fees nationally, with undergraduate students paying an average of \$46,433 and graduate students paying \$28,152.^{11,12} This situation underscores the significant and escalating financial burden on international students, especially amidst rising living costs.

Exploitation of international students

Despite their vital contribution, international students continue to face ongoing discrimination, exploitation and abuse as they pursue their post-secondary education in Canada.¹³ Reported exploitation of international students includes various forms and degrees of mis/disinformation, financial fraud, and documentation fraud.¹⁴ This issue is especially pronounced in Ontario, where the province welcomes a large number of international students every year but lags behind in providing the necessary resources to support them once they arrive.¹⁵ Victims of these predatory practices are reported to suffer from severe financial, social and emotional consequences which also extend to their families back home.¹⁶

4 Sam Konnert, "Expected Funding Boost for Ontario Universities a 'drop in the Bucket,' Critics Say | CBC News," accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/expected-funding-boost-for-ontario-universities-a-drop-in-the-bucket-critics-say-1.7124860>.

5 Alex Usher, *The State of Postsecondary Education 2023*, (Toronto: Higher Education Strategy, 2023), 45, https://higherstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-03-SPEC-2023_fi-nal-2_smaller.pdf#page=45

6 Usher, *The State of Postsecondary Education 2023*, 46.

7 Statistics Canada, "The Daily — Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2022/2023," September 7, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220907/dq220907b-eng.htm>.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Canadian Alliance of Student Association, *Abacus Report 2024*.

11 Statistics Canada, "Canadian and International Tuition Fees by Level of Study (Current Dollars)."

12 Ibid

13 Lisa R. Brunner, "The Ethics of Eduration : Canada's Higher Education-Migration Nexus," *University of British Columbia Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) 2008+*, (2022): 4-5, [doi:https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0422835](https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0422835).

14 Pii-Tuulia Nikula and Jussi Kivistö, "Monitoring of Education Agents Engaged in International Student Recruitment: Perspectives from Agency Theory," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 24, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 212–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318825338>.

15 Vanessa Baltinec, "We're Welcoming Record Numbers of International Students. Here's How They Got Caught up in the Housing Crisis | CBC News," accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/international-student-timeline-1.6947913>.

16 Vima Sivakumar, "Protecting against Immigration Fraud as an International Student in Canada | CIC News," March 28, 2023, <https://www.cicnews.com/2023/03/protecting-against-immigration-fraud-as-an-international-student-in-canada-0334120.html>.

International students are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation in the housing market due to a lack of adequate protections, and precarious immigrant status.¹⁷ According to the 2021 Census, international students are more prone to being pushed into sub-standard, illegal and overcrowded housing.¹⁸ Brampton(ON) are among the cities that have the highest share of international students living in unsuitable accommodations.¹⁹ Additionally, with the rising living cost and the lack of affordable housing options, international students are also facing rent gouging, rights abuses, and sexual harassment in their search for accommodations.²⁰

International students are often targeted by housing scams perpetrated by illegitimate landlords who demand hefty upfront deposits, leaving students without accommodations and facing significant financial loss upon arrival.²¹ The lack of essential housing resources before departure, coupled with limited access to legal assistance, further exacerbates the challenges international students encounter in their search for suitable accommodations.²² It is no doubt that these issues pose a significant threat to international students' well-being and hinder their ability to pursue a quality education in Canada.

Current unsustainability of Canadian post-secondary institutions

Canada remains the only major industrialized country without national oversight over higher education. While the federal government transfers money to the provinces for post-secondary education, there is no mechanism to ensure that the funds are actually spent on post-secondary education.²³ In turn, provincial support for post-secondary education has diminished over the past decade, with the current share of provincial funding comprising only around 34% of university operating budgets nationally.²⁴ Coupled with rising operational costs and domestic tuition freezes, Canadian post-secondary institutions have increasingly depended on international student revenue to compensate for chronically underfunded education systems.²⁵

This over-reliance on international students is particularly pronounced in Ontario, where provincial funding is the weakest in the country by a considerable margin.²⁶ The recent cap on international student enrollments has further exposed this severe overreliance, highlighting the financial unsustainability facing many publicly-funded institutions. Almost half of Ontario's post-secondary institutions are now running deficits,²⁷ jeopardizing the quality and experience of education for many post-secondary students.²⁸

17 Balintec, "We're Welcoming Record Numbers of International Students. Here's How They Got Caught up in the Housing Crisis | CBC News."

18 "Canada's Costly Housing Market Leaves International Students Open to Exploitation," News@York (blog), May 2, 2023, <https://www.yorku.ca/news/2023/05/02/canadas-costly-housing-market-leaves-international-students-open-to-exploitation/>.

19 Statistics Canada, "Housing International Students: Housing Suitability across Municipalities," May 22, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024005/article/00001-eng.htm>.

20 Ibid.

21 Aastha Shetty, "University, College Students Coping with High Rent and Scams Ahead of Fall Semester | CBC News," accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchen-er-waterloo/students-waterloo-region-rent-scams-housing-1.6944819>.

22 UNSW Human Rights Clinic, No Place Like Home - Addressing Exploitation of International Students in Sydney's Housing Market, (Sydney: UNSW Human Rights Clinic, 2019), https://www.law.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/imce/files/UNSW0006-No-Place-Like-Home_Executive-Summary.pdf

23 Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, The impact of government underfunding on Students, (Toronto: Canadian Federation of Students, 2015), <https://cfsontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Factsheet-Underfunding.pdf>

24 Statistic Canada, "Provincial Funding and Tuition Revenue as Share of Total Universities' Revenue, 2013/2014 to 2022/2023," Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240723/cq-a001-eng.htm>.

25 Pari Johnston, "Sustainable Investment in the Public Post-Secondary Sector Is the National Conversation We Should Be Having, Not Unsustainable Growth in International Students Colleges and Institutes Canada," accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/sustainable-investment-in-the-public-post-secondary-sector-is-the-national-conversation-we-should-be-having-not-unsustainable-growth-in-international-students/>.

26 Usher, The State of Postsecondary Education 2023, 25.

27 Ibid.

28 Kristin Rushowy, "Nearly Half of Ontario Universities Running Deficits," accessed August 20, 2024, https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/almost-half-of-ontario-universities-are-running-deficits-putting-student-services-at-risk-council-says/article_639ebedc-af31-11ee-bdce-47e37d4e1808.html.

Recommendations

It is essential that the Federal Government move to address the concerns facing international students as the result of the internationalization of Canadian higher education. This includes clear policy solutions to redress student financial costs, protect students against exploitation, and optimize immigration programs to facilitate better outcomes for students.

Recommendation #1 – Retain more Canadian-trained students by revising the Express Entry Comprehensive Ranking System score for a Canadian post-secondary credential to 80 for 3+ year degrees and 30 for programs of at least 1 year.

Recommendation #2 – Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) enact further reforms to help the goal of retaining as many highly-trained individuals who received graduate degrees from Canadian institutions as possible.

Recommendation #3 – Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) award Express Entry points for all in-study employment experience (i.e. work experience obtained in Canada while on a study permit), including teaching assistantships, cooperative education and internships.

Recommendation #4 – Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to overall increase the number of highly-skilled newcomers admitted to Canada under the Foreign Skilled Workers Program (FSWP).

Recommendation #5 – Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to create a new stream of Express Entry for foreign graduate students with Canadian research experience.

Recommendation #6 – Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to introduce a new Recognized Institutions Framework with clear metrics on how to support international students with affordable housing, financial opportunities, and mental health support.

Conclusion

The internationalization of Canadian higher education has significantly driven growth, cultural exchange, and economic benefits within the post-secondary education sector. However, underlying these internationalization efforts is a growing overreliance on international students to subsidize post-secondary institutions' operations amidst diminishing public funding and increased cost of living. Consequently, international students are often viewed as vital economic resources, with their tuition fees significantly exceeding those of domestic students, making them increasingly vulnerable to ex-

ploitation by many financially strapped institutions. Without increased government support, the growing reliance on international student fees further risks destabilizing the financial sustainability of the post-secondary education sector. Additionally, due to their precarious immigration status, international students have limited access to government financial aid and government-funded support services. This disparity exacerbates the financial burden on international students, who already bear the high cost of living and exorbitant tuition fees, further making pursuing higher education increasingly inaccessible for many.

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Alongside these financial pressures, international students must also navigate a complex and often hostile housing market. Amidst the ongoing housing crisis, they are frequently pushed into substandard, overcrowded living conditions with limited access to essential services, including public transportation. With the lack of legal protection and resources, international students are left vulnerable to scams and exploitation while trying to secure affordable and suitable accommodations, especially in major cities, where housing shortages and skyrocketing rents are common. Moreover, as the cost of living rises, many students are forced to choose between their well-being and education.

The current system sees international students as economic contributors and not as individuals with dreams, aspirations, and vulnerabilities. As more international students continue to choose Canada as their top education destination, it is imperative that these challenges be effectively addressed. CASA remains committed to supporting its partner organizations in advocating for international students to enjoy an accessible, affordable, and high-quality post-secondary education system and an excellent quality of life as they pursue their education in Canada.

An Action Plan for Renewing Ontario’s International Education System

By Mahtab Laghaei, André Côté, Noah Morris (The Dais)



Mahtab is a policy and research assistant for the Dais, motivated by her interest in the innovation economy and the interplay between geopolitics and tech policy. She is currently finishing her Master of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. Previously, she worked as a researcher and campaigner for women’s organizations, and in global gender digital access.



André Côté is the Director of Policy and Research for the Dais @ Toronto Metropolitan University. He has worked in a variety of roles at the intersection of policy, higher education and tech, including as a senior advisor to Ontario's minister for postsecondary education. He is also a director on the Board of eCampus Ontario, and a graduate of two Ontario universities.

Canada has historically been an attractive destination for international students to pursue their postsecondary studies. The students, meanwhile, have brought not only tuition revenues to the system, but global perspectives that can enhance learning for domestic students, substantial contributions to local economies, and the potential to become valuable assets to the country as workers and future citizens.

Yet, the massive influx of international students over the past decade to Canada - and in particular Ontario - has led to questions about the integrity of the international education program and the postsecondary system, as well as public concerns about the conditions for students, notably around housing access and affordability. The growth has been staggering, from 200,000 study permits in 2013 to over one million in 2023.¹ Ontario represented the largest share of this growth, concentrated in its public colleges - where the number of international students grew by 342 percent in less than a decade.² By 2021-22, almost three-quarters of Canada’s international college students resided in Ontario.³

It was only last year that the issue really burst into the mainstream public (and public policy) consciousness. Stories emerged about unethical recruitment practices, including deceptive immigration information from third-party recruiters.⁴

1 Youjin Choi and Feng Hou, “A Comparison of Postsecondary Enrolment Trends between Domestic and International Students by Field of Study,” Economic and Social Reports, Statistics Canada, September 27, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202300900003-eng>.

2 Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, Value-for-Money Audit: Public Colleges Oversight (Toronto: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, December 2021), 1, https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_PublicColleges_en21.pdf.

3 Statistics Canada, “Table 37-10-0086-01: Postsecondary Enrolments, by Institution Type, Registration Status, Province and Sex,” November 22, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710008601>.

4 Matthew Halliday, “The Murky World of Unregulated International Student Recruiters,” University Affairs, November 2, 2022, <https://universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/the-murky-world-of-unregulated-international-student-recruiters/>.

Poor living and working conditions of international students due to exploitative landlords and employers.⁵ Strains on municipal housing supplies and local services.⁶ Increasing dependence of universities and colleges on the unregulated international tuition revenues. One immediate outcome has been damage to Canada's global brand in higher education.

There are various causes of this runaway growth. The federal government's 2014 International Education Strategy, which sought to make Canada a destination for international students to address worker shortages and demographic challenges, set a target to double the number of international students by 2022 - a target now well surpassed.⁷ In Ontario, various reviews found that specific provincial policy choices indirectly encouraged the explosion of international students in Ontario, notably the low growth in provincial operating grant funding and seven years of caps on domestic tuition. For public colleges facing funding pressures, the reversal of a government moratorium on public-private college partnerships opened the door to massive, often irresponsible, expansion of these programs to secure lucrative international enrolments.^{8,9,10} It was a permissive environment with minimal government oversight.

The issue came to a head in early 2024, with the announcement by the federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) of substantial changes to federal policy on international study permits.¹¹ The stated aims of the reforms are to address threats to the integrity of the international education system resulting from unsustainable growth and risks to the quality of experience for students, but also pressures on public services and housing stocks. The Minister singled-out "degree mills" and "bad actors" widely associated with the public-private delivery partnerships in the Ontario college system.



Noah Morris is recently retired from a 34 year career as an executive (exec Dir; ADM) in the Ontario Government, and is now a principal at NJM Strategies. Noah's career in the Public Service was evenly divided by leadership positions in postsecondary education, and finance. Noah is currently advising clients on postsecondary strategy, government financial services, and financial systems. Noah is also teaching at the Munk School at UofT, and has joined a number of agency boards in the area of immigration & settlement.

5 Peter Zimonjic, "Marc Miller Says International Students Are Being Unfairly Stigmatized," CBC News, September 9, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/marc-miller-international-students-stigmatization-1.6959645>.

6 Bryan Passifiume, "Record Number of International Students Straining Canada's Housing Supply: Report," National Post, August 11, 2023, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/record-international-students-straining-housing-supply>.

7 Canada, Global Affairs. "ARCHIVED - Canada's International Education Strategy (2014-2019)." GAC, May 21, 2019. <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategy-strategie-2014/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

8 Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, Public Colleges Oversight, 1.

9 Alan Harrison (2023), Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector, Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, November 14, 2023, <https://files.ontario.ca/mcu-ensuring-financial-sustainability-for-ontarios-postsecondary-sector-en-2023-11-14.pdf>.

10 Alex Usher, Janet Balfour . (2023). The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2023. Toronto: Higher Education Strategy Associates,

11 See the text of the IRCC announcement here.

The changes reduce the number of new permits that the federal immigration department will approve in 2024 by approximately 35%, caps provincial and territorial shares based on population weight, and eliminates post-graduate work study eligibility for graduates of public-private college partnership programs, among other changes.

The immediate impacts to the postsecondary system are significant, particularly in Ontario which received a higher proportion of the national intake of international students. Beyond a major loss of revenues for colleges and universities, the federal changes introduce new administrative processes requiring provincial attestation for all study permits. In March 2024, the Government of Ontario announced a financial sustainability package for institutions of \$1.3 billion.¹²

What's next for international education in Ontario?

Through the Spring of 2024, key actors in the system - IRCC, the Ontario government, institutions, sector advocacy associations - scrambled to develop processes for allocating permits under the new cap and fulfilling the attestation process required for 2024. For the new school year beginning this Fall, policymakers should rightly be focused on ensuring international students already studying in Canada can complete their studies, and new international students have the support in place to succeed.

At the same time, Ontario policymakers must focus their attention over a longer horizon - on the task of repairing and renewing the province's international education system. First and foremost, this requires a purposeful reassessment of the objectives and priorities of a leaner, more sustainable and higher-quality system. Once these objectives are

clearly articulated, Ontario must develop the accompanying system infrastructure and accountability measures.

Informed by research and stakeholder roundtables undertaken by the Dais and its partners in Spring and Summer 2024, this article outlines four areas of action for Ontario international education policy: to improve quality assurance for Designated Learning Institutions; strengthen consumer protections in international recruitment; enhance support services for international students; and restore "brand Ontario" (part of "brand Canada") as a desirable destination for international students. We explore each below.

An Action Plan for Provincial Policymakers

1. Improve Quality Assurance of Designated Learning Institutions

A Designated Learning Institution (DLI) is approved by a provincial or territorial government to host international students. In Ontario, postsecondary institutions - including public and private institutions, and registered career colleges - must meet the requirements of the International Student Program to both apply and be redesignated as a DLI.¹³ The joint federal-provincial program establishes that institutions have in place the facilities, services and curriculum to educate international students. While most postsecondary institutions appear to be meeting their DLI obligations, it has become apparent that the program is not resourced to ensure full compliance. With a one-time review at time of application and few requirements to remain a DLI, the system lacks sufficient on-going monitoring for compliance and quality assurance.

¹² Government of Ontario, "Ontario Investing Nearly \$1.3 Billion to Stabilize Colleges and Universities," Ontario Newsroom, February 26, 2024, <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1004227/ontario-investing-nearly-13-billion-to-stabilize-colleges-and-universities>.

¹³ For more information, see: Government of Ontario, "Apply for Status as a Designated Learning Institution," Ontario.ca, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/apply-status-designated-learning-institution>.

The DLI process should be made more rigorous, through annual or more regular requirements to retain the accreditation, periodic on-the-ground inspections for quality assurance, and regular reporting processes (i.e., graduation rates; time to completion; etc) that can better inform both levels of government and the public about how each institution is doing. Over the longer term, DLI designation should be better tied to evidence-based outcomes that better reflect why Ontario is educating international students in the first place.

While the merits and mechanics of linking international study permits to labour market requirements or other goals are hotly contested, policymakers should commit to ensuring that international student experiences and outcomes are in line with the Queen's Park's international education policy objectives. This is also a direction the federal government has signaled with the proposed "Recognized Institutions Framework," which would provide preferred or fast-track study permit access to DLI's that meet a higher bar for quality assurance or outcomes.

2. Enforce Consumer Protection in International Recruitment

International students face significant uncertainty, financial outlay and opportunity cost in choosing to study in Ontario. Clear and accurate information about their choices is essential. Yet, research and expert discussions reveal that one of the most consistently cited challenges for international students is the lack of transparent or accurate information from postsecondary institutions and third-party recruiters. Public post-secondary institutions in Ontario are subject to Ontar-

io's Consumer Protection Act. Private colleges are also mandated to follow specific advertising rules to avoid misrepresentation of degrees offered and outcomes possible.¹⁴ Still, there have been many reports of misleading information provided to international students by unscrupulous international recruiters and agents.¹⁵ This includes misleading international students on issues relating to immigration and post-graduate work permits, and overselling their chances for successful permanent residency (PR).¹⁶

Improved consumer protections in international recruitment should seek to assure the integrity of recruitment tactics and the accuracy of essential marketing information, including about programs of study and applications; tuition and fees, cost-of-living, and other financial obligations; in-study student work regulations; study permit application requirements; and post-study immigration eligibility. One option would be to modify and extend the advertising rules applied to private colleges for all postsecondary institutions. Another would be to borrow from practices in other jurisdictions, such as Manitoba's legislated Code of Conduct for Recruiters,¹⁷ or the ethical recruitment models in the United Kingdom and Australia.^{18,19} How these requirements are enforced is also critical. Ontario should tie on-going DLI accreditation for institutions to robust evidence of compliance, tracked through data, reporting, inspections and more. The Province could also introduce administrative penalties for postsecondary institutions that willfully violate their DLI responsibilities, similar to those under the Ontario Career Colleges Act.

¹⁴ Government of Ontario, "Advertising Rules for Career Colleges," Ontario.ca, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/advertising-rules-career-colleges#section-3>.

¹⁵ See, for example: Kathy Tomlinson, "The Foreign Students Who Say They Were Lured to Canada by a Lie," *The Globe and Mail*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-international-students-coming-to-private-colleges-say-they-were-duped/>.

¹⁶ Naomi Alboim, Karen Cohl, and Marshia Akbar, "Ontario Colleges and International Students: A Pivotal Time," *Policy Brief 18* (Toronto Metropolitan University, February 2024), 5, https://www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/Policy/CERCMigration_PolicyBrief18_FEB2024.pdf.

¹⁷ Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, "Code of Practice and Conduct Regulation," Government of Manitoba, https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ie/pdf/code_of_practice.pdf.

¹⁸ ICEF Monitor, "Australia Expands Regulatory Oversight of Education Agents and Announces New Integrity Measures for VET," last modified October 2023, <https://monitor.icef.com/2023/10/australia-expands-regulatory-oversight-of-education-agents-and-announces-new-integrity-measures-for-vet/>.

¹⁹ BUILA, "A Partnership for Quality: UK Quality Framework for Education Agents," <https://www.buila.ac.uk/activities/a-partnership-for-quality-uk-quality-framework-for-education-agents-2>.

3. Enhance Support Services for International Students

Another area of concern has been the inadequacy of supports for foreign students after they arrive and begin their studies. Academic supports, ranging from language proficiency to tutoring and academic upgrading, are often unavailable, difficult to access, or poor quality. Access to adequate and affordable housing has been a particular difficulty for many international students, who can be subject to housing discrimination and exploitation by landlords and property managers.²⁰ International students can face challenges accessing healthcare and mental health services that are culturally appropriate for their needs. Lastly, many international students, reliant on off-campus employment to fund their studies and living costs in Canada, struggle to find work or protect themselves from unscrupulous and exploitative employers.²¹

Our research and consultations also revealed that many international students voice feelings of being lost or stranded. Representatives of student advocacy organizations share that career services staff can be unfamiliar with the international student experience and unable to provide adequate or culturally-informed support. In a recent study that examined experiences at an Ontario college, the authors noted that “faculty training and development, and intercultural co-curricular activities” were crucial to the success of international students.²²

The Province should establish minimum standards for international student support services. Like for recruitment, these minimum standards could become a re-

quirement for securing and maintaining DLI status. Further, institutions could be required to demonstrate that they dedicate a percentage of international tuition revenue to these support services. Some institutions already do this. For example, the University of British Columbia’s Vancouver campus established a policy that allotted 7.5% of international tuition revenues for international student financial aid.²³ Institutions should ensure these services are culturally-informed, based upon the unique profile of international students on their campuses and in their programs. Lastly, standards for support services should be part of evaluation and data collection efforts to ensure institutions are meeting their obligations.

4. Restore the Ontario Brand (as part of “Brand Canada”)

One outcome of the turmoil in the international education system, and the federal government’s striking reforms to rein in growth, is that Canada’s “brand” as an international education destination has been tarnished. Evidence ranges from media coverage of the perceptions of international students to online message boards in source countries like India.²⁴ The impact has already been felt in admissions: there has been a significant drop in applications to Canada, with projections suggesting international admissions for the 2024 year could underperform even the reduced admissions cap.²⁵ As a result, though some institutions and provincial systems bear greater responsibility, all could suffer for Canada’s reputational damage.

20 Marshia Akbar, “Challenges Facing International College Students in Canada,” in *India Migration Report 2023: Student Migration*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (Routledge, 2024), 156, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003490234-7>.

21 J. Colyar, J. Pichette, and J. Deakin, *Matching Rapid Growth with Adequate Supports: How Colleges and Government Can Enhance International Student Experiences in Ontario* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2023).

22 Adam McGregor, Christina Decarie, Wendy Whitehead, and Shelley Aylesworth-Spink, “Supporting International Students in an Ontario College: A Case for Multiple Interventions,” *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* 22, no. 2 (2022): 5-28.

23 The University of British Columbia, “Basics of the University Budget,” accessed July 24, 2024, <https://consultations.students.ubc.ca/basics-of-the-university-budget/>.

24 See, for example, this thread on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/india/comments/171eub6/scared_about_going_to_canada_for_my_further/

25 Nicholas Keung, “With Dipping Study Permit Approval Rates for International Students, Canada May Not Meet Its Reduced Immigration Targets,” *Toronto Star*, June 19, 2024, last updated July 9, 2024, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/with-dipping-study-permit-approval-rates-for-international-students-canada-may-not-meet-its-reduced/article_eb23c5ac-2e64-11ef-b4b6-6387aa4cb2c1.html.

Ontario should take the lead in rebooting the “Study in Canada” brand. It could play a leadership role in mobilizing PTs and the federal government to repair the country’s reputation as a trustworthy and attractive destination for high quality postsecondary education. The marketing strategy should emphasize that the reduction in study permits is not about “closing the door” to foreign students, but a part of substantive efforts to shore up the integrity, quality, oversight and support for international students in Canada. Promotion efforts should seek to coordinate across provincial, institution-specific and third-party postsecondary international recruitment, and broader trade promotion efforts through Global Affairs Canada, the Trade Commissioner Service and others. Intergovernmental and cross-sector collaboration is the key to success, and Ontario can play a leadership role.

Conclusion

Ontario has one of the finest postsecondary systems in the world, built up over many generations, with an incredible range of institutions. There is no reason that Ontario policymakers and postsecondary leaders, in partnership with Canada and the other provinces, cannot put in place a revitalized system, with appropriate quality assurance measures, to ensure the province offers a world-class education and experience for international students.

An Account of International Student Succession & Holistic Support in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

By Alya Najla, Broderick Norwich with support from Ian Muller (WLUSU)



As the Vice-President of Clubs & Associations for the Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union, it is my commitment to support student-run clubs that help others find their community on campus. I recently graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration, with a concentration in Marketing and minor in User Experience Design. My goal is to work in community engagement, bridging the gap between large corporations and charities or non-profit organizations, to expand resources and reach, helping those in need through impactful initiatives. Inspired by selflessness and desire to serve my community, inheriting these traits from my grandparents, I am driven to leave a lasting impact. I aim to foster connections, enhance the quality of life for others, and advocate for holistic support to those in need.

-Alya Najla

The international student experience in Canada continues to be a topic of discussion and debate, and it is important not to lose track of individual perspectives. As I transition from a student to a student leader, I have intentionally reflected on my experience thus far. What stands out is the value of holistic support within an empowering community. Like many of my fellow international students within the past four years, my education abroad did not begin with travel but with the isolation of navigating a new academic journey many time zones away from classmates. Once in Canada, the pressure of adapting to second-year was made all the more difficult by the need to adjust to new cultural norms, a different cost-of-living, and trying to find social connections. Individual perseverance was crucial to navigating these barriers and finding the communities of support that ultimately helped me flourish in my time at Laurier.

Adjusting To A Non-Traditional First-Year

The journey of an international student often begins long before setting foot in Canada. For many, it starts with an emotional departure from home, made even more challenging in recent years by the isolation of travelling alone during a global pandemic. My first year of university was particularly challenging as I was still living in Indonesia, forced to attend online classes in a completely different time zone.



As the Vice-President of Government & Stakeholder Relations and a Steering Committee member for the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), I am dedicated to advocating for a more equitable and inclusive post-secondary experience for all students. My role includes advocacy work, navigating policy and maintaining institutional and stakeholder relations. My passions have been shaped by the guidance and wisdom of student leaders who have inspired me to lead with purpose. More personally, my goal is to advocate for a landscape in which every undergraduate, regardless of their background, can succeed in their pursuit of an extraordinary life. Currently, I am completing my degree in Political Science with a Minor in Leadership. Moving forward, I am committed to continuing my work in advocacy, particularly in policy writing, where I believe I can make a lasting impact.

-Broderick Norwich

The time difference meant that my classes often took place at three o'clock in the morning, leaving me exhausted and struggling to stay engaged. Participation, which is crucial for success and understanding the material, was difficult due to the lack of in-person interaction. The opportunity to connect with my peers and professors was severely limited, further deepening my feelings of isolation. The absence of a campus community experience during this period was particularly disheartening. With little opportunity to get involved in university life, I felt disconnected from the broader student body and struggled to feel part of the Laurier community. Despite these challenges, I tried to make the most of the situation by reaching out to fellow students online, but the virtual environment made it hard to form meaningful connections. This period underscored the importance of involvement in campus activities and organizations, as they provided a crucial lifeline. Volunteering with groups such as the First Year Project (FYP) and Enactus was instrumental in overcoming these initial challenges. Not only did they accommodate my time zone struggles, but they also offered a sense of belonging and purpose. The empathy and willingness of fellow students to support me were pivotal in navigating the challenges of my first year, helping me build friendships, develop skills, and find my place within the Laurier community.

Adapting To A New Community & Culture

My second year brought a different set of challenges. This time, I was finally leaving my family behind and travelling to Ontario to attend university in person. The transition was marked by a mandatory two-week quarantine in a hotel room, where I was isolated with only my laptop and phone for company.

My daily routine was limited to online classes and occasional calls to my parents and a friend in Canada. This isolation was compounded by the unfamiliarity of the food available, which was vastly different from the home-cooked authentic Indonesian meals I was accustomed to. My appetite diminished, and I felt disconnected from the comforts of home.

Arriving in Canada and adjusting to a new academic environment was daunting. The pressure to adapt quickly to a completely different way of life, including new social norms and a different cost of living, was overwhelming. I had to navigate this new world on my own, without the immediate support of my family. The challenges of integrating into a new community and culture were exacerbated by my unfamiliarity with Canadian cultural practices and the constant fear of not fitting in or being misunderstood. In the early stages of my undergraduate experience, I grappled with the pressure of establishing an identity beyond being “the international student.” This internal struggle often made it difficult to fully engage with the campus community or take advantage of available opportunities.

Despite these difficulties, my second year also provided opportunities for growth. The in-person university experience, though challenging, allowed me to engage more deeply with the campus community. The support of friends and the broader Laurier community played a crucial role in helping me navigate these difficulties and gradually find my place in a new cultural environment. In an ideal world, the international student experience would be seamless, supportive, and inclusive. This would involve comprehensive orientation programs that cover every aspect of life in Canada – from academic

expectations to cultural norms and practical life skills. Institutions, in collaboration with community and government stakeholders, should provide extensive resources for international students to ease their transition. This could include detailed guides on banking, public transportation, grocery shopping, and understanding the cost of living. Additionally, a robust support system, including peer mentors and cultural liaisons, would be in place to help students navigate these new experiences. Support resources should be easily accessible and tailored to the specific needs of international students. Institutions must ensure these resources are well-publicized and that staff are trained to address the unique challenges faced by international students.

Acclimating to Canadian Living

One of the most significant hurdles I encountered was a lack of preparedness for the cost of living in Canada. The financial realities – ranging from currency differences to budgeting – were areas where I felt particularly vulnerable. Transitioning from a country with no sales tax to navigating Ontario’s 13% tax was a significant culture shock. Despite my parents’ efforts to prepare me, the reality of financial independence in a foreign country was daunting. As an incoming international student, I noticed significant gaps in campus and community resources tailored specifically for international students.

This lack of targeted programming reflects a broader issue – a limited understanding of the international student experience. While academic support was readily provided, there was little emphasis on social and cultural integration. Programs offering information on budgeting, grocery shopping, and public transportation were minimal, making it difficult to adapt to life outside the classroom. A practical guide on essential day-to-day activities can significantly ease the transition for international students. Such a guide should cover how to open a bank account, use public transportation, navigate grocery prices, and understand the standard of living in Ontario. Providing this information during orientation sessions and making it available online would reduce stress and help students feel more confident in their new environment.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities, along with the Council of Ontario Universities, should develop training and funding models to address these gaps. Initiatives such as cultural awareness training, language support, and anti-racism education for both domestic and international students can foster a more inclusive environment. Additionally, creating social spaces that encourage interaction between international and domestic students can help build a cohesive campus community. While it is essential for international students to positively integrate into Canadian society, it is equally important for them to maintain their connection to their home countries. Institutions should encourage students to share their own cultural practices and foster a more inclusive and empathetic campus culture for international and domestic students.

Authenticity As An Instrument For Integration

Cultural sharing practices are essential for the successful integration of international students into their new communities. These practices create opportunities for interactions that enrich everyone's knowledge of the world, expand life experiences, and deepen connections. Without these opportunities, we miss out on learning about one another's unique backgrounds and stories, adding richness to our shared experiences. Authenticity, for many international students, is more than just a concept – it is a necessary foundation for navigating the complex landscape of studying abroad. The challenges of being in a new country, away from familiar cultural touchstones, can often lead to feelings of fear, hesitancy, and self-doubt. These feelings are intensified when there is no immediate community to lean on, leaving students isolated as they try to balance academic demands with the need to integrate socially. For me, authenticity became a personal journey of finding the courage to step out of my comfort zone.

The turning point came when I began volunteering with the Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union. This experience provided a platform where I could practice being my authentic self. It wasn't just about participating in campus life; it was about exuding confidence, sharing my passions, and opening up to parts of myself that I had previously kept hidden. This involvement was transformative, allowing me to thrive in an environment where I felt accepted and understood. I found fun and enjoyment in being part of a community where I could bring my whole self to the table. Being authentic also meant embracing the full spectrum of my identity – combining my cultural heritage with new experiences and perspectives gained from my time at Laurier. This balance was crucial for my mental well-being and honouring my parents' wishes for a well-rounded education. It allowed me to pursue academic success without sacrificing personal growth or the enjoyment of university life.

However, the journey to authenticity is not an easy one, and it highlights a broader issue that many international students face: the mental battle of overcoming fears and taking risks. For this to occur, providing spaces and opportunities that encourage students to step out of their comfort zones

is crucial. This could include creating more inclusive communities, offering programs that promote self-exploration, and fostering an environment where diverse identities are not only accepted but celebrated. One effective way to foster such an environment is through courses like HR 261, Human Rights & Human Diversity, offered by Laurier. This course addresses the human rights revolution in Canada and around the world, equipping students with an understanding of human rights, human diversity, and the transferable skills that employers seek. HR 261 brought together students from diverse backgrounds – international, domestic, Indigenous, and from various degrees, cultures, races, and religions. The course provided a unique opportunity for students to share cultural practices and learn from one another's experiences. I found it incredibly helpful as I transitioned to university life after a non-traditional first year spent abroad. It was a great way to connect with other students as we all returned to campus and adjusted to the new “normal.” Other institutions should look to implement similar courses that focus on discussion and bring students together to learn about one another, helping to create a supportive and inclusive environment for all.

International students face unique challenges, from adapting to new cultural norms and financial realities to finding a supportive community. My journey highlights the importance of holistic support in overcoming these obstacles. Engaging with the community and participating in cultural sharing not only helped me navigate the complexities of studying abroad but also enriched my personal and academic journey. These experiences have shown me the profound impact that a supportive and inclusive environment can have on an international student's ability to thrive.

Institutions must prioritize comprehensive resources and create spaces where international students feel empowered, understood, and connected. By fostering such environments, we can ensure that all students can succeed and contribute meaningfully to the campus community.

Faculty Solutions For International Student Success

By Nigmendra Narain (OCUFA)



Nigmendra Narain (he/him) is the President of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) and a Lecturer and Course Coordinator in Political Science at the University of Western Ontario. Founded in 1964, OCUFA represents more than 18,000 faculty, academic librarians, and other academic professionals in 30 member organizations across Ontario. It is committed to enhancing the quality of higher education in Ontario and recognizing the outstanding contributions of its members towards creating a world-class publicly funded university system.

Introduction

Ontario's world-class public universities are a top destination for international students. Of the one million students with active study permits in Canada in 2023, 51% settled in Ontario.¹ Even following changes to international visa allocations in 2024, with Ontario losing about 40% of its allocated spots, the province will still be granted about half of the country's total international student visas.² As a result, Ontario is uniquely positioned to explore solutions to the challenges faced by international students, university faculty, academic librarians, and academic professionals.

International students face a high cost of living, steep cultural learning curves, legal issues, homesickness, and campus life adjustment when they arrive in Ontario. These issues are multifaceted, and solutions for thriving international student experiences exist at individual, institutional, and government levels.

Working on the front lines of student engagement, faculty, academic librarians, and academic professionals have key insights into what international students need to thrive during and after their studies. They care deeply about their students—no matter where they come from—and often go above and beyond to help international students adjust to life on campus, including providing mentorship, assisting with accommodations,

¹ "Canada Hosted More than 1 Million International Students in 2023," ICEF Monitor, February 14, 2024, <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/01/canada-hosted-more-than-1-million-international-students-in-2023/>

² "Minister Miller issues statement on international student allocations for provinces and territories," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, April 5, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/04/minister-miller-issues-statement-on-international-student-allocations-for-provinces-and-territories.html>

connecting students to qualified experts on campus, or talking about their concerns during office hours.

However, despite this care and attention, faculty and academic professionals often lack the necessary resources to guide and support students holistically. This article discusses some of the systemic problems affecting international students' learning environments and how faculty, academic librarians, university administration, and government can help international students succeed.

Student belonging and equity

Making the transition to university education is challenging for any student, but international students face both different and severe challenges. They need to adjust to new learning environments, find housing, and navigate new social networks. They also need to navigate cultural differences, legal requirements, and commitments to loved ones back home.

While some public misperception suggests international students are affluent, in reality, many face significant financial challenges. Since 2008-09, international student tuition in Ontario has nearly tripled in current dollars, rising from \$16,891 to \$46,433.³ These high costs force many international students to work extended hours at off-campus jobs, and leave them vulnerable to unscrupulous employers, housing exploitation, long commutes to campus, and food insecurity.⁴

Financial issues can significantly and negatively affect international students' ability to focus on their education, forge connections, participate in on-campus activities, and get to know their professors—all essential components of student belonging. A lack of belonging can be extremely detrimental.⁵ In 2019, 70% of students at Canadian post-secondary institutions experienced extreme loneliness, according to the National College Health Assessment survey.⁶ In 2020, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine reported that loneliness has public health effects comparable to smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.⁷ Not experiencing belonging and integration into the campus community will affect international students' current education experience and have ripple effects on them after they finish their education and consider working or staying in Canada.⁸

As noted above, student belonging promotes good mental and physical health, as well as success in school. Faculty, academic librarians, and academic professionals work daily to support all students and help them feel part of their campus community. Faculty have been—and can continue to be—active learners when it comes to international students' concerns and challenges.⁹ This can be done through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing at symposiums and conferences, department meetings, and professional workshops.¹⁰

5 Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, "Empowering Tomorrow: The OCUFA Blueprint for Revitalizing Ontario's Public Universities," January 26, 2024, https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/2024.01.26.OCUFA-PBS-FINAL-3_1.pdf

6 Sarah Law, "Nearly All Free Food Service Users at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay Are International Students," CBC Thunder Bay, October 27, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/food-insecurity-international-students-thunder-bay-1.7006004>.

7 Juana Du, "How universities can support international students beyond orientation week," The Conversation, August 16, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-universities-can-support-international-students-beyond-orientation-week-186678>

8 Simon Lewsen, "Inside the Mental Health Crisis Facing College and University Students," The Walrus, October 26, 2021, <https://thewalrus.ca/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-facing-college-and-university-students/>

9 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2020)

10 Ali Amad, "Since the federal government capped international student enrolment, many of us haven't felt welcome in Canada," Toronto Life, February 20, 2024, <https://torontolife.com/city/akar-shannoor-singh-international-student-cap-colleges-universities/>

9 Elizabeth Berman, "Fostering solidarity with and support for international students," CAUT Bulletin, December 2023, <https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/2023/12/fostering-solidarity-and-support-international-students>

10 Hiba B. Ibrahim, "5 ways to better build community with international students in Canada," The Conversation, March 19, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/5-ways-to-better-build-community-with-international-students-in-canada-214109>

Through these channels, faculty can learn more skills to support international students holistically within the parameters of their roles as educators.

However, faculty ranks are stretched thin and faculty workloads are growing. Full-time faculty hiring at Ontario universities has not kept pace with student enrolment especially as public funding has stagnated over the last decade, and more than half of faculty at Ontario universities are now working on short-term contracts. Further, as of 2021-22, there were about 30 students for every full-time faculty member at an Ontario university, compared to the Canadian average of 25 students for each university faculty member. This is the highest student-faculty ratio in the country.¹¹ Large classes taught by short-term contract instructors, with little or no job security, do not allow for even minimal direct support and mentorship of international students.

At an institutional level, strengthening orientation and belonging initiatives for international students are essential to help them understand their new environments and make connections with peers, faculty, and staff with the goal of sustained support throughout their university experience.¹² Universities also need to create tailored pathways for information-sharing about campus activities, mentorship opportunities, and educational success events.

As universities incorporate equity, diversity, inclusion, and Indigenization (EDI) initiatives into curricula and operations, internation-

al students have a place in the EDI matrix, including sharing their ideas and life experiences.¹³ Universities can publicize these connections to international students upon their arrival to campus, and develop more programming that addresses these unique intersections. These solutions build on existing infrastructure and campus networks, but more investment is needed to ensure their sustainability.

To reach the goal of well-supported international students with a strong sense of belonging on campus, universities need to ensure faculty and staff have the capacity to do so. By hiring more full-time faculty to reduce class sizes, and offering more opportunities for mentorship and experiential learning classes, faculty will have more opportunities to meaningfully and substantially support international students during their studies. Finally, universities must engage with academic experts, policymakers and student advocacy organizations to develop ethical frameworks for international student recruitment, retention, and support. Such organizations include campus-based international student groups, provincial and national student networks, and advocacy and research organizations such as the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change and the Canadian Bureau for International Education. Such consultations will improve student learning conditions, which are also faculty working conditions.

The provincial government, too, has an important role in ensuring that international students feel belonging in a campus

¹¹ Statistics Canada, "Table 37-10-0018-01: Postsecondary enrolments, by registration status, institution type, status of student in Canada and gender," <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3710001801>; Statistics Canada, "Table 37-10-0228-01: Number and distribution of full-time academic staff at Canadian universities by age group, gender and province," <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3710022801>

¹² Du, *The Conversation*, 2022

¹³ Roopa Desai Trilokekar, "Changing perceptions of international education in Canada," *Academic Matters*, Spring 2024, <https://academicmatters.ca/changing-perceptions-of-international-education-in-canada/>

community and our welcoming province. This starts with a commitment to more robust, sustainable funding for our universities and an end to exorbitant, unregulated international student tuition fees. To accomplish this goal, OCUFA advocates for a per-student funding increase that will help universities stabilize their revenue streams and focus on providing much-needed spaces and opportunities for belonging for both domestic and international students.

Investing in student mental health services

The student mental health crisis is well-documented in Canada, and has gotten worse since the pandemic.¹⁴ Academic professionals, such as professional counsellors, offer valuable support and expertise on student mental health, and have been offering front-line, research-informed support to students on university campuses since the 1960s. According to OCUFA research, in general, one mental health counsellor should be provided for every 1,000 full-time undergraduates.¹⁵ However, many universities do not meet this benchmark.¹⁶ OCUFA urges the provincial government to provide funding for universities to hire more full-time, permanent professional counsellors to meet at least the 1,000-to-one student-to-counsellor ratio recommended by experts.

In addition, as experts with frontline, student-facing experience, professional counsellors and their faculty associations must be consulted extensively and regularly about student mental health policies and initiatives. Through meaningful collaboration, academic professionals and university

administrators can create relevant mental health solutions to help students with their individualized needs.

Though they are often students' first contact for support, faculty are not trained to offer legal, mental health, or settlement support, and importantly, resources for such support through qualified professionals are more impactful to helping students. Sadly, in 2022, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations and the Mental Health Commission of Canada reported that only 28% of respondents knew how to access mental health services on campus.¹⁷

This low figure shows the gulf between students and existing campus services. Faculty can build connections with professional counsellors to understand and provide information on services to direct students. Increased collaboration between counsellors and student groups could promote existing mental health services and expand outreach to international students in particular. While this takes advantage of existing resources and increases engagements between counsellors, faculty, and students, more resources are also needed to ensure student success.

Many universities have resource centres dedicated to these services, but they are inadequately staffed. These centres cannot replace community-based services; they are bridges between students and these external resources. Still, universities must ensure that these resource offices are properly staffed with well-trained professionals, and that their hours of operation are in sync with student schedules.

¹⁴ Lewsen, The Walrus

¹⁵ Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, "OCUFA Submission: Bill 166, the Strengthening Accountability and Student Support Act, 2024," April 15, 2024, https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA.Bill166_submission.FINAL_.pdf

¹⁶ Amanda Pfeffer, "Ontario campus counsellors say they're drowning in mental health needs," CBC Ottawa, September 26, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/mental-health-ontario-campus-crisis-1.3771682>

¹⁷ "The New Abnormal: Student Mental Health Two Years Into COVID-19," Canadian Alliance of Student Associations and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2022, https://campusmentalhealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Abacus_Report_2022_1.pdf

Universities must support international students facing mental health concerns, and provide resources to the academic professionals who offer the frontline services. They must also re-evaluate and enhance their services through consulting with these professionals.

Enhancing academic integrity and student success through government investment

The government of Ontario must take responsibility for the well-being of international students. In a time of increasing international student enrollment and chronic underfunding of our universities, the integrity and reputation of our public post-secondary education system needs to be a priority.

Currently, Ontario sits last in the country in per-student funding at \$9,890 per domestic full-time equivalent in 2021-22, which is far below the Canadian average of \$15,807.¹⁸ Due to this chronic underfunding, universities turned to skyrocketing, unregulated international student tuition fees. This is an unsustainable funding model which exploits international students. OCUFA champions the pursuit of learning for all students, and urges the government of Ontario to increase funding for universities so that institutions have more revenue options than simply charging exorbitant tuition fees to international students to make up for provincial funding shortfalls.

Without investments from the provincial government, the academic integrity and reputation of our public universities will suffer in the long term. University faculty, academic

librarians, and academic professionals are already stretched to the limit of their capacity to teach, do research, and fulfill service obligations to the university. Consequently, this affects their capacity to adequately support international students, along with significant underfunding of established university-run support services, including resources and staffing.

The provincial government must choose to invest in public university education through more sustainable, long-term funding. Reversing years of low provincial investment requires a significant increase in per-student funding. OCUFA calls for the government to increase total university funding by 11.75%, compounded annually, for the next five years to bring the province in line with the Canadian average.¹⁹ This investment is an essential step to ensure that international students—and all students—in our public university system can succeed.

Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0026-01: Revenue of universities by type of revenues and funds (in current Canadian dollars) (x 1,000); Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0018-01: Postsecondary enrolments, by registration status, institution type, status of student in Canada and gender; and authors' calculations. Note: Part-time enrolments were converted into full-time enrolments by dividing them by 3.5, as is standard practice.

OCUFA, "Empowering Tomorrow: The OCUFA Blueprint for Revitalizing Ontario's Public Universities," January 26, 2024, https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/2024.01.26.OCUFA-PBS-FINAL-3_1.pdf

Conclusion

There are many avenues for ensuring that international students are supported holistically while pursuing studies at Ontario's universities. As front-line classroom educators, faculty, academic librarians, and academic staff see the strains on international students every day and they try their best to provide meaningful connections and support during difficult times. Faculty work with their peers, student groups, and administrators to better understand the issues faced by international students, work collaboratively to reach them, and direct them to campus mental health, housing and food supports. Still, to ensure faculty have the capacity to continue supporting students in a sustainable manner, there must be greater investment and support for appropriate workloads for faculty.

It is clear that investing in student belonging, mentorship and employment resources, along with mental health supports, are essential to enhancing international students' experiences. Universities have a responsibility to the students already on their campuses before over-enrolling new international students to fill funding gaps.

The provincial government must improve support for our public universities through increased funding. Funding increases will give universities much-needed resources and stability to hire more full-time, permanent faculty, academic librarians, and academic professionals and enhance existing student services such as mental health counselling. A well-funded campus is a more welcoming campus, has a greater capacity to nurture belonging, and creates an environment with consistent and robust support for equity-seeking groups—including international students.

Solutions for the challenges facing international students exist at the individual, institutional, and government levels. It is time for everyone to work together to create a holistic environment on our campuses to ensure students thrive and succeed. It is also essential that we work towards a future in which public postsecondary education has stable, robust government funding.

OCUFA continues to push for sustainable funding for our universities, so that the next generations of domestic and international students can access Ontario's world-class public universities in a fair and equitable way, and realize their true and full potential.

Strengthening International Student Success: The Consortium on International Education

By Elizabeth Agoe, Alexandra MacFarlane & Hagar Effah (HEQCO)



Elizabeth (she/her) is a Researcher at the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario where she works on projects focused on AI in higher education, skills assessment and labour market outcomes of postsecondary students. Her experiences as an international student and student mentor fueled her passion for equitable access to postsecondary education, resources and support, as well as ways to improve the student experience. She holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology and a graduate certificate in Research Analysis.

In 2023, Canada hosted over a million international students, 51% of whom studied in Ontario.¹ The province has for many years enrolled the largest number of international students in the country, and by 2023 that number had dramatically increased. Between 2018–19 and 2022–23, international student enrolment at Ontario public colleges increased by 89% (77,403 to 146,328 students) and at universities by 32% (73,110 to 96,479).² The growth of international students in Ontario has become a crucial source of funding for higher education institutions, due in part to stagnant provincial funding and a 2019 tuition freeze.³ Increases in international student enrolments have raised concerns about the quality, sustainability and accountability of Ontario's postsecondary education (PSE) sector. Students, communities and the government have expressed concerns about unregulated recruitment practices, housing shortages and labour market opportunities for international graduates.

Earlier this year, the federal and provincial governments took actions to address these issues and support international student success in their studies and beyond. In January 2024, the federal government announced several policy changes, including a temporary 35% reduction in international study permits.⁴ As part of the new internationalization framework, provincial governments are responsible for allocating

¹ ICEF Monitor, "Canada hosted more than 1 million international students in 2023," ICEF Monitor, January 24, 2024, <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/01/canada-hosted-more-than-1-million-international-students-in-2023/#:~:text=Ontario%2C%20Canada%E2%80%99s%20most%20populous%20province%2C%20has%20long%20held,popularity%20of%20Ontario%20college%20programmes%20among%20international%20students>.

² Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, MCU Data Compass: Student, Clients and Graduates Served 2024, distributed by the Government of Ontario Open SIMS.

³ Government of Ontario, "Ontario Extends Freeze on College and University Tuition," March 23, 2022, <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001830/ontario-extends-freeze-on-college-and-university-tuition>; Government of Ontario, "Ontario universities plead for increased funding amid Ford government tuition freeze," Global News, January 9, 2024, <https://globalnews.ca/news/10213696/ontario-universities-funding-request/>.

⁴ Victoria Prince, Katherine Carre and Stefan Timms. "Additional Updates to Canada's International Student Program." Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, April 12, 2024, <https://www.blg.com/en/in-sights/2024/04/additional-updates-to-canadas-international-student-program>; Government of Canada, "Canada Gazette, Part I, Volume 158, Number 26: Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (Designated Learning Institutions)," June 9, 2024, https://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2024/2024-06-29/html/reg1-eng.html?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Academica-Top-Ten---Thurs%2C-Jul-11%2C-2024&utm_source=Envoque-%2AAcademica-Top-Ten-Daily-Newsletter&utm_term=Today%27s-Top-Ten-in-Higher-Ed; Alexandra Mae Jones, "Canada to reduce the number of international study permits by 35 per cent: Miller," CTV News, January 31, 2024, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/canada-to-reduce-the-number-of-international-study-permits-by-35-per-cent-miller-1.6736298>.

these permits across eligible institutions. The Ontario government's allocation approach included a priority on enrolment in programs with high labour market demands (e.g. health-care). Government also introduced a moratorium on public-private partnership arrangements, which drove much of the enrolment increases in the college sector.⁵



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Evaluating and implementing impactful policies that support a high-quality, sustainable international education system that remains accountable to students requires research and data collection. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario's (HEQCO's) Consortium on International Education is composed of six projects that provide evidence-based research to assist institutions, communities and government in enhancing international education in Ontario.⁶ This report highlights three of those projects, focusing on international student recruitment, students' labour market outcomes and community partnerships.

International Student Recruitment

Third-party agencies have become a standard part of international student recruitment in Ontario. These third-party agencies — many of whom have offices around the world — connect with prospective students to provide information on institutions and programs.⁷ Recently, some agencies have faced criticism related to predatory practices, including misleading and misinforming students about enrolment, immigration and post-graduation work permits.⁸ The work of recruiting agents — both good and bad — impacts prospective students and Ontario's higher education ecosystem, necessitating more accountability measures.

5 Government of Ontario, "Ontario taking action to improve integrity of postsecondary education and promote employment in critical sectors," January 26, 2024, <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1004117/ontario-taking-action-to-improve-integrity-of-postsecondary-education-and-promote-employment-in-critical-sectors>.

6 Consortium on International Education, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, <https://heqco.ca/research/consortia/international/>.

7 Matthew Halliday, "The Murky World of Unregulated International Student Recruiters," University Affairs, November 2, 2022. <https://universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/the-murky-world-of-unregulated-international-student-recruiters/>; "Value for Money Audit: Public Colleges Oversight," Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, December 2021, https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_PublicColleges_en21.pdf.

8 Kathy Tomlinson, "The Foreign Students Who Say They Were Lured to Canada by a Lie," The Globe and Mail, June 27, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-international-students-coming-to-private-colleges-say-they-were-duped/>; "Value for Money Audit: Public Colleges Oversight," Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, December 2021, https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_PublicColleges_en21.pdf.

Other international jurisdictions faced with similar challenges, such as Australia and the UK, have incorporated strategies to manage recruiting agencies. These governments have developed a variety of measures for recruiting agencies, including accountability legislation and voluntary codes of practice.⁹ Limited work has been done in Canada to regulate third-party agents; Manitoba is the only province to regulate the industry through legislation.¹⁰ The complex relationship between higher education institutions, agents and students, and the lack of reporting and data on recruitment practices, has made it difficult to establish accountability measures.

As part of the Consortium on International Education, Higher Education Strategy Associates is exploring regulatory models in other jurisdictions and consulting with relevant parties, including provincial agencies and student associations at postsecondary institutions, to propose possible models and recommendations for regulating recruitment agents in Ontario. This work will offer important analyses and context as Ontario considers policies to prioritize student safety and ensure program quality and integrity.

Labour Market Outcomes

International students' labour market outcomes are important to institutions, government and students themselves. Incoming international students see Canada as a destination with better job opportunities and higher living standards than their home countries.¹¹ A 2018 survey of 3400 international students in Canada found that 61% were interested in working in Canada, and

51% intended to apply for permanent residency.¹² International students can also fill critical skills and labour market shortages across Canada.¹³ However, research has found that international graduates have different labour market outcomes and experiences than their Canadian counterparts. Despite similar demographics, educational qualifications and pre-graduation work experience, international students earn less than domestic graduates.¹⁴ Some of the challenges international students encounter during their labour market transitions include understanding the Canadian labour market, competing for jobs, coping with employer discrimination, navigating cultural differences and managing their insecure immigration situations.^{15, 16}

These challenges make it increasingly important to examine the relationship between international students' postsecondary experiences and their labour market outcomes. Understanding the factors (e.g. credentials, institution type) that impact graduates' labour market experiences can help institutions develop the programs and supports international students need to succeed after graduation. With their consortium project, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation is investigating the relationship between PSE credentials and the post-graduation pathways of international students enrolled in public institutions in Ontario. This survey of international graduation and labour market outcomes in the province will help inform institutional policies and programs to better support international students.

9 "Renewing Canada's IES - Proposed Pillar: The Conduct of Education Agents and Ethics in International Student Recruitment," Government of Canada, March 1, 2023, https://www.international.gc.ca/education/strategy_research-strategie_recherche/agents.aspx?lang=eng&pedisable=true.

10 "Renewing Canada's IES - Proposed Pillar," Government of Canada.

11 Victoria Esses, Alina Sutter, Alejandro Ortiz, Ning Luo, Jean Cui and Lisa Deacon, "Retaining International Students in Canada Post-Graduation: Understanding the Motivations and Drivers of the Decision to Stay," Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018, <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Intl-students-post-graduation-RiB-8-EN-1.pdf>.

12 Esses, Sutter, Ortiz, Luo, Cui and Deacon, "Retaining International Students in Canada Post-Graduation."

13 Government of Canada, "Building on Success: International Education Strategy (2019-2024)," Government of Canada, 2020, <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/strategy-2019-2024-strategie.aspx?lang=eng#1>.

14 Marc Frenette, Lu Yuqian, and Winnie Chan, "The Postsecondary Experience and Early Labour Market Outcomes of International Study Permit Holders," Statistics Canada, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019019-eng.htm>.

15 Jon Woodend and Nancy Arthur, "International Students' University to Work Transition: Research-in-Brief," Canadian Journal of Career Development 17 (2018): 53-55. <https://cjcd-rcdc.ceric.ca/index.php/cjcd/article/view/107/141>; Nancy Arthur, Jon Woodend, Lisa Gust, April Dyrda and Judy Dang, "It's not as easy as they say: International Students' Perspectives About

16 Gaining Canadian Work Experience," Canadian Journal of Career Development 21, no. 2 (2022): 42-58, <https://cjcd-rcdc.ceric.ca/index.php/cjcd/article/view/344/395>.

Community Partnerships

As international students navigate the higher education system in Ontario and their transition into the labour market, supports and services are crucial to a high-quality experience. The federal government's recent policy changes could further strain the financial stability of Ontario's PSE institutions and may impact the supports and services available to international students. Students are already reporting challenges such as access to reliable information, academic and social supports, housing services, labour market integration and immigration services.¹⁷ Current mental health support structures also lack accessible, culturally relevant resources needed to address international students' diverse needs.¹⁸

Despite financial constraints, colleges and universities are expanding and improving resources and services for international students, such as housing supports and post-graduation career counselling.¹⁹ In addition to the initiatives at institutions, there are also many resources, such as mental health, employment and housing supports, available to newcomers and immigrants in the wider community that international students can access, but this is only possible if they are aware of them.²⁰ The community partnership model between Sheridan College and the City of Brampton is an example of how institutions and communities can work together to support international students. Sheridan College has partnered with 35 Brampton-based organizations (including

social service and healthcare providers) to encourage collaboration between community members. This has enabled a foundation for sharing resources, providing work opportunities and promoting affordable housing, amongst other initiatives, to create an enriching educational environment for international students.²¹

Understanding existing models of community partnerships, such as the Sheridan College–City of Brampton partnership, can provide guidance for institutions to better work with their communities to support international students. To understand more about the potential of these partnerships, the Canadian Bureau of International Education is investigating the networks, programs and services that support international students in Hamilton, Ontario as they transition into the labour market. This project will help community leaders and policymakers replicate helpful interventions in other communities across Ontario.

17 Marsha Akbar, "Best Practices in Supporting International Students Enrolled in Toronto-Area Colleges," Intergovernmental Committee for Economic and Labour Force Development, 2023, <https://www.icecommittee.org/reports/Supporting-International-College-Students-Final-Research-Report.pdf>; Moira J. Calder, Solina Richter, Yiping Mao, Katharina Kovacs Burns, Ramadimefja S. Mogale and Margaret Danko, "International Students Attending Canadian Universities: Their Experiences with Housing, Finances, and Other Issues," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 46, no. 2 (2016): 92-110, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1113439.pdf>.

18 Dimitris Giamos, Alex Young Soo Lee, Amanda Suleiman, Heather Stuart and Shu-Ping Chen, "Understanding Campus Culture and Student Coping Strategies for Mental Health Issues in Five Canadian Colleges and Universities," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 47, no. 3 (2017): 136-151, <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v47i3.187957>; Danielle De Moissac, Jan Marie Graham, Kevin Prada, Ndeye Rokhaya Gueye and Rhéa Rocque, "Mental Health Status and Help-Seeking Strategies of International Students in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 50, no. 4 (2020): 52-71, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1288032.pdf>.

19 ICEF Monitor, "Canada: Ontario Colleges Adopt New Standards for Programmes and Supports for International Students," ICEF Monitor, March 26, 2023, <https://monitor.icef.com/2023/03/canada-ontario-colleges-adopt-new-standards-for-programmes-and-supports-for-international-students/>; "Ontario Universities: Support International Student Success," Ontario's Universities, <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Supporting-International-Student-Success-OU.pdf>; "Ontario Public Colleges' Standards of Practice for International Education," Colleges Ontario, March, 2023, <https://www.collegesontario.org/en/resources/standards-for-international-programs>.

20 "Ontario Universities: Supporting International Student Success," <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Supporting-International-Student-Success-OU.pdf>; Achëv, "Newcomer Services," <https://achev.ca/services/newcomer/>.

21 "Sheridan College and the City of Brampton Unveil Charter for Enhanced International Student Experience," *Bramptonist*, December 18, 2023, <https://bramptonist.com/sheridan-college-and-the-city-of-brampton-unveil-charter-for-enhanced-international-student-experience/>; Sheridan College, *Brampton Charter for Improving the International Student Experience*, Sheridan College, 2022, <https://www.sheridancollege.ca/about/administration-governance/institutional-plans/brampton-charter-international-student-experience#:~:text=The%20Brampton%20Charter%20for%20Improving,actions%20and%20mechanisms%20for%20accountability>.

Concluding Thoughts

Financial constraints in Ontario's PSE sector have incentivized growth in international student enrolments. With new federal regulations in place to quell the increase in international students, Ontario's government and institutions have an opportunity to explore international students' challenges and successes to inform new policies and practices.

Understanding international student recruitment practices, international students' labour market outcomes and opportunities for community partnerships will help to ensure international students' success. Through research completed as part of HEQCO's Consortium on International Education, government, institutions and communities can be better prepared to develop policies to support high-quality, sustainable international education that is accountable to the students we welcome to Ontario. The Consortium wraps up their projects in February 2025. Stay tuned for HEQCO's final report providing recommendations for improving international education in Ontario, which can be found on HEQCO's Consortium on International Education webpage.²²



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Supporting International Students with Open Education Resources

By Graeme Cannon, Don Eldridge, Laura Viselli, (eCampusOntario)



Graeme Cannon is a Research and Foresight Associate at eCampusOntario. He has spent his working career in the postsecondary sector in various research and support roles. His interests in postsecondary education are rooted in his own experiences of both being a learner and educator, with a key interest in making postsecondary more welcoming and equitable to all students. Graeme holds a Master of Arts from Western University in Political Science, an Honours Bachelor of Arts from Trent University in Political Science and Philosophy (emphasis in Policy and Law), and a postgraduate certificate in Research Analysis from Georgian College.



Don Eldridge is a Manager, Programs at eCampusOntario where he oversees the Open Library, Emerging Tech, and Learn Online Portal portfolios. Prior to joining eCampusOntario, Don spent over a decade as a postsecondary instructor and administrator working primarily with Indigenous Learners. He holds a Master of Education specializing in Postsecondary Education. Research passions include the integration of technology into learning, decolonization and equity in education, and sustainability of publicly supported higher education.

Introduction

International students face an arduous journey when coming to Canada. The decision to leave families, friends, and societal and cultural norms is not made lightly or without sacrifice. That decision comes to a head during the longest and most intensive step of their journey: living and studying in Canada. The postsecondary institutions in which they spend most of their time are fundamental to their experience. eCampusOntario—a provincially funded non-profit organization that leads a consortium of the province’s publicly-assisted Indigenous Institutes, colleges, and universities to further digital transformation in higher education—sought to understand the experience of international students and to imagine digital solutions that could support them. To do this, eCampusOntario conducted research with international students throughout the summer and fall of 2023.

One digital solution that emerged from this research is the use of Open Education Resources (OER). OER can be used to alleviate financial pressures; provide supports for international learners in areas they require assistance—such as cultural adjustment and adjusting to new methods and modalities of teaching and learning—and improve equity amongst all students. UNESCO defines OER as “learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license,

that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others.”¹ eCampusOntario’s Open Library, an online repository of free and openly-licensed educational resources to support online teaching and learning, houses these resources that can be used to support and mitigate barriers faced by international students in a myriad of ways, such as clarifying expectations in higher education, supporting skill development, or helping to alleviate financial worries. Some have been used as wraparound supports to promote relevant and core skills in areas that international students indicate they would like assistance. This article will provide an overview of eCampusOntario’s research and then showcase how OER can and is being used to support international students to achieve more equitable access to higher education.

Our Research

Research Background

Recognizing the significant role that Ontario plays in the international learner ecosystem, eCampusOntario engaged in research with international learners about their experiences with higher education in Ontario. As a convening power in the Ontario postsecondary sector, eCampusOntario is in a unique position to work with the sector to understand the needs of international learners and identify solutions to some of the problems they face. Between July and October 2023, eCampusOntario engaged with international learners at the undergraduate level at Ontario’s publicly-assisted colleges and universities to identify the problems they face and to explore possible digital by design solutions.

A survey was deployed during the summer of 2023 which asked about the various periods in the learner’s journey, from their application



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to their arrival in Canada to their studying period to post-graduation pathways. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide their contact information to participate later in an hour-long interview. Interview questions asked for more in-depth responses. In total, 250 survey responses were collected and 11 interviews conducted. In total, these respondents represented 25 different postsecondary institutions in Ontario and were from 33 different countries.

Research Findings

Through our research, we learned more about the experiences of international students at every phase of their journey. During the first part of their journey—researching and applying to institutions—survey respondents indicated that they find government and institutional websites confusing and contradicting. Thus, they often turn to unofficial channels, such as immigration influencers on social media platforms like TikTok and Youtube, to find answers to questions they have. Other sources they confer with include education agents and family and friends with lived experience. Once international students have arrived in Ontario, there are many areas in which they struggle to find information. Participants indicate that finances, housing, employment, and immigration and their associated rights are their top concerns. Interview participants revealed that learners feel they do not know the reality of what life will be like in Ontario and are sold false narratives. Interview participants also highlighted how they struggle to get by on their own in another part of the world with a different culture.

Canadian culture—academic and societal—may also differ from where they live. Survey participants indicated that they did not understand aspects of Canadian culture and

customs, including legal and financial responsibilities (such as paying taxes), tenant rights, worker rights, day-to-day life experience, and formal and informal education such as the value of participating in co-curricular activities. Participants indicated that there are many areas they did not feel prepared for regarding learning in Ontario post-secondary. These areas include styles of teaching; online and hybrid modalities; expectations from instructors, institutions, and other learners; communications, including how to contact instructors; where to find academic support; and digital fluency.

Proposed Solutions

There are many potential digital solutions to mitigate these experiences and barriers that international students experience throughout their journey. We divided their barriers into three categories: solvable (those we understand and can solve), difficult (those we understand but are difficult to solve), and wicked (those that are complex to define and address).² Solvable barriers in this context include information barriers and academic processes. Some proposed solutions for these barriers include upskilling through micro-credentials and improving information provided. Difficult barriers in this context include topics such as loneliness and understanding Canadian culture. Proposed solutions for difficult barriers include peer mentorship programs and study and stay programs. Finally, wicked problems include housing, employment, and immigration challenges. Proposed solutions for wicked problems include using student portals, establishing a co-curricular micro-credentialing framework, and using digital credentials and virtual wallets. The research team described some of these solutions to learners to understand their thoughts, while other digital

² Scope of barriers comes from design thinking.

³ Statistics Canada, "Tuition fees for degree programs, 2022/2023," September 7, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220907/dq220907b-eng.htm>.

⁴ Times Higher Education, "The cost of studying at a university in Canada," April 11, 2023, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/cost-studying-university-canada>.

⁵ Alex Usher, "Data on Textbook Costs," February 16, 2015, <https://higherstrategy.com/data-on-text-book-costs/>.

solutions were presented to use by learners, seeking digital solutions to the problems they face. To learn more about the solutions described, you can read the full report, *The International Learner Journey in Ontario Postsecondary Education: Enabling Supports for Success*, or the shorter action guide, *Action Guide: Enabling Supports for International Learner Success in Ontario Postsecondary Education*, which focuses on the proposed digital solutions in English and French on our website; ecampus.ca.

One notable experience of international students is the high cost of living. Postsecondary institutions charge international students significantly higher levels of tuition and fees than domestic students.³ Moreover, the cost of living in Canada has increased significantly over recent years, including the cost of food and rent. As one interview participant opined, “[There are a h]uge amount of fees to come here and [being] asked to buy textbooks which were, like, hundred[s] of dollars... for 2 or 3 subjects. And it’s a little bit difficult for us to survive here [because] in the first couple of months, we didn’t have any job... Spending \$300 is a lot for us”. One way to alleviate this financial pressure is for institutions to shift from traditional textbooks, which on average cost learners hundreds of dollars per academic year, to OER.⁴ As costs increase, learners may try to find workarounds to purchasing textbooks, which may have an impact on their success and resilience.⁵ Beyond cost savings, the use of OER has been shown to improve learner outcomes, such as improved grades and reduced course withdrawals. These benefits are even more pronounced for student populations that have been historically underserved by higher education.⁶ Other ar-

reas that international students identified as areas where they could use support, such as learning about housing, employment, and Canadian culture, can also be supported through auxiliary use of OER focusing on these topics across institutions. As such, the use of OER should be encouraged to support international students.

Open Library and Open Educational Resources

In Ontario, Open Education is directly supported by eCampusOntario’s Open Library (OL). Benefiting from the province’s historic \$70 million investment in the Virtual Learning Strategy.⁷ The OL’s collection has grown to over 1800 OER and comprises a variety of open assets including textbooks, simulations, interactive activities, virtual reality experience, and more. In addition to serving as a repository for OER, the OL also provides Ontario learners and educators with access to the OER authoring tools Pressbooks and H5P Studio. Through these platforms, learners and educators alike can co-create new resources and discover and adopt resources from the collection. Educators are further supported through ongoing training from the OL that provides support in using authoring tools, selecting appropriate licensing, and advising on accessibility considerations as OER are created or adopted. For example, in 2023 eCampusOntario, through its OER Ranger program and in collaboration with subject matter experts from across Ontario, created the ‘Mastering OpenEd’ training program. Best of all, these services make higher education more affordable for international and domestic students and equip learners and faculty with the tools and supports that lead to success.

6 Martin Weller et al. “The impact of OER on teaching and learning practice,” *Open Praxis* 7, no. 4 (2015): 351-361, doi: 10.5944/openpraxis.7.4.227.

7 Ontario Newsroom, “Ontario Expanding High-Quality, Accessible Virtual Learning,” October 28, 2021, <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001058/ontario-expanding-high-quality-accessible-virtual-learning>.

8 Digital Fluency Accelerator on the Open Library: <https://openlibrary.ecampusontario.ca/item-details/6418cc77-b37b-46e7-930f-2d2b7defc79a/?k=digital%20fluency&itemTypes=6&itemTypes=12&sortCol=2&increasePopularSearch=true#/>

9 Core Skills for Actional Professional Communication on the Open Library: <https://openlibrary.ecampusontario.ca/item-details/#/cbced1f4-67b9-4d86-a6b3-6be3d769095f>

10 Ontario Extend: Liberated Learner on the Open Library: <https://openlibrary.ecampusontario.ca/item-details/#/90d3d8c1-0aa4-4e60-81d0-c0f09d70bce4?k=liberated%20learners&itemTypes=6&itemTypes=12&sortCol=1&increasePopularSearch=true>

11 International Students: Stories and Strategies for academic success in postsecondary education on the Open Library: <https://openlibrary.ecampusontario.ca/item-details/#/cbced1f4-67b9-4d86-a6b3-6be3d769095f>

To date, the OL has saved learners in excess of \$27 million, with savings continuing to grow as more and more OER are adopted.

Beyond the cost savings to learners, OER can also help international students transition to learning in Canada and can greatly contribute to their success. Further, OER can serve as inspiration for faculty finding ways to better support diverse learners. Here are some OER in the OL that can be adopted for these purposes:

- eCampusOntario's "Digital Fluency Accelerator" microcredential, which supports students in increasing their digital fluency.⁸ "Core Skills for Actionable Professional Communication" is designed to support students in developing skills in professional communications, such as writing cover letters, developing reports, and preparing and delivering presentations. These topics align with areas that international students indicated they would like assistance.⁹
- "Ontario Extend: Liberated Learner" helps learners navigate digital education and access resources for success.¹⁰
- "International Students: Stories and strategies for academic success in postsecondary education" is an e-book designed to help international students find resources, develop their academic skills, and provide information related to finances, housing, shopping, driving, finding community, language, campus life, and study strategies.¹¹

OER such as these can be used as wrap-around supports to promote relevant skills. OER that are used have been peer reviewed to assure quality and updated as time passes. The Open Library has tools to provide feedback and experiences with any utilized resources.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2023, eCampusOntario investigated digital supports that provide solutions to barriers that international students experience during their journey to and time studying in Canada. Shortly thereafter, in January 2024, the federal government announced and implemented an international student cap, which limited the number of international students in Canada. As research indicates, international students are particularly vulnerable to the financial burdens of higher education along with the unique challenge of transitioning to postsecondary education in a new cultural context. OER stands as one solution to reduce the costs of resources while providing contextualized support that leads to success for international students. eCampusOntario, through its Open Library, is leading Ontario's higher education sector in providing access to an OER repository as well as training and authoring tools that support the use of OER. As an open community, educators and learners can get involved with the Open Library by exploring the collection and reaching out for direct support from our team of dedicated librarians. Together, we can create more equitable access to higher education and improve outcomes for all learners.

International Student Healthcare: Addressing Unique Health Disparities in Ontario

By Olivia Villeneuve (CSA)



Olivia recently completed her Master's in International Development and Public Policy in Portugal. With a strong background in the civil society sector, she successfully facilitated literacy programs for underrepresented populations as a Program Coordinator at an adult education non-profit. Her research spans both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, covering topics like post-secondary mental health, sexual violence, early childhood education, and the global family doctor shortage. Olivia has extensive experience writing policy briefs and engaging in stakeholder relations. She is dedicated to building a career focused on engaging with diverse communities and promoting equality through the development of inclusive social policies.

Introduction

Internationalization has gained prominence in Ontario's postsecondary education sector following years of substantial increases in federally issued student permits. Amidst these developments, critical aspects such as the health and well-being of international students often receive inadequate attention. International students encounter unique health barriers and challenges that significantly impact their health outcomes. They are disproportionately affected by social determinants and face considerable disparities in health insurance plans, which vary among provinces and post-secondary institutions. These challenges are compounded by the complexities of navigating a healthcare system different from their home countries. Recognizing these diverse barriers to healthcare access and affordability is crucial for promoting a more inclusive and healthier Canadian society.

Social Determinants of Health

Access to healthcare for international students is influenced by a complex interplay of social determinants of health and intersectional factors. Social determinants of health encompass non-medical factors such as socioeconomic status, education, employment, housing, social support networks, and access to healthcare services. These determinants can intersect with aspects of identity—such as race, gender, and immigration status—heightening vulnerability and leading to distinct disadvantages in accessing healthcare.¹

¹ Olena Hankivsky and Ashlee Christoffersen, "Intersectionality and the determinants of health: a Canadian perspective." *Critical Public Health* 18, no. 3 (2008): 271-283.

This section highlights key social determinants that disproportionately impact international students, noting that further research is needed to fully understand the intersectional effects.

International students' financial status in Ontario are influenced by policies that limit work hours to 20 per week, require proof of only \$20,635 for a one-year study permit, and lack tuition fee stabilization, making them vulnerable to financial insecurity. Many rely on loans that fall short of covering both direct and indirect educational costs, such as tuition, food, and housing. Studies show that food-insecure students have higher odds of reporting fair or poor general health and mental health, difficulty concentrating in class, and lower consumption of nutritious food.² The prevalence of food insecurity is higher among international students, with 46.6% of food bank clients being international students compared to 31.0% of the general student population.³ Access to affordable and suitable housing is another critical health determinant for international students, often closely tied to financial insecurity. Safe, affordable housing impacts stress levels, exposure to environmental hazards, and overall quality of life. A survey of 500 international students revealed that 40% reported difficulties finding affordable housing near campus, with 13% describing it as a significant problem.⁴ Facing food insecurity and inadequate housing, students may be deterred from seeking healthcare due to the upfront costs they must cover before receiving insurance reimbursement.

Low health literacy, defined as the skills needed to obtain, understand, and use

health information, is consistently associated with poorer health outcomes.⁵ Factors such as socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity impact health literacy among students, affecting their ability to navigate the Canadian healthcare system. A study highlighted that 57% of international students perceive themselves as having little to no knowledge about the Canadian healthcare system.⁶ Understanding the role of primary care providers as gatekeepers to specialized healthcare—a concept unfamiliar to many international students—can lead to misunderstandings, with some students mistaking the referral process for discrimination.⁷ Medication-related issues, such as difficulty finding Canadian equivalents and concerns about insurance coverage, further complicate healthcare access. Additionally, international students must undergo a health assessment for a post-study residency visa in Canada, potentially leading to the misconception that using health services could harm their residency chances.

Racism and discrimination can adversely affect the mental and physical well-being of international students. Systematic reviews have shown that racism is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological stress, as well as poorer general and physical health.⁸ Racism can manifest through overt threats and insults or be deeply embedded in social systems, affecting international students regardless of their backgrounds.

Acculturative stress - the emotional, psychological, and social adjustments when adapting to a new culture - significantly impacts

2 Jasmine Farahbakhsh et al., "Food insecure student clients of a university-based food bank have compromised health, dietary intake and academic quality." *Nutrition & dietetics* 74, no. 1 (2017): 67-73.

3 Ibid

4 Moira J. Calder et al., "International students attending Canadian universities: Their experiences with housing, finances, and other issues." *Canadian Journal of higher education* 46, no. 2 (2016): 92-110.

6 Dillon Lee and Lisa Guirguis, "International students and their accessibility to on-campus healthcare services." *Spectrum* 7 (2021).

7 Ibid

8 Yin Paradies et al., "Racism as a determinant of health: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *PloS one* 10, no. 9 (2015): e0138511.

international student's health-related quality of life.⁹ A study of 900 international students found that 41% experience substantial stress due to factors such as homesickness, cultural shock, and perceived discrimination.¹⁰ International students often report higher depressive symptoms compared to domestic students, with female students exhibiting higher rates than males.¹¹ Despite the availability of on-campus mental health services, international students often underutilize them due to cultural beliefs and stigma associated with mental health in their home countries¹². Institutions must understand the diverse cultural barriers these students face and adopt long-term approaches. Counselors can assist by helping students develop diverse social networks, adapt to local academic norms, and form connections with the campus and local community.¹³

Applying intersectionality frameworks is crucial for future research to understand the diverse challenges faced by international students in accessing healthcare. For international students, this approach can uncover how various aspects of their identities affect their integration and experiences in a new environment, such as financial constraints, cultural differences, and systemic discrimination. Current research is limited, often focusing broadly on immigrants rather than the specific experiences of international students. By integrating intersectionality frameworks, researchers can more effectively explore the complex interactions between individual and institutional factors contributing to health disparities, guiding more targeted and impactful policies and interventions.¹⁴

Insurance Plans and Policies

It is evident that international students have

distinct healthcare needs that require comprehensive and affordable health coverage. However, since 1994, international students attending post-secondary institutions in Ontario have been ineligible for the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). Ontario is one of four provinces where post-secondary institutions provide private health insurance (Figure 1). In contrast, seven provinces, including Alberta and British Columbia, offer provincial public health plans to international students.

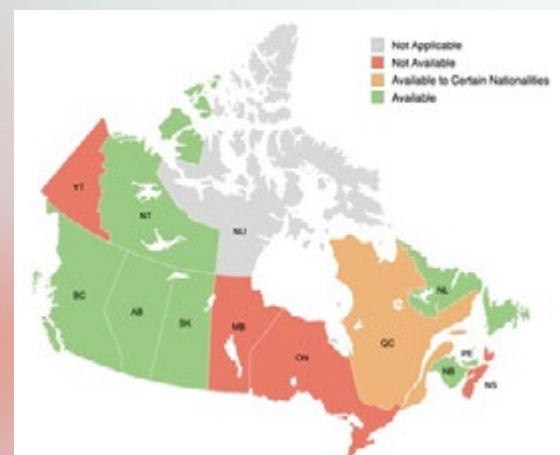


Figure 1. Inclusion and availability of public health plans to international students by Canadian province.

Ontario universities generally offer the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP), included in tuition at \$756 for the 2023/24 academic year. UHIP covers basic OHIP services such as doctor visits, hospital stays, and lab tests but excludes prescription drugs, dental coverage, and paramedical practitioners. International students can opt out of UHIP with equivalent coverage and access extended health and dental plans through student associations for additional fees.

Alternatively, colleges provide varied private insurance plans with inconsistent fees and coverage, leading to significant disparities in

9 Motolani E. Ogunsanya et al., "Determinants of health-related quality of life in international graduate students." *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning* 10, no. 4 (2018): 413-422.
 10 Hsiao-ping Wu, Esther Garza, and Norma Guzman, "International student's challenge and adjustment to college." *Education research international* 2015, no. 1 (2015): 202753.
 11 Lala Acharya, Lan Jin, and William Collins, "College life is stressful today—Emerging stressors and depressive symptoms in college students." *Journal of American college health* 66, no. 7 (2018): 655-664.
 12 Sarah Ketchen Lipson et al., "Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the national healthy minds study, 2013–2021." *Journal of affective disorders* 306 (2022): 138-147. ; Sarah Ketchen Lipson et al., "Mental health disparities among college students of color." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 63, no. 3 (2018): 348-356.
 13 Christopher Sullivan and Susan Kashubeck-West, "The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes." *Journal of International Students* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1-11.
 14 Anna Gkiouleka et al., "Understanding the micro and macro politics of health: Inequalities, intersectionality & institutions—A research agenda." *Social science & medicine* 200 (2018): 92-98. ; Sarah Benkirane and Marina M. Doucerain, "Considering intersectionality in acculturation: Bringing theory to practice." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 91 (2022): 150-157.

healthcare access (Figure 2). These plans are typically managed by private providers through the institution or international centers. Of Ontario’s 24 publicly funded colleges, 14 provide comprehensive coverage including dental, prescriptions, and paramedical practitioners, in addition to the OHIP alternative. The average cost for OHIP alternative insurance plans at Ontario colleges is \$774 per student each academic year, including comprehensive plans. One college did not have accessible ancillary fees online.

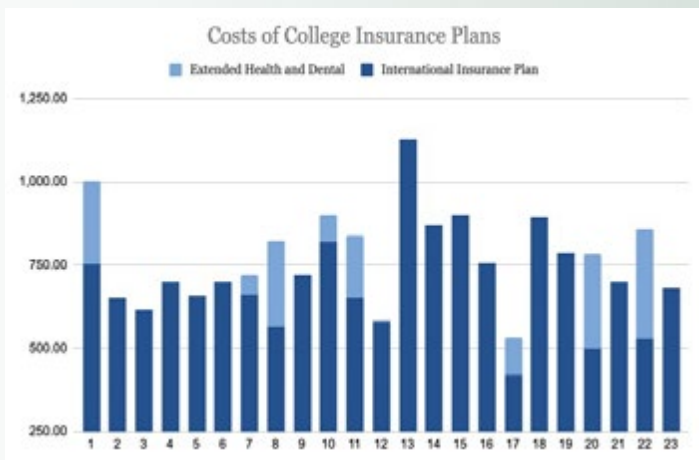


Figure 2. Total available costs of private insurance health plans per international student per academic year (23/24 or 24/25 academic year). Data retrieved from individual college and student associations.

Half of Ontario public colleges use GuardMe as their insurance provider for international students. GuardMe offers an OHIP alternative and paramedical practitioners but excludes dental care, with costs ranging from \$565 to \$820 per academic year. Including extended health and dental plans at five colleges, the average cost increases from \$672 to \$742. Morcare, covering nine colleges, offers plans with non-emergency dental coverage and mental health support, costing \$420 to \$1128.92 per year, averaging \$808.50. Remaining colleges’ plans range from \$498 to \$782.14 per year, offering varying levels of comprehensive cover-

age. The average cost for each international student health plan from small colleges is \$883.31, over \$100 more than the total average (Figure 3). This price variation may be due to larger institutions negotiating better rates and absorbing administrative costs, while smaller colleges embed these costs in student fees. Additionally, northern Ontario colleges average \$844.34, indicating pricing discrepancies based on location, possibly due to institutional size, fewer healthcare providers, logistical challenges, and increased operational expenses.

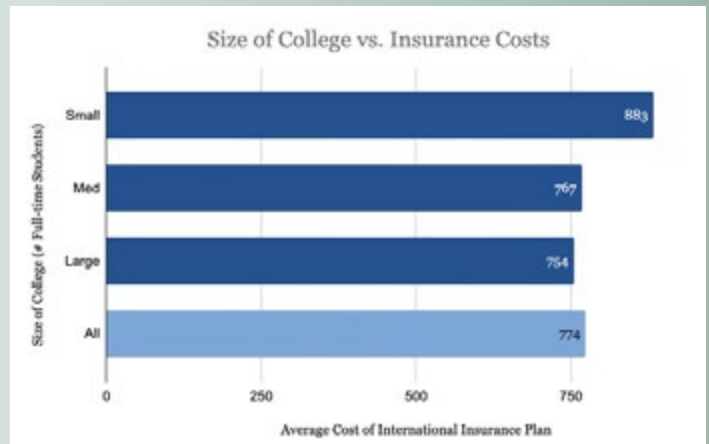


Figure 3. Average costs of private insurance health plans per international student per academic year based on college size (number of full-time students).

Most health plans offer some coverage for psychiatric assessments and sessions, ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year. Programs like Morcare’s Student Wellness Assistant Program provide access to mental health support, online counseling, and referrals. Additionally, GuardMe offers counseling in multiple languages, with counselors from students’ home countries, addressing cultural and linguistic barriers international students face. On-campus mental health services are often partially funded through insurance providers, as well as through school funds and additional ancillary fees.

Notably, there is inconsistency and lack of transparency in reporting ancillary fees, including health plans, at Ontario colleges. While compulsory ancillary fees must be listed before admission deadlines, health insurance fees by student governing bodies are exempt.¹⁵ Fee presentation varies: some colleges list fees by academic year, others by semester or course. Categories such as mental health, on-campus services, online services, and insurance are inconsistently separated, with some colleges further dividing costs into dental, vision, and OHIP alternatives. This inconsistency causes confusion and creates barriers to accessing information. Additionally, opt-in or opt-out processes for health plans vary; some colleges automatically enroll international students in both international and extended health plans, while others do not. This lack of standardized reporting and inconsistent accessibility of information significantly challenges international students navigating Ontario's health system.

Policy Considerations

Provincial

1. **Policy Reintegration:** Reinstate international students in OHIP with a nominal premium to balance costs and benefits, improving healthcare access and equity. A report from the Canadian Federation of Students, proposes that a nominal premium per international student could generate adequate funds to surpass the costs associated with including them in OHIP, significantly undercutting private insurance expenses.¹⁶
2. **Enhance Transparency and Accessibility:** Standardize the reporting of ancillary fees, including health plan fees, across educational institutions to improve transparency and accessibility for international students. The government should ensure coverage details, costs, and opt-in/opt-out procedures are clear and readily available in multiple lan-

guages.

3. **Address Financial Barriers:** The provincial government should provide equalization payments for smaller or northern schools with limited resources to offset administrative insurance fees and recognize additional barriers faced by remote and rural students. This would allow institutions to manage costs without compromising healthcare service quality for international students.

Institutional

1. **Promote Student-Centred Responses:** Encourage collaboration among various stakeholders within institutions, such as regular reporting on healthcare service utilization by providers to insurance staff can ensure coverage meets students' actual needs. Offer multiple insurance plans, allowing students to select one that suits their individual needs without varying fees.
2. **Increase Awareness:** Increase awareness initiatives on the value of health plans to ensure international students understand and utilize available healthcare services, highlighting preventative care. This could include multilingual training sessions, webinars, easily digestible pamphlets and ensuring health contacts are easily accessible.
3. **Strengthen Cultural Sensitivity:** Implement cultural sensitivity training for school administrators, to better understand and meet diverse healthcare needs of international students.

Addressing the healthcare barriers faced by international students in Ontario requires a multifaceted approach. Social determinants of health, restrictive policies, and inconsistent health insurance plans complicate access to necessary services. Increased attention and research on international student health and health plan regulation are needed to improve healthcare access and equity for Ontario's international student population.

¹⁶ Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario. "Think Global Act Local: A path towards re-integration of international students into the Ontario Health Insurance Program (OHIP)." (2016).

Shifting Paradigms: Taking a whole campus approach to move from cultural competency toward cultural safety in supporting international student mental health and wellbeing

By Ella Wiseman and Tarin Karunagoda (CIMCH)



Ella Wiseman is one of the Knowledge & Research Leads at The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health. Her work revolves around supporting students transitioning to and from post-secondary institutions, international student mental health, and the changing landscape of care in a post-pandemic world. Ella's educational background includes a Bachelor of Social Work. Ella has two cats, Tortellini and Farfalle.



Tarin Karunagoda is one of the Knowledge & Research Leads at The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CIMCH). Her work there revolves around creating knowledge sharing products for campus stakeholders to support campus mental wellbeing. These include the monthly webinars, toolkits, courses, and infosheets. Her educational background includes a Master's in Neuroscience and BSc in Biomedical Science. Tarin also has a cat named Lulu.

Introduction

It is well documented that the overall mental health and wellbeing of international students is well below that of their domestic counterparts. While many campuses across Ontario are taking this issue seriously and being proactive in their approaches, this work is vast, diverse, and complex. Compared to domestic students, international students have reported higher levels of suicide ideation, academic stress, and feeling less connected within their post-secondary community.^{1,2} Additionally, compared to domestic students, international students are less likely to report symptoms of mental health concerns, have lower mental health literacy, and have low help-seeking behaviours.³ These trends tend to occur due to stigma, fear of judgement, difficulty with acculturation, communication barriers, and social disconnection. These challenges can particularly be prominent during the first half of a post-secondary degree as they are navigating their sense of belonging.⁴ Additionally, post-secondary institutions do not always adequately recognize that the institutional environment was built for domestic students and therefore may be harder to navigate for newcomers.

1 King N., et al. "Mental Health and Academic Outcomes over the First Year at University in International Compared to Domestic Canadian Students." *Journal of American College Health*, 2021, doi:10.1080/07448481.2021.1982950
 2 Kivelä, L., et al. "Student Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Are International Students More Affected?" *Journal of American College Health*, 2022, doi:10.1080/07448481.2022.2037616.
 3 Clough, B. A., et al. "A Comparison of Mental Health Literacy, Attitudes, and Help Seeking Intentions Among Domestic and International Tertiary Students" *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2018.1459473
 4 Cogan, N. A., et al. "The Taboo of Mental Health Problems, Stigma and Fear of Disclosure among Asian International Students: Implications for Help-Seeking, Guidance and Support." *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 2023, doi:10.1080/03069885.2023.2214307.

Campuses are already grappling with ensuring international students have adequate supports to adjust to life in Canada such as having safe, secure, and affordable housing; having access to culturally appropriate and nutritious food; and creating spaces for community building and connection. It is also crucial for schools to consider the cultural safety of their campuses (including, but not limited to, student support services) and how this might be impacting the mental health and wellbeing of international students. Embedding culturally inclusive services has been a common recommendation to address the various mental health and service accessibility challenges faced by international students.⁵ Culturally safe practices may retain students who sought help initially, improve therapeutic alliances, and encourage continuous support seeking.⁵ This approach is especially important to international student populations who are racialized due to the rampant xenophobic and racist rhetoric they face in Canadian society and on their campuses. In this article, we will argue that embedding cultural safety in post-secondary institutions is crucial to improving the mental health and wellbeing of international students. We will first discuss the context in which the theory of cultural safety arose and what preceded it. Next, we will discuss how this approach can be embedded at both the individual and systemic level on campus. We will end with a discussion of this approach's limitations and highlighting some work in this area and its impacts.

Ever Evolving: Awareness, Humility, Competence, and Safety

The term “cultural safety” was first proposed by Dr. Irihapeti Ramsden and Māori nurses in New Zealand in the 1990s. At the outset, the goal of bringing awareness to this issue was to improve the health outcomes of his-

torically and presently marginalized populations; essentially, to reduce the effects of the social determinants of health. As a result, the concept of cultural safety is mainly tied to health & wellness settings, specifically for health and helping professions.⁶

To understand cultural safety in its full context, we must look to the past to see the “cultural” concepts that both preceded and influenced it. Below is a brief explanation of a few key terms. Please note, the definitions for these terms are wide and vary across discipline, location, and author. For the purposes of this article, we will use the following definitions⁶:

- Cultural Awareness: there are more cultures other than my own
- Cultural Humility: my culture is not the most valuable/ true nor more valuable/ true than other cultures
- Cultural Competency: if I know enough about another’s culture and its practices, I won’t cause harm, or I will cause less harm
- Cultural Safety: I must always consider the power dynamics and systemic factors (e.g. colonialism) inherent in cross-cultural interactions if I intend to not cause harm or cause less harm

Below is a quotation from the International Journal for Equity in Health that further describes cultural safety for the context of our article:

Cultural safety...rejects the notion that health providers should focus on learning cultural customs of different ethnic groups. Instead, cultural safety seeks to achieve better care through being aware of difference,

5 McKay, S., et al. “Suicide Prevention for International Students: A Scoping Review.” International journal of environmental research and public health, 2023, doi:10.3390/ijerph20021500

6 Curtis, E., et al. “Why Cultural Safety Rather than Cultural Competency Is Required to Achieve Health Equity: A Literature Review and Recommended Definition” International Journal for Equity in Health, 2019, doi:10.1186/s12939-019-1082-3

decolonizing, considering power relationships, implementing reflective practice, and by allowing the patient to determine whether a clinical encounter is safe.⁶

Core Tenets

Further, the core tenets of cultural safety can be summarized as:

- A focus on critical self-reflection and awareness of social location
- Relationship building between client and practitioner
- Using a social justice lens to consider power imbalances
- The client or service user is the one that determines if the care was culturally safe
- This is an active and ongoing process

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

A Whole Campus Approach

A key question of embedding cultural safety on campuses is the “where”. Where do these practices, procedures, and values go? To improve mental health outcomes and overall international student wellbeing, a whole-campus approach is recommended. In a whole-campus approach, all members of the campus community are involved in supporting student mental health. Ideally, practices that promote mental health are woven into all aspects of campus, from policies and programs/services to the learning environment (i.e the classroom). A whole-campus approach also involves breaking down silos between departments/campus areas and ensuring that everyone has the appropriate information and resources they need to support student mental health based on their role on campus. While this task can be daunting and is perpetually ongoing, it is hugely crucial to the betterment of overall student mental health and wellbeing.

Taking Action: Individual Level

To move towards a whole campus approach, each of us can start individually to examine how we can play a part in cultivating cultural safety. As mentioned above, one of the key actions is engaging in ongoing critical self-reflection. Critical self-reflection is when we “...question [our] own biases, attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices...”⁶. And further, work to eliminate them from our day-to-day interactions, work, and practice. It is hard to look inward and acknowledge these pieces of ourselves, but it is integral to this work and our success in delivering equitable and effective supports to international students.

Critical self-reflection is important because our individual actions can support and maintain the status quo of our institutions, which are based in colonialism. By engaging in critical self-reflection, we can identify ways in which we may be upholding harmful norms and begin to work on reformulating our practices so that they can instead help dismantle barriers to mental health on campus.

Within one-on-one services, culturally safe practices can be encouraged through training and continuous learning both about diverse cultures and how to investigate our own complicity in doing harm and upholding harmful systems. According to Hechanova and Waedle, assessing how one navigates or understands emotional expression; shame related to mental health concerns; power between the service provider and service user; collectivism; and spirituality may be a good place to begin.⁷

⁷ Hechanova, R., and Waedle, L. “The Influence of Culture on Disaster Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Interventions in Southeast Asia.” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2017, doi:10.1080/13674676.2017.1322048.

Taking Action: Systems Level

Taking action on a systemic level looks like embedding and requiring robust and nuanced training on cultural safety, anti-oppressive practice, and anti-racism, to name a few. Delivering these trainings to all staff and faculty, regardless of department or role, does a lot to create an environment in which equity and power imbalances are top of mind. A common pitfall in large-scale training is that the curriculum remains static over time. It is important that the content and delivery of this education remain dynamic and are reassessed and improved regularly. As we've seen earlier in this article, discourses around culturally appropriate care have changed enormously in the last 20 years and they will continue to shift as we open our eyes to the ongoing harms of colonialism, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Further, it may be important for institutions to intentionally collect information to gain a better understanding of what factors impact help-seeking among international students. For example, post-secondary institutions could look at how international students' level of trust in mental health practitioners may be impacted by experiences of oppression and colonization⁸ as historically, medical practices and research have violated and oppressed people of colour in the name of scientific advancement.⁹ Additionally, Western medicine has been regarded as the "standard", while other understandings of wellness (Traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine) may not be considered valid forms of healing.⁹

That being said, ease of access is also important in supporting international students' mental health and wellbeing. Incorporating mental health services into primary care spaces may provide a way for international students to explore mental health services more discretely as we work to fully disman-

tle the stigma.⁸

Embedding cultural safety into policy is also important. For example, HR policies and procedures should be designed and/or refined so that post-secondary institutions can attract and retain diverse mental health staff. These policies can also mandate an introduction to cultural safety during orientation for new staff/ faculty.

Limitations

The cultural safety framework has limitations and concerns. In our research for this article, we have found that cultural safety and its related tools and approaches have been mainly studied as they relate to Indigenous populations. The articles referenced in this piece mainly focused on research done in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand where Indigenous populations have been historically and presently subjected to the complex and violent processes of settler-colonialism. To that end, with the acknowledgement that the current research on cultural safety and its impact on mental health exists largely in the context of indigeneity and settler-colonialism. Specific research must be done to see if cultural safety is effective in improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for international students studying in Canada.

However, cultural safety developed as a response to settler-colonialism is not entirely separate from the context of international students. Many students who come to Canada to study have come from places that have been impacted by colonialism, which have experienced effects similar to settler-colonial systems. In some cases, this has directly or indirectly created a situation in which they must go abroad to seek education and opportunities. This leaves some international students doubly impacted by colonialism both in their home country and in Canada.

Further, a whole campus approach involves acknowledging and perhaps dismantling deeply entrenched power structures. This process is hard and will require buy-in from those who directly and indirectly receive privilege from these systems. It also involves the uncomfortable and at times painful process of acknowledging our personal role in causing harm.

Cultural Safety Spotlights

The following are examples of how bringing cultural safety into the community can lead to improved health and mental health outcomes for service users.

Mindfully Muslim – Dr. Yusra Ahmad¹⁰

Dr. Yusra Ahmad, an academic psychiatrist from the University of Toronto and founder of the Mindfully Muslim group program, took a unique approach to support newcomers. While most therapeutic programs are secular and do not embed religion or spirituality, Dr. Ahmad created a program that offers mindfulness-based interventions that intertwine Islamic wisdom, teachings, and imagery. Offered at a mosque, this program recognizes the participant's identity as part of the recovery process. Dr. Ahmad has made a great impact in the Muslim newcomer community through this program.

Community Health Fair – Black Medical Students' Association¹¹

When the Black Medical Students' Association (BMSA) at the University of Alberta noticed that underserved communities weren't actively seeking health supports, they began hosting community health fairs that brought health care to the community, and in a more relaxed, non-clinical setting. The Community Health Fairs included bringing cancer screening services, dentistry booths, and various types of doctors. The results were that community members were able to ac-

cess crucial health care and information. By recognizing that service users will not always seek the support they need due to a variety of concerns, including how culturally safe and inclusive healthcare settings are, BMSA was able to deliver care to service users who would otherwise have remained underserved.

Cultural Safety: The Professional Portfolio – Schulich Medicine & Dentistry, Western University¹²

Students enrolled in the undergraduate medical program at Western University have the opportunity to engage with mentors through a yearlong mentorship program in their first three years of school. The mentorship is rooted in cultural safety with the specific aim to help students gain a better understanding of their "underlying assumptions and facilitate awareness of alternative perspectives"¹². The program also helps students to learn the principles of culturally competent care, the importance of meeting the healthcare needs of underserved populations, and recognize the pervasiveness of healthcare disparities.

Conclusion

International students are a vulnerable population that needs our continuous support, especially given the turbulent and challenging nature of this phase of their lives. Supporting their mental health by embedding cultural safety is a fundamental and important way to acknowledge the inherent power dynamics in mental health care and international students' overall experiences within post-secondary spaces. A focus on cultural safety will not only benefit international students by fully supporting them and making services accessible to them, but it can also benefit the whole campus as the needs of diverse students and staff evolve.

¹⁰ Omole, Mojola. "Let's Talk about Culturally Sensitive Treatments for Depression." The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/lets-talk-about-culturally-sensitive-treatments-for-depression-90387>.

¹¹ "Community Health Fair Provides Culturally Safe and Inclusive Health Care." University of Alberta, accessed July 26, 2024, <https://www.ualberta.ca/medicine/news/2023/04/community-health-fair-provides-culturally-safe-and-inclusive-health-care.html>.

¹² "Cultural Safety" University of Western Ontario, Schulich Medicine, accessed August 29, 2024,

OUSA's **ADVOCACY PRIORITIES**

Investing in Post-Secondary Education

The provincial government should increase operating grants until students are contributing at most/a maximum of one-third of universities' total operating budget.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that university budgets be made publicly available on their institutional website and that HEQCO produces a yearly report that outlines each university's tuition revenue breakdown, with both documents being written in an accessible manner.

The provincial government should remove interest on all student loans, including past students who still owe provincial student loans.

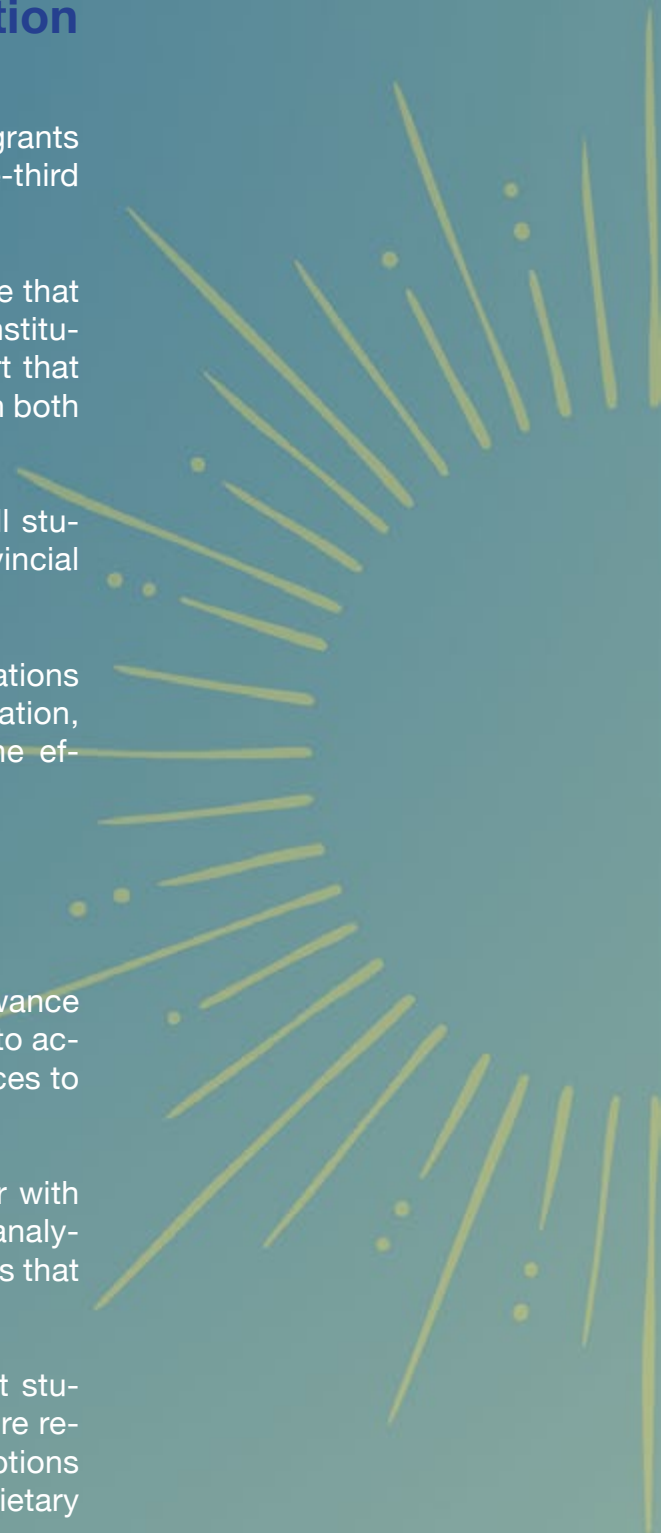
The provincial government should ensure OSAP calculations include indirect costs of accessing post-secondary education, particularly accounting for diverse backgrounds and the effects of systemic oppression, when distributing funding.

Food Insecurity

The provincial government should amend the Living Allowance under OSAP to allocate more funding for food expenses to account for inflation of prices and give students the resources to acquire the food options they want.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should partner with the Council of Ontario Universities to complete a system analysis of food insecurity and systems on university campuses that centers the voices and experiences of affected students.

The provincial government should establish a grant that student-run food banks can use to maintain the infrastructure required to provide nutritious and culturally relevant food options and food options that meet the requirements of various dietary restrictions (e.g., fridges and freezers).



2024-2025

Responses to Hate-Motivated Attacks

The provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions provide trauma-informed, accessible and anonymous reporting mechanisms available for all students who experience racial and religious discrimination in post-secondary institutions as well as establish clear and enforceable codes of conduct that explicitly prohibit racism and hate speech, and outline the consequences for violations.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that all institution-based mental health care providers receive training on providing accessible, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant counselling and referrals to diverse populations.

The provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions create a public plan within three years through responsible and meaningful consultation with students to create more compassionate, community-informed, and culturally and racially diverse campus safety models, including the re-allocation of funding from any existing and future campus security or policing budgets to student-led and community-led non-enforcement crisis intervention services, social services, and mental health supports on campuses.

Housing

The provincial government should introduce rent control/maximum rent increases between tenancies in high-turnover units as part of the rental increase limits described within the Residential Tenancies Act, 2006.

The provincial government should allocate additional funding to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities for expanding OSAP to include a grant program that provides students in-need with financial assistance specifically for their rental housing costs.

The provincial government should work with Legal Aid Ontario, municipalities, university administrators, as well as student association to adequately fund the promotion and reinforcement of tenant rights and responsibilities, with an emphasis on reaching international and non-official language speaking students.

