

International demand for academics in Canada outpacing funding supply

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Simona Chiose - EDUCATION
REPORTER

Watching the crackdown on protestors in Turkey four years ago, Ayca Koseoglu, then a recent MA graduate from a university in Ankara, had two thoughts.

"I thought there was no life in Turkey for people like me any more, for academics," said Ms. Koseoglu, who decided she had to go abroad to continue her education.

Her second thought was that she wanted to research how political movements used public space to stand up to repressive regimes, whether in Turkey, the Middle East or the United States.

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Those goals led her to McGill University and to work with associate professor Ipek Tureli, who studies the relationship between architecture and social justice.

"Public spaces are central to our ideal of democracy. Even if our representative democracy may not work, we can still show up in physical public spaces to express our desires and ideals," said Dr. Tureli, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Architectures of Spatial Justice and is supervising Ms. Koseoglu's work.

But after three years of a PhD, for which she won multiple grants, Ms. Koseoglu has now run out of funds to complete her field work and write her dissertation.

"I had trust in myself and that I would find the money to do the program," she said. "But now I can't move forward."

So Ms. Koseoglu has begun a campaign she calls "[Educating Ayca](#)" to raise the money she needs through crowd-funding. Her hope is that those who pitch in will also think about whether Canada and its postsecondary institutions can do more to help young scholars who are seeking refuge here, whether from an increasingly repressive regime in Turkey or from instability elsewhere.

"It's not only that I need that money, but our voices should be heard by the rest of Canada," Ms. Koseoglu said.

McGill University said in a statement that it will work with her to find other scholarships and resolve her situation.

But while there are hundreds of awards open to international students studying in Canada, the number pales compared to the demand.

After almost a decade of steady increases, many universities say applications to pursue graduate studies in Canada have jumped this year. Exact numbers are not collected nationally. But according to Statistics Canada figures analyzed by The Globe and Mail, the number of international students who were awarded MA and PhD degrees by Canadian universities doubled between 2008 and 2014, to approximately 12,500. (A total of 56,000 such diplomas were awarded in 2014, the last year for which numbers are available.)

"Much as it is exhilarating to see the growth in demand, it is disconcerting, because if it does not come with additional money, we are going to frustrate a larger number of students," said Britta Baron, the associate vice-president, international, at the University of Alberta, where graduate applications are up 82 per cent compared to last year.

The vast majority of Canadian research-intensive universities do not receive public money for international students, graduate or undergraduate. Alberta does not differentiate between domestic and international students in its funding, but the province is reviewing how it awards grants to universities and colleges. After intense lobbying two years ago, Ontario decided to provide grants for 133 PhD spots for international students, but discussions to increase that number are not advancing.

As a result, some universities are now exploring collaborations with universities in Europe or the United States to train young scholars from abroad. Such options will be discussed next month in Waterloo, Ont., at a meeting of Canadian senior administrators in charge of internationalization, the first such collective effort from the group.

"We all feel like we need to do something – not just about international graduate students – but from my point of view that is the most urgent area of action," Dr. Baron said.

Being able to respond to the increase in demand is particularly crucial now, because Canadian universities are recruiting from and seeing rising interest from poorer countries, others said. If a qualified student from Nigeria comes to Canada, it will change her life, and also possibly the trajectory of her country's future, said Jamie Mandigo, the vice-provost in charge of internationalization at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont.

"We are seeing increases from northern Africa, India, Pakistan, Ghana and Egypt, Mexico," he said. "Those markets don't have the financial resources other markets have, particularly in a place like Nigeria where the currency fluctuates constantly."

In response, Brock has started a new scholarship program for international students who are active in social causes, in addition to existing scholarships for students from emerging countries.

"There's a recognition that we are dealing with less stable financial markets than in the past, so universities are trying to respond to that by providing [aid]," he said.

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