

Ontario colleges in Saudi Arabia for men only

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TORONTO — Ontario's minister of post-secondary education says he's concerned that two publicly-funded Ontario colleges have opened campuses in Saudi Arabia that don't allow women.

On Wednesday, Colleges and Universities Minister Reza Moridi said decisions on the operation of a campus, including student composition, are up to each college's board of governors.

But late Thursday, after a lot of criticism on social media about the male-only campuses, the minister had a change of heart about Ontario colleges teaching courses that deliberately exclude women.

"I understand and appreciate the concern that has been raised in recent weeks around some of these international activities, particularly around two Ontario colleges running male-only campuses in Saudi Arabia," Moridi said in a statement to The Canadian Press. "I share those concerns."

Niagara College offers tourism, hospitality and business courses at its campus in Taif, and Algonquin College offers 10 programs, including business, accounting and electrical engineering technology, at a campus in the city of Jazan.

In addition, Toronto-based Centennial College offers a corporate training program for men only in Saudi Arabia.

The Ontario campuses in Saudi Arabia, and all education in the kingdom, operate under Sharia law and prohibit the teaching of men and women in the same classes.

Moridi said he wanted to meet with both colleges and also plans a conversation with all community colleges about the programs they deliver outside of Ontario.

"What has become clear is that further engagement needs to take place between the government and Ontario's college sector on this important issue," he said.

"I will be reaching out to Algonquin College and Niagara College immediately to receive a full update on their international activities."

Ontario provides \$1.44 billion in funding to its 24 community colleges, which accounts for only about 40 per cent of their budgets. Algonquin got \$103 million in provincial funding in 2014-15, while Niagara College received \$45 million. The colleges have to get the rest of their funding from tuition fees and other sources.

"They're desperate for ways to generate some dollars," said NDP post-secondary critic Peggy Sattler. "But we shouldn't have Ontario colleges partnering with repressive regimes that have a history of gender-based violence."

Niagara College said opening a Saudi campus was an opportunity to expand access to education there and enhance its own reputation, and it expects to generate \$4 million over five years from its classes in Taif.

"The campus opportunity that most closely aligns with our key areas of specialization is the campus with a hospitality and tourism focus," said college spokeswoman Susan McConnell. "This campus provides education to male students."

Algonquin College announced in 2013 that it hoped to have 2,000 students at its campus in Saudi Arabia and expected to generate annual revenues of more than \$25 million. But a spokesman for the Ottawa-based college refused Thursday to provide any update on the school's operations.

"We have no new information to provide other than what is already publicly available," Algonquin's Phil Gaudreau said in an email.

The Ontario Public Sector Employees Union calls the establishment of the Canadian campuses in Saudi Arabia an endorsement of discrimination against women.

"The Wynne government's shameful neglect and underfunding of its 24 community colleges has forced them to seek alternative sources of funding, even to making deals with a country that carries out mass executions as a means of stifling democracy," said OPSEU president Smokey Thomas.

Jack Wilson of OPSEU local 415 at Algonquin said the college's board of governors fell into an awkward silence after one member asked how comfortable they were establishing a Saudi campus that would teach only men.

"You could see that people didn't think this question was going to be asked," Wilson said in an interview. "But that got me thinking, what are we doing operating a campus where women are deliberately excluded?"

The controversy comes as the federal government faces pressure to kill a \$15-billion sale of Ontario-made LAV3 vehicles to the kingdom.

The sale came under fire after Saudi Arabia executed 47 alleged terrorists Jan. 1, but the Trudeau government says it won't cancel the deal made by the previous Conservative administration.

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