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PhD studies in Canada: A dilemma for international students

In Canada, international students working on their PhD are given funding for four years. After that, they are on their own.

By STEPHANIE KAPUSTA + CRISTINA ROADEVIN | August 23, 2011

44 Comments

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Canadian society and the Canadian academy are proud of their openness and diversity. Every year, thousands of international students are encouraged to embark upon undergraduate and graduate studies at Canadian institutes of higher education. Indeed, the drive amongst Canadian universities to attract top-quality international students in greater numbers is intensifying. And yet, there is a significant systemic problem for those international students in the arts and humanities who undertake doctoral studies in Canada.

These PhD candidates are encouraged to complete their degree in four years and, with but few exceptions, funding generally isn't provided beyond this period. But looking at studies on PhD completion times at

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Canadian universities, it is clear that the vast majority of students do not finish in four years: the average post-master's completion time is about five years, according to a [2003 report by Frank Elgar](#) (PDF).

This is a worrying statistic. It shows a misalignment between the expectations of university authorities and the lived reality of PhD students. It is worrying for Canadian PhD candidates, and certainly causes hardship to those Canadians who do not complete their degrees before their funding expires. But for international students, **the situation is dramatic**.

University fees for international students are approximately twice those of Canadian students. At the University of Western Ontario, for example, the 2011-12 fall term costs \$2,836 for a Canadian student, but **more than twice that**, at \$5,807, for an international student. While funding is secure, of course, this difference is barely felt. The drama unfolds when funding runs out.

International students who cannot pay their fees are unable to prove to Immigration Canada that they have sufficient funds to remain in the country. They are faced with having to leave Canada without a degree, after four years of hard work, with little prospect of completing a doctoral program at another institution.

In the past, many savvy international PhD candidates would apply for permanent residence in Canada so as to pay the much lower resident fees once their funding had expired. But since the summer of 2010, this is no longer possible: the provincial nominee program in Ontario, for example, specifies that candidates are eligible to be nominated for residence only *after* completion of their PhD degree.

Thus, under current conditions, international PhD candidates must confront the stark prospect of having to leave empty-handed. This situation causes much anxiety and distress. Not only do international students have to deal with issues of culture and language differences and homesickness, but they must also deal with the added pressure of having to be, on average, faster at completing their studies than their Canadian colleagues. Some manage to do this. Others will fall by the wayside, or else submit a thesis which they know is below academic standards.

What is it about international students that makes their pockets intrinsically better lined with money? Placements and funding at

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Canadian universities, we are told, are accorded on merit. But in practice it will be those international students who can *pay* who will be academically more successful. Or, international students are tacitly expected to be superior academically than their Canadian colleagues. This is not a “culture of completion” as university authorities tell us, but a “culture of discrimination.”

It is the universities that are at fault. There is no logic in limiting funding to four years if it is patently obvious that most students in the arts and humanities are not completing their degrees within those time constraints. Unfortunately, it is our experience that university authorities adopt an attitude of “our hands are tied,” blaming other university bodies, or the provincial or federal government.

Some tentative steps are being taken by universities to curtail completion times. But what is required is a greater determination to confront the systemic dilemma that international PhD students face. Otherwise, we fear, international students may be discouraged from studying in Canada and Canadian universities may forfeit the very diversity they so yearn for.

Stephanie Kapusta and Cristina Roadevin are PhD candidates at the University of Western Ontario.

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COMMENTS

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44 Comments

Just_Saying / September 7, 2011 at 2:45 pm

Universities are now run by a professional “administrative” class, which is less committed to the university’s mission to expand and disseminate knowledge (through research and teaching) as it is to the promotion of institution in international rankings of prestige and of generating income. As a case in point, I note that almost every Ontario University, including my own, has had large contingents of senior administrators make lengthy junkets to China and India in the past year for to promote the institution.

Two issues concern me about the sincerity of administration promoting our schools abroad. First, if increasing diversity is the point, then there must be real action taken to allow international students to complete their degrees (funding must be available for an additional year) and to integrate into local life (e.g. spouses need to be able to work here). Secondly, our standards for academic integrity must not be compromised in the name of securing continued tuition for full-fee paying undergraduates. I have had the experience of being unable to fail a student for repeated plagiarism because (so the argument goes) he faced pressure to succeed/cultural differences in acceptable conduct. I don’t buy these arguments. I fear that we are being told to turn a blind eye to conduct that as educators we need to correct (through counselling for anxiety or additional training on proper citation) because we don’t want to jeopardize the incoming fees.

Reply

Charlton / April 29, 2012 at 12:59 am

While it is a genuine concern (comment above) that we need not and should not “dilute” academic standards just to accommodate more incoming international fees, we cannot generalize. Every international student may not be plagiarizing as

not every Canadian citizen/PR is not an “academic saint”. There are bad apples everywhere and we must treat them as such without labeling them as “local” vs. “international”.

One way to address this mismatch between number of years of funding and completion of Ph.D. programme is to cap the number of years of a student’s registration at four years; if he/she does not finish by the specified period, he/she should register once again – afresh. But it should be an exception rather than a rule. The professor must share some part of the blame as to why did the student fail to complete the degree within the given time frame. At least he/she must convincingly explain to the university academic administration the circumstances that led to student’s inability to complete the research work successfully. To do this, it may be essential to have a research advisory committee (of at least two more professors) for a Ph.D. candidate who can monitor and evaluate a student’s performance at least at the end of every six months. This would keep a Ph.D. student on rails and also avoid laxity on the part of the supervisor, if any. The University can have as many international students as it wants and is good for its cultural diversity as well as its financial health.

Reply

Canadian / **May 2, 2012 at 1:24 pm**

I completed a PhD at a smaller Canadian University (University of New Brunswick), and had to pay my own tuition, international service fee, and health care (as you are not covered under medicare). This means about 50% of your annual salary is going to tuition + health care.

Reply

International / **May 9, 2012 at 2:07 pm**

While I only completed my first year as international PhD student in Canada, I indeed am already worried about this issue, in particular, since my university only offered me funding for the first three years. Also it seems worth noting that international students are not allowed to work outside of their university. Many of my colleagues are looking for part-time jobs at CEGEPs (I am in Quebec), an opportunity that is closed to me as well.

Reply

Julia / **May 9, 2015 at 11:30 pm**

There are no jobs in Canada, anyway. Are you going to work in Tim Hortons? It is very difficult to get there, too, anyway. Crowds of newcomers are coming and coming and there are no jobs for them. On campus, you can work for some professors and you are paid much more.

Reply

David / **June 12, 2012 at 3:04 pm**

The commenter “International” mentions one of the greatest barriers that international students face in the completion of their PhD: when scholarships run out domestic students can find outside work to fund the completion of their studies, but because of visa restrictions international students cannot. Usually the international students’ only recourse is to return to their countries of origin, which dramatically decreases the likelihood of degree completion. Such a consequence benefits no one: not the university, not the department, not the student.

Make excuses for university administrators if you must, but the fact remains that it is highly unethical to invite a student to study in Canada without funding them for a realistic duration of study.

Reply

Joshua Rodrigues / **December 4, 2012 at 4:05 am**

Australia is no different from Canada. The educational system is two-tiered with education a matter of fundamental right for Aussies and a passport for a better future for international students and a matter of privilege.

The Australian higher educational system is highly discriminatory in the way it promotes domestic students at the cost of scientific rigour. For example, local students have no time limits to submit their degree. International students owing to visa regulations have to submit their theses in three years. If unsuccessful in finishing up in three years, they are expected to cough up ridiculously high fees. If a local student does not complete her/his degree, the university is held accountable to ensure that the student finishes her/his degree but in the case of international students the university is not answerable to ensure that their degree is completed in a timely manner. The university rules militate against the principles of science and are to an extent racist!

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