

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BACKGROUND

International students are valuable members of a university community, and bring a range of benefits to Ontario. These include economic impacts - contributing \$2.9 billion to the provincial economy and creating just under 30,000 jobs¹ – as well as contributing to diverse and vibrant classrooms and communities.

Both governments and institutions have recognized the value of international students: for example, in 2014 the federal government set a target of doubling the number of international students in Canada by 2022.

However, strategies to “internationalize” Ontario’s campuses must focus on more than the economic benefits to be derived from increasing numbers of international students. Rather it is crucial that the academic success and welfare of international students is at the heart of these conversations, as well as consideration of how to implement supports that make our campuses more diverse and welcoming spaces.

In addition, OUSA’s vision for increased internationalization includes the benefits for Canadian students studying abroad, and calls for increased supports to expand opportunities to do so.

AREAS OF CONCERN

Tuition

On average, international students in Ontario pay 265 per cent more in tuition than domestic students, paying average fees of \$21,314.44 compared to \$5,808.16.² International tuition in Ontario is deregulated, and can be subject to unpredictable year-to-year increases: for example, at McMaster University international tuition rose by 32.2 per cent in 2012-13 and by 11.6 per cent in 2013-14.³ These factors can make it difficult for international students to budget: OUSA’s 2013 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey found that 68 per cent of international students found their tuition costs unpredictable.

Further, OUSA believes there is insufficient transparency about the ways in which international tuition is spent, and

whether students’ money is being invested in services that directly support international student success.

Student Financial Assistance

In addition to high tuition costs, there is limited needs-based financial assistance available to international students. Subsequently, the vast majority of international students come from upper-middle and high-income backgrounds, indicating that qualified international students from low-income backgrounds may not view studying in Canada as a viable option.

Immigration and Visas

Dealing with immigration and visa issues can be a particular source of stress for international students, particularly in the case of delays in visa processing. Compounding this issue, legislation passed in 2011 has meant that international student advisors are no longer able to provide immigration advice,⁴ meaning students access to immigration advice in a familiar environment and at low cost has been compromised.

Health Coverage

Since 1994, international students have been barred from enrolling in the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) and instead are required to enroll in a private plan, the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) administered through Sun Life Financial. The cost of UHIP can add another financial burden for financial students, with single students paying \$684 annually, and costs rising to over \$2000 for a student with two or more dependents.

This arrangement compares unfavourably to peer jurisdictions: four Canadian provinces allow access to provincial health plans free of charge, while three of the top four host countries for international students provide public health care to international students.

Student Support

International students arrive in Ontario with a vast range of lived experiences, and varying levels of need for support. As international enrollment grows, it is crucial that institutions invest in high quality support services targeted at international students to ensure their academic success and their well-being.

¹ Roslyn Kunin & Associates (2012) *Economic Impact of International Education – An Update*. Presented to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade by school. Data compiled from the Common University Data Ontario, Council of Ontario Universities, Association of Universities and Colleges Canada, and institutional websites.
² Calculated using Council of Ontario Universities Common University Data Ontario (2011, 2012, 2013)

⁴ Unless they hold a law degree or are a member in good standing with the Immigration Consultants of Canada Regulatory Council.

Recruitment and Admissions

OUSA believes that internationalization strategies should only be pursued under the assurance of providing quality education, for example through ensuring international branch campuses are quality assured, and through seeking to attract the most qualified students to study in Ontario regardless of the location of their home country.

Outbound Students

Studying abroad has been shown to have positive benefits for students, including increased employability, effectiveness, and global knowledge and awareness. These experiences will be increasingly important to Canada as increasingly global markets impact our competitiveness. However, despite the documented benefits of study abroad, relatively few Canadians are pursuing these opportunities, with only 2.2 per cent studying abroad in 2006. This compares to 33 per cent of German students, 15 per cent of Australian students, and 9 per cent of US students.⁵

Potential barriers to studying abroad include: inadequate support services; lack of awareness of benefits; concerns regarding affordability; and concerns about disrupting studies or being unable to transfer credits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OUSA recommends that the following strategies be adopted to ensure internationalization agendas are implemented in such a way that support student success, and ensure Ontario remains an attractive destination for international students:

Regulate international student tuition to ensure international students are not paying more than the real cost of their education.

- International student tuition should be regulated within the Ontario Tuition Framework, and tuition should be equal to domestic tuition, government grants, and inclusive of any additional costs for the provision of services specifically targeted at international students;
- International student tuition should be regulated in cohorts to ensure predictability;
- Institutions should commit to greater accountability regarding the spending of international student tuition.

Increase needs-based financial assistance available to international students.

- Institutions should adopt a set-aside of international student tuition to provide for needs based financial assistance;
- The provincial government and/or institutions should commit to establishing targeted financial assistance for students with refugee status;
- Ontario should seek to retain talented international students through a tuition rebate for international students who gain permanent

residency in the province through the Provincial Nominee Program.

Mitigate undue stress related to visas and immigration.

- The provincial government must ensure there is a transparent criteria for institutions that are able to admit international students;
- If a student is unable to attend an Ontario university due to visa processing delays, any visa or application fees should be reimbursed to the student;
- International student advisors should be able to gain a fast-track certification in order to resume advising students regarding immigration issues;
- International students should have pathways to gain citizenship without undue hardship.

Ensure international students have access to high quality, affordable health care.

- The provincial government should allow international students to enroll in OHIP – international students should contribute fair and proportional costs equivalent to amounts paid by domestic students;
- As long as UHIP exists, the UHIP steering committee must have significant international student representation;
- Expanded cultural sensitivity training should be offered for on-campus healthcare providers.

Protect Ontario's reputation as an educational leader in post-secondary education.

- Ensure admissions standards are not bypassed by private, for-profit international colleges;
- Create an international branch campus quality assurance framework;
- Focus on admitting the most qualified students regardless of country of origin.

Explore strategies to increase the numbers of Canadian students able to pursue study abroad opportunities.

- The provincial government should encourage more students in Ontario to study abroad;
- Institutions should invest in providing comprehensive study abroad support for outbound and prospective outbound students;
- Institutions should provide clear assessment for the transferability of courses prior to a student's study abroad departure;
- Institutions should commit to the full recognition of credit gained by Canadian students while undertaking study abroad at exchange institutions.

⁵ CBIE (2012) *Facts and Figures*. <http://www.cbie-bcei.ca/about-ie/facts-and-figures/>