

Wynne: Male-only Ont. colleges in Saudi Arabia 'unacceptable'

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TORONTO -- It is "unacceptable" for publicly funded Ontario colleges to operate campuses outside Canada that exclude women, the premier of Ontario said Friday when asked about two men-only schools in Saudi Arabia.

Ontario post-secondary institutions have a duty to ensure those programs offer equal access to women and men, added Kathleen Wynne.

"That is, I think, the minimum we expect in 2016," she said. "As soon as I found out there was a possibility that women weren't being offered programs, I asked questions about it, and it's unacceptable to me."

Niagara College and Ottawa-based Algonquin College opened men-only campuses two years ago in two cities in Saudi Arabia, where Sharia law forbids the education of women and men in the same classes.

Algonquin issued a statement Friday saying the college has always been open about its activities in Saudi Arabia, and is "seeking clarification" of the premier's comments.

"(We) will have more to say on this topic when we have that clarification," Algonquin spokesman Scott Anderson said in an email.

"Since the beginning, Algonquin has been open and transparent about the college's work in Saudi Arabia, announcing each new step and providing regular updates to our Board and to the Ontario government, which approved this international expansion."

Algonquin was the successful bidder for the male-only campus in the city of Jazan in 2013, but lost out in a second wave of bidding to open a women's college in Saudi Arabia, added Andereson.

"We are exploring options to open a female campus in the future," he said.

Wynne suggested Friday that she still wasn't sure women were barred from classes at the Saudi campuses of Niagara and Algonquin colleges.

"My understanding is the minister is looking at it, and if women don't have access to programs, then that's got to change," she said. "And if they don't, then that's another conversation that has to be had with both Niagara and Algonquin."

Colleges and Universities Minister Reza Moridi, who earlier said it was up to colleges to determine the student makeup on their campuses, expressed concerns Thursday that women were excluded from the Ontario-run programs.

Moridi's office confirmed Friday that both Algonquin and Niagara followed the Ministry's "binding policy

directive on entrepreneurial activities" before setting up the male-only Saudi campuses, but would not say if the minister approved their plans.

Wynne said she told Moridi to immediately meet with the two colleges to discuss the situation.

"My understanding is that at the beginning of this process when the two colleges were setting up this program, there was a discussion about women having access," she said.

The Progressive Conservatives said Wynne and Moridi should have known from the start what Niagara and Algonquin were up to with their Saudi programs.

"I would have to view it as, to use her phrase, a stretch for her not to have been aware that for two years these colleges have been operating in Saudi Arabia under a program where only men were allowed as students," said PC critic John Yakabuski.

"They had to be aware of this, but acted only because there's a story in the media."

New Democrat post-secondary education critic Peggy Sattler said colleges get the majority of their funding from tuition fees and other sources of revenue, but went too far expanding to Saudi Arabia without making sure women had access to their programs.

"They're making agreements to create campuses in places where Ontario's commitment to equality and ending gender-based violence is not respected," she said.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union called the male-only campuses "gender apartheid," and said it was happy to hear Wynne called the situation unacceptable.

"One of the things I hope she does do, in addition to really taking a good hard look at this, is look at increasing the funding for post-secondary institutions as well," said Ravi Ramkissoonsingh of OPSEU local 242 at Niagara College. "She seems to think now that this is unacceptable, which is certainly our view."

Ontario provides \$1.44 billion in funding to its 24 community colleges, with Algonquin getting \$103 million for the current fiscal year, while Niagara College received \$45 million. The government says it has increased per-student funding to colleges by 36 per cent since the Liberals were first elected in 2003.