

Ontario government approved male-only Saudi Arabia campuses: minister Add to ...



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Keith Leslie

The Ontario government said Monday it allowed two provincial colleges to create male-only campuses in Saudi Arabia, but added that gap in the approval process will be closed.

Reza Moridi, minister of colleges and universities, said that Niagara and Algonquin Colleges applied to his ministry to establish the two Saudi campuses, and were given the green light by a previous minister in 2008 and 2012.

However, Moridi said the province's responsibility was to approve financial plans for the two Saudi expansions and it was up to the colleges to determine who was admitted.

"We see there is a gap in the process between the parts that are left for the boards of governors at the colleges to approve and the other parts that are on the government's side to approve," he said.

"We want to talk with the sector to make sure that gap is eliminated."

John Milloy, Moridi's predecessor as minister of training, colleges and universities when Algonquin and Niagara applied to open their Saudi campuses, said he doesn't remember any discussions about them excluding women from classes.

"I do not ever recall any talk of a male-only campus," Milloy said in an email to The Canadian Press.

Premier Kathleen Wynne said Friday she'd just learned that the Saudi campuses of the two Ontario colleges did not admit women, a situation she called "unacceptable" as she asked Moridi to investigate.

The opposition parties called it a "stretch" for Wynne to say she didn't know that Algonquin and Niagara were operating male-only Saudi campuses.

"She was part of the cabinet all those years and premier for three years, and that this is news (to the premier) is really quite disconcerting," said NDP post-secondary critic Peggy Sattler. "If they didn't know, why not?"

Algonquin said it lost a bid to establish a women's college in Saudi Arabia — where Shariah law forbids educating men and women in the same class — and questioned Wynne's criticism of its male-only campus in the city of Jazan.

"We are seeking clarification around the premier's comments and will have more to say on this topic when we have that clarification," said Algonquin's Scott Anderson.

"Since the beginning, Algonquin has been open and transparent about the college's work in Saudi Arabia ... providing regular updates to our board and to the Ontario government."

Niagara College said it trained 120 women in medical office administration at the King Faisal Speciality Hospital and Research Centre in Saudi Arabia, but its campus in the city of Taif offers programs for men

only.

Moridi wouldn't say if Algonquin and Niagara would have to shut their Saudi operations if they can't also open women's colleges in the kingdom.

"We are in the process of talking to the sector and then we will get to that," he said.

"We are going to have a conversation with the college and university sector to make sure that our internationalization policy will be based on the norms and the culture which we follow."

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union, which represents faculty at the colleges, said it has been writing Wynne for eight months to oppose the Saudi campuses because of that country's "terrible" human rights record.

The union and the opposition parties said Ontario colleges are chronically underfunded and are turning to international expansion projects to raise badly needed money.

Ontario provides \$1.44 billion in funding to its 24 community colleges, with Algonquin getting \$103 million in the current fiscal year and Niagara College \$45 million.

The government said it has increased per-student funding to colleges by 36 per cent since the Liberals were first elected in 2003.