

Shifting the discourse around International Students in Postsecondary Education

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“Ontario welcomes international students because of the diverse perspectives they bring to our institutions of higher learning.”

- ontarioimmigration.ca

Throughout the summer, I have often found myself in discussions about international students. During these discussions I have constantly heard about the “benefits” these individuals bring to Canadian universities described as “unique perspectives in class discussions” or “a significant economic impact.” This is true – international students do provide immeasurable benefits; however, they also face significant barriers while attending our institutions. We need to start shifting our focus from the benefits these students bring, to ways that we can help them succeed while they are attending our institutions.

Often times, the majority of discussions surrounding these students are focused on the cost of their tuition. It is widely known that international students pay more than domestic students. This is understandable, due to the well-known fact that institutions do not receive operating capital or research funding for international students. That being said, institutions should be charging these students the real cost of attending their school, rather than using international students as a cost-recovery model. To address this, the government should regulate international student tuition to ensure that these students are being charged a fair amount for their education.

Another issue that often goes undiscussed is international student healthcare. Since 1994, international students in Ontario have been barred from enrolling in the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, instead enrolling in the University Health Insurance Plan. This not only adds a significant financial burden on this group of students, but also provides them with second-tier healthcare service. The government should allow these students to enroll in the Ontario Health Insurance Plan at a fair and proportional cost that is equivalent to the amount paid by domestic students. Every student in Ontario should receive the same treatment and quality of care at any medical institution.

What about immigration? The Province of Ontario, as well as other provinces across the country, needs to encourage the federal government to allow international students to gain Canadian citizenship without undue hardship. These students contribute billions of dollars to our economy, and are earning a high quality education from our schools. Doesn't it make sense to allow them to use the talents they develop at our institutions, right here in Ontario?

While these are just a few examples of issues surrounding this group of students, they are a sign that discussions surrounding the issues these students have need to shift away from focusing on tuition, and must look at the broader picture. Additionally, the public discourse needs to shift from how international students benefit the Province of Ontario and its institutions, to how Ontario and its institutions can help them succeed while studying. This is not a one-way street; in order for Ontario to remain competitive with other Canadian provinces, significant changes need to be implemented to make Ontario universities more appealing to our international friends and classmates. We need to make sure that these students are provided with a welcoming, supportive environment alongside their high-quality educational experience.

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