



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 140,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

## POLICY BRIEF: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & EDUCATION

International education comprises several elements: increased international student access and retention within domestic institutions, growth in numbers of domestic students pursuing opportunities to study abroad, and diversifying institutional administration, staff, faculty, and services to promote internationalization. It is imperative that the Government of Ontario takes steps to enhance each of these areas in order to internationalize its university sector and remain competitive with other jurisdictions around the world.

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Deregulated tuition rates and lack of financial assistance**

International students should have the same predictability in their annual tuition costs as domestic students, and should only be paying for the true cost of their education. However, due to deregulation, international students are forced to disproportionately bear the rising cost of university operations, particularly in light of declining provincial funding. This is compounded by the fact that very few financial assistance options are available to international undergraduate students in Ontario.

#### **Inadequate career advising and access to the labour market**

International students should benefit from targeted career advising from staff familiar with current federal and provincial work permit policies and legislation. Yet, on-campus career advising is predominantly geared towards domestic students and the guidance provided by career advisors is not always up-to-date. International students should also have similar employment prospects as their domestic peers post-graduation. Nevertheless, employers often look globally for skilled foreign workers, rather than looking at Ontario's international student population. International students are also burdened with paying a \$1500 application fee to apply through the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program.

#### **Inflexible study and work permits**

International students should not have their study permits negatively impacted by academic disruptions, such as strikes. Unfortunately, such events impact the ability of international students to complete their studies due to the restrictive length of their permits. Government policy should also not restrict Ontario's international student graduates from accessing employment opportunities. However, complicated government policies often make it difficult for international students to gain the credentials

required to obtain employment. As a result, many employers opt to avoid hiring international students due to difficulties in following appropriate onboarding processes.

#### **Limited health coverage and student oversight**

International students must have access to affordable health services in Ontario for the duration of their studies. However, international students are automatically enrolled into the University Health Insurance Plan, wherein costs are unregulated and increases are unpredictable. These costs can be unaffordable, and excluded service offerings may result in additional fees for international students. Furthermore, students may not choose to seek out medical care if additional costs are unknown. There is currently also a lack of international student representation on the University Health Insurance Plan's steering committee.

#### **Insufficient support services and cultural integration**

All international students in Ontario should be adequately supported during their studies through well-resourced offices that provide access to training and support resources. Nevertheless, the quality of programming varies between institutions and some institutions do not provide critical services. Rising international enrolment has yet to bring about increased investment in international student support services, leading to negative pressures on service delivery. International students should also be able to access support services that are culturally appropriate and welcoming to all international students, regardless of language spoken, ethnicity or religion. Nevertheless, international students often struggle to integrate with domestic students and faculty members due to language barriers, while also being victims of racism.

#### **Inaccessible foreign exchange and credit transfer**

Ontario's domestic students should be able to take advantage of study abroad opportunities regardless of family income. However, domestic students are declining

these opportunities due to both real and perceived financial barriers. Students studying abroad through exchange agreements should also receive full recognition of completed course credits. Unfortunately, many credits students earn on exchange do not get recognized or transfer back to their home institutions in Ontario.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Regulate fair and predictable international tuition**

The provincial government should regulate annual in-program international students' tuition rate increases at the same percentage as domestic tuition. Furthermore, the provincial government should mandate that international students' tuition rates be predicated on the cost of their education—as calculated and defined by the Ministry—throughout the length of their degree.

#### **Establish an international tuition set-aside program**

The provincial government should mandate that a tuition set-aside – valued at the same percentage as the domestic set-aside – be established from international student tuition in order to provide needs-based financial aid for international undergraduate students. This would ensure that international students from diverse income backgrounds can access the Ontario university sector.

#### **Improve access to employment and immigration**

The Ministry should, through Strategic Mandate Agreements, provide increased funding for career advising tailored towards international students. At the same time, the provincial government should develop tax credits to encourage employers to sponsor international student graduates through the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program. For graduates of Ontario universities, specifically, the provincial government should delay the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program's \$1500 application fee until one year following their initial offer of employment.

#### **Create more flexible study and work permits**

The Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration should work with the Federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to provide international student graduates with easier access to work visas, as well as tie the length of study permits to the length of the degree program selected by students. Furthermore, in the case of an academic disruption, these Ministries should also develop a process wherein study permit extensions are offered to international students in the event of unexpected academic disruptions, and mandate that Ontario universities must refund international students if they are forced to withdraw due to delays caused by labour interruptions, which inhibit the completion of academic terms.

#### **Provide affordable health coverage through OHIP**

The provincial government should allow international

students to pay a premium, equitable to that of the domestic population, to receive coverage through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan. To achieve affordable and equitable coverage, the provincial government should consult with British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba on best practices for the implementation of provincial health coverage for international students in Ontario. In the interim, international student representation should be included on the University Health Insurance Plan steering committee via mandate from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development.

#### **Develop best practice models for student support services**

The Ministry should work with the Council of Ontario Universities to make recommendations regarding the implementation of best practice models for supporting international students. At the same time, the provincial government should provide requisite funding to post-secondary institutions that commit through their Strategic Mandate Agreement to provide a robust offering of international student support services. Similarly, the provincial government should mandate that any institution committed to internationalization through their Strategic Mandate Agreements ensure a proportion of international student tuition is used towards funding support services for international students.

#### **Incentivize cultural integration and internationalization**

The provincial government should mandate that institutions that prioritize internationalization within their Strategic Mandate Agreements provide comprehensive, yearlong programming that actively promotes integration between domestic and international students. It should also be mandated to provide cultural and religious sensitivity training for all front-line health workers on campus (such as doctors, psychiatrists, therapists) based on best practice models. The Ministry should also work with the Council of Ontario Universities to make recommendations regarding the implementation of cultural awareness, language support and anti-racism training for students, staff, and faculty members. Finally, the Council of Ontario Universities should administer and collect data on international student retention, success, and supports through a climate survey.

#### **Enhance accessibility and mobility of study abroad opportunities**

The provincial government should create an International Experiences Grant to provide needs-based funding for Ontario students participating in for-credit study-abroad experiences. Concurrently, the provincial government should task the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer to improve credit transfer pathways between international institutions and Ontario universities, which will benefit domestic students studying abroad, as well as international students seeking higher education in Ontario.