



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

POLICY BRIEF: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

International students provide unique perspectives that enrich higher education across the province. It is imperative that we give these students the support they need so that they can maintain their mental and physical health, sustain themselves financially, excel academically, and pursue their career goals.

Unfortunately, international students continue to face several issues, including unregulated tuition, minimal financial assistance, expensive healthcare costs, unregulated recruitment practices, and a lack of work-integrated learning opportunities. There are also several aspects of exchange programs that need improvement, including financial aid, quality assurance, and student support services.

THE PROBLEM

Unregulated Tuition and Lack of Financial Assistance

International tuition fees are often unpredictable from one year to the next, making it difficult for international students to manage their finances. The recent domestic tuition freeze, coupled with a lack of increases to provincial operating grants, has also encouraged institutions to raise international tuition at high rates. In addition, there are disproportionately fewer scholarships and bursary opportunities for international students with financial need, which prevents qualified students from studying in Ontario. International students may also face unique costs outside of tuition, increasing their need for financial aid. Similarly, there is a lack of provincially funded financial aid available to international students who display academic excellence or who wish to come to Canada as a refugee.

Inflexible Study Permits

Because of the restrictive length of study permits, strikes and other academic disruptions disproportionately affect the ability of international students to complete their studies. Extenuating personal circumstances and the availability of accommodations can also increase the amount of time it takes for an international student to complete their degree program. Currently, study permits are not designed to take these circumstances into account.

Restricted Access to Work-Integrated Learning, Labour Markets, and Residency

Work-integrated learning (WIL) gives international students the opportunity to apply theoretical principles and develop skills before entering the workforce. Unfortunately, funding for research projects, co-ops, and internships is disproportionately available to domestic students. When they do secure WIL opportunities, international students may face difficulty communicating with others and may not receive enough support from supervisors.

After graduation, complicated government policies often make it difficult for international students to gain the credentials they need to find employment and obtain permanent residency. This process has been made particularly challenging by the closure of the “Employer Job Offer: International Students” stream of the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP), and many employers avoid hiring international students because it is difficult to follow the appropriate onboarding processes.

Limited Health Coverage and Mental Health Support

University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) costs are unreasonably high, especially when compared to fees in other provinces, and excluded services may result in additional fees for international students. Some may choose not to seek out medical care if additional costs are unknown. UHIP also operates on a reimbursement model, which requires students to pay upfront for medical expenses incurred outside of UHIP’s preferred provider network. Further, the processes surrounding

the UHIP Steering Committee are unclear and may not include adequate student consultation or representation.

International students also face unique mental health challenges as a result of living far from home and adjusting to adult life in a new country. Language barriers and cultural stigma can prevent these students from receiving effective mental health care, and campus mental health professionals may not be adequately trained in how to care for international students effectively.

Insufficient International Student Services

International students have unique needs that require specialized training and support. However, rising international student enrolment has not been met with increased investment in support services, and funding models vary from one institution to the next. The guidance provided by career advisors is not always informed by the most up-to-date information, and support services are not always intersectional and responsive to international students' needs.

In many cases, international students are unaware of academic support systems. These students face significant challenges to achieving academic success, and many institutions lack culturally relevant, language-specific academic resources. Further, international students often experience disproportionate barriers when attempting to access peer-to-peer support programs; this can result in a lack of social support and, in turn, increased stress and poor psychosocial adjustment.

Finally, crisis support services allow international students to receive support anonymously and without fear of stigmatization. Unfortunately, twenty-four-hour crisis support services are often available in only English and French, and international students may be less likely to visit on-campus health resources due to cultural and religious differences or barriers.

Lack of Protections for Off-Campus Housing

International students may be unfamiliar with the legal rights and obligations of tenants in Ontario, which makes them susceptible to fraud and other unethical behaviour when looking for off-campus housing. These students may also be subject to discrimination based on their ethnicity, religion, or preferred language. Some international students lack English or French language proficiency, which creates barriers to accessing government services like the Landlord and Tenant Board.

Unregulated Recruitment Practices and Limited Transition Programming

International student recruitment, through advertising and other avenues, plays a key role in where students choose to study. Prospective students deserve transparent, accurate, and ethical recruitment methods so that they can have an accurate picture of what their university experience will look like before they enroll. Unfortunately, a lack of regulation increases the risk of fraud, corruption, and unethical behavior during the recruitment process.

International students may also face greater difficulties in transitioning to university life in Canada. Many are unable to tour post-secondary institutions they wish to attend before enrolling, and international student intake periods do not necessarily align with university orientation and transition programs. Universities also differ in the amount of information they provide to students prior to enrollment, and time zone differences prevent many international students from attending information sessions and livestreams.

Limited Support for Exchange Programs

There are several aspects of outbound exchange that need improvement. First, the costs of travel and accommodation can prevent students from accessing these opportunities. Second, there is no inter-university quality assurance framework for international experiences, nor is there a centralized set of recommendations on how to maximize educational benefit for students who participate in outbound exchange programs. As a result, the quality of these programs can vary widely. Third, students studying abroad often require additional resources which support systems are not equipped to offer.

The quality of inbound exchange programs also requires improvement and additional research. International students on exchange in Canada are entitled to support to promote their academic and personal success, and their support systems should generally reflect the support offered to permanent international students. In general, more research is needed on the experiences of inbound exchange students and the difficulties they face.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulate Tuition and Increase Financial Aid

The provincial government should:

- regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5% per year to match institutionally set limitations;
- regulate in-cohort increases to international tuition at a maximum of 3% per year;
- increase basic operating grant funding for post-secondary institutions so that they are publicly funded;
- establish an international tuition set-aside at the same 10% rate of the domestic set-aside, with funds raised directed specifically to needs-based financial aid for international students;
- consult with the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) to develop a framework to improve recruitment, support, and retention of students who are refugees; and
- create scholarships for undergraduate international students, similar to the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS).

Increase Study Permit Flexibility

The provincial government should:

- work with the federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to ensure that the length of each international student's study permit matches the length of time they need to complete their degree program.

Facilitate Access to Work-Integrated Learning, Labour Markets, and Residency

The provincial government should:

- create financial incentives applicable for hiring both domestic and international students in co-op, internship, and work-integrated learning positions;
- provide envelope funding to institutions to increase the availability of paid applied research and work-study opportunities available to international students;
- develop educational programs that help international students improve their English-language proficiency and cultural awareness through out-of-classroom and social learning environments;
- provide envelope funding for post-secondary institutions to retain dedicated work-integrated learning international student advisors;
- reopen the "Employer Job Offer: International Students" stream of the Ontario Immigrant

- Nominee Program (OINP);
- include international students in the "Express Entry" streams of the OINP;
- develop and implement tax credits to offset the costs employers incur when sponsoring highly skilled international student graduates through the OINP; and
- delay the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program's \$1500 application fee for graduates of Ontario universities until one year after their initial offer of employment.

Expand Health Coverage and Mental Health Support

The provincial government should:

- allow international students to pay a fair and affordable premium to receive coverage through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP);
- consult with provincial and territorial governments in Canada to produce a report on best practices for implementing provincial health coverage for international students;
- prior to the inclusion of international students in OHIP, work to expand UHIP's preferred provider network;
- develop research-informed resources and fund training for mental health professionals to effectively care for international students and other immigrants;
- centralize and expand telephone interpretation services to include access by on-campus mental health professionals;
- integrate care for international students into the Roadmap to Wellness plan; and
- provide financial incentives to universities for hiring mental health professionals with lived experiences relevant to the diverse needs of international students.

The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) Steering Committee should, prior to the inclusion of international students in OHIP:

- consult with international students on changes to UHIP; and
- include members on the UHIP Steering Committee who represent international students from Ontario post-secondary institutions.

Invest in International Student Services

The provincial government should:

- consult with the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) to develop a best practice model for cultural awareness, language support, and anti-racism training based on research conducted by

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The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE);

- provide envelope funding to post-secondary institutions to provide a robust offering of international student support services based on best practice models;
- mandate that post-secondary institutions review their academic support structures to accommodate best practices;
- provide funding to expand the Good2Talk service and equivalent 24/7/365 virtual services, to allow for the accessibility of crisis support through the addition of culturally and linguistically competent support resources; and
- mandate that all academic and career counsellors be trained in research-based best practices for cultural sensitivity and intersectionality.

Increase Off-Campus Housing Protections

The provincial government should:

- make recommendations to post-secondary institutions on how to provide resources regarding tenant rights and housing in international service offices and during educational training for international students;
- provide funding for the Landlord and Tenant Board to provide interpreters for international students whose first language is not English or French; and
- mandate the use of court interpreters in Landlord and Tenant Board hearings for a party or witness who requests it and halt proceedings until the request has been granted.

Regulate Recruitment Practices and Facilitate Transition to University

The provincial government should:

- create an accreditation system for international student recruiting agents to establish a minimum standard for recruitment practices;
- develop a regulatory scheme and code of practice and conduct for the recruitment of international students;
- fund research into international student recruitment practices in order to collect data on the frequency of fraud, corruption, and unethical behaviour during the recruitment process; and
- adhere to the Canadian Bureau of International Education's (CBIE) code of ethics when developing orientation or transition policy for international students.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO) should:

- research best practices surrounding international student orientation programming;

and

- develop guidelines regarding what information institutions must share with potential students about their university prior to enrollment.

Increase Support for Exchange Programs

The provincial government should:

- coordinate with the federal government to implement Canada's International Education Strategy;
- coordinate with the federal government and the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) to identify marginalized groups and prioritize funding within the Outbound Student Mobility Pilot (OSMP) such that funding distributed under the OSMP is given to students with demonstrated financial need;
- create an application-based bursary for students with demonstrable financial need;
- instruct the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO) to research international experiential design and outcomes, and to develop recommendations that help universities review their outbound exchange programs;
- provide envelope funding for development or capacity expansion of programs providing for student domestic or international exchange;
- provide envelope funding for post-secondary institutions to hire an international experiences development coordinator;
- reimplement travel insurance coverage under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP);
- provide post-secondary institutions with envelope funding for digital technology capacity and training for university staff to support students abroad;
- provide envelope funding to student associations and universities to facilitate peer-support groups for inbound exchange students;
- create an optional common standard for university exit surveys on student experience for inbound exchange students; and
- establish funding available to universities to support targeted mental health and other resources available to inbound exchange students.

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance should:

- create an addition to their Quality Assurance Framework to institute review of international educational experiences within the Institutional Quality Assurance Process.