

## The Canadian government neglects its international students again

By Claudia Hirtenfelder, International PhD Candidate at Queen's University

This crisis has once again highlighted the unequal treatment of international students in Canada, and in Ontario in particular. International students are relied on financially by the province and universities. International students pay a great deal more in fees, they bring in revenue through their purchasing in local economies, and they are workers within university systems that have been designed to offer support through work – instead of through accolading their scholarship. This has been made abundantly clear once again with the [announcement of financial support for students by the government](#). International students are not eligible for the money, so their only options are to work in a high-risk environment (if they can find any).

Why is this not good enough?

It highlights the double standards of the Canadian government. The government relies on international students for revenue and to make their universities more competitive and dynamic places but they are not willing to support them. Currently the Federal and Ontario governments have several strategies in place not only to increase the size of their international student populations but also to ensure that they settle here once their degrees are completed (see the [Ontario Postsecondary Education Strategy, Report by the Higher Education Council](#) and Canada's [International Education Strategy](#)).

It is not surprising that so many efforts are being made to recruit new international students. In 2018 alone, international students contributed an estimated \$21.6 billion to the Canadian economy in the form of tuition, accommodation and other expenses ([International Education Strategy](#)). Also, Canada is relying heavily on making many of these students part of their future skilled workforces. Ontario and the country need us and yet in a time of crisis are not willing to provide us with the same support being given to domestic students – in fact, the language as it currently stands actively excludes us.

Even prior to this pandemic, international students have been struggling. At my institution, Queen's University, international graduate students pay significantly higher fees but have limited access to federal scholarships like those through CIHR, SSRHC, and NSERC. We also have to pay roughly \$1200 per year for medical coverage and double if we have a partner. Over and above that, our visas limit us to working 20 hours outside of the university<sup>1</sup> but there is no cap on how much we are allowed to work within the university - so many international students work in excess of two jobs at any given point in time so that they can pay their fees, their rent and eat. Not to mention

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<sup>1</sup> Interesting, the same day that it became apparent international students were being excluded from financial provisions we learnt that this 20 hour work limit has been lifted for international students who work in essential services

that we need to complete our degrees in what are usually unrealistic timeframes or face getting no financial support at all.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of consideration for us in the pandemic is just a part of what has been a long line of taking advantage of internationals. In 2019, under the banner of PSAC 901 (the local union), international students at Queen's University sent an [open letter to the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies](#) highlighting their concerns and asking the university to take action – to at the very least publicly state that they would advocate for their international students at the provincial and federal levels. These same students then organised themselves as the [International Student Working Group](#) and launched a campaign focused on reducing fees for international graduate students. And while there have been rumours that some changes might be on the horizon, we as international students have not publicly heard anything. The School of Graduate Studies did however conduct [an extensive review of graduate student life](#) and found that the average international student in the humanities, after paying for rent and fees, had only \$22 left at the end of the month to buy food and supplies. So, the situation was dire before the pandemic broke, and to be actively left out of support for students at the federal level is abysmal.

Time and again, international students have been asked to be patient while the university, province and state lean heavily on them. I suppose I shouldn't have been holding my breath for a bolder response from the government – perhaps a response that took into account the campaigns to waive summer tuition fees (including [Queen's University](#), [Carleton University](#), [the University of British Columbia](#), and 8 others). Students from across the country have made themselves clear that this would offer them the financial relief they desperately need and yet it appears to not even be under consideration.

I came to Canada expecting a country that would be bold and stand up for fairness and what is right. This is the Canada the rest of the world is told about. And Canada's response to the pandemic has been incredible. The communication and the speed with which support came to your citizens is inspiring. But your inefficiency and lack of sensitivity regarding international students has been disappointing. Like Canadian students, international students have rent to pay, (higher) fees to pay, a reduction in work, and families to support. Universities and the Canadian government rely heavily on international students financially and to build up their future work force, and yet in a time of need we are actively left out.

I hope that as your support for students is being considered in Parliament you will consider international students. You should be considering our needs because it is just, fair, and right to do so. But if not for those reasons, then do it because it is in line with your strategies and plans to get us to come and stay in Canada. How can you actively be recruiting more international students if you are not willing to support them? As the veneer of a Canada that cares about international students fades it will become increasingly difficult for Canadian universities to compete with the best around the world. It is high time that Canada realises that international students are serious academics who have a lot to give but cannot constantly be asked to give without something more in return.

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<sup>2</sup> PhD students are expected to finish in 4 years while the national average for completing a PhD is 5 years and 9 months ([Statistics Canada](#))