

Opinion/Editorial

March 2024

Lana Parker, University of Windsor
Holt Stuart-Hitchcox, York University

International Students in Ontario: Questions of Housing and Economic Sustainability

Keywords: *Ontario; K-12; post-secondary; international students; housing; sustainability; alternative revenue streams*

This past fall, the issue of international students and the post-secondary system across Canada came into the spotlight. The media coverage, as exemplified in the news articles listed below, foregrounds issues of inadequate housing and employment relating to the influx of international students in Ontario postsecondary institutions. The articles document international students' struggles to find housing (Denley 2023; Akkaymak, 2023; Law, 2023; Gemmill, 2022) and employment (Friesen, 2023; CBC, 2023; Law, 2023). These difficulties are often elided by deceptive recruitment practices, which do not adequately communicate the difficult state of housing and job markets in Ontario (Akkaymak, 2023; Keung, 2023).

How is this privatization?

The Ontario government's low public funding of post-secondary education has forced colleges and universities to pursue alternative revenue streams (Usher & Balfour, 2023). International student tuition has been highly consequential for these institutions, supplying 100% of new operating income in Canadian higher education since 2008 (Usher & Balfour, 2023). Schools across the country are being incentivized to attract international students. This leads to dishonest recruitment practices, as many are competing for students in a private education market, with a focus on extending profits. Institutions with these objectives prioritize private interests over public interests.

The problem of underfunding and the consequent push to discover alternative revenue streams is also evident in the K-12 system, though not (yet) to the same extent as seen in post-secondary institutions. As Parker, Stewart, and Deckard (2020) note in their piece for *The Conversation*, K-12 systems across Canada have begun recruiting international students as well. They note:

one concern is that this recruitment of children from around the world has evolved in a context where neoliberal educational reforms of the past several decades have eroded tax funds for public education, lowering per pupil spending, and forced school boards to supplement their revenue. Boards are under pressure to do more with less. (paras. 12-13).

Why does it matter?

The current system disregards the capacity for local housing and employment markets to adequately accommodate an influx of new international students. This both aggravates present difficulties for Ontario residents (particularly in housing) and puts incoming international students in a precarious situation. International students are often compelled to often work several low-paying jobs to cover their tuition expenses, which disrupts the education experiences they have arrived to pursue. Primarily, this issue matters in the context of privatization because the use of alternative revenue streams permits the erosion of funding for public education, hiding the fiscal pressures in the system from view—often for years—before the problem of economic sustainability comes into full view. More generally, the situation with international students matters because it exemplifies both: how privatization within one sector leads to ripple effects across other parts of society; and how private interests do not consider or take responsibility for the public impacts of their actions.

References

- Akkaymak, G. (2023, July 13). Ontario needs to better protect international students. *Policy Options*. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/june-2023/ontario-international-students-protection/>
- Bamaniya, P. (2023, August 24). Finding housing in Hamilton an “awful” and “stressful” task for incoming international students. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/hamilton-international-students-housing-1.6942842>
- CBC. (2023, September 21). “They started crying:” Ontario international students finding it difficult to land work. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/international-students-hard-to-find-work-1.6972622>
- Denley, R. (2023, August 24). Randall Denley: Time for Ford to act on Ontario’s reliance on international students for post-secondary funding. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/ontario-international-students-post-secondary-funding>
- Friesen, J. (2023, September 8). Ontario colleges are fuelling unprecedented growth in international students. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-international-students-ontario-colleges-enrolment/>
- Gemmill, A. (2022, August 26). Sikh temple in Timmins, Ont., provides temporary housing to international students amid housing crunch. *CBC*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/groups-helping-international-students-timmins-sudbury-1.6563292>
- Keung, N. (2023, March 16). *Ontario colleges move to protect international students, before and after they come to Canada*. Toronto Star. https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/ontario-colleges-move-to-protect-international-students-before-and-after-they-come-to-canada/article_d27a9a48-7881-582a-bb12-748b2f0b3c89.html

- Law, S. (2023, September 5). International student pounded the pavement and crashed on a couch on path to coveted room in Thunder Bay. *CBC*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/thunder-bay-international-student-housing-1.6954968>
- Parker, L., Stewart, B., & Deckard, N. (2020). Canada's high schools are underfunded and turning to international tuition to help. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/canadas-high-schools-are-underfunded-and-turning-to-international-tuition-to-help-127753>
- Usher, A., & Balfour, J. (2023). The state of postsecondary education in Canada, 2023. *Higher Education Strategy Associates*. https://higherstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-03-SPEC-2023_final-2_smaller.pdf