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## **Canadian Universities in the Pandemic: Differing Policy Responses to International and Domestic Student Financial Needs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on university enrollments around the world and caused significant challenges for students. This study examined how Canadian universities responded to the financial impacts of the pandemic on international and domestic students and how these responses differed. This work involved the identification and collection of public statements issued by selected Canadian universities during the first two years of the pandemic. This consisted of about 14,000 items posted on university public websites. Under the broad framework of the ecological theory of inclusion, an emergent theme content analysis was used to examine and organize data. This analysis confirmed that there was far less financial assistance provided to international students, and the amount of assistance provided to them was significantly disproportionate to the overall revenues generated by their enrollment at Canadian institutions.*

**Keywords:** International Students, Financial Aid, Student Financial Assistance, COVID-19, Canada

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In the Canadian context, international students include those who do not have permanent residency status in Canada but are living and studying in the country on a study visa or have refugee status. International students also include students who are enrolled in a program delivered by a Canadian institution that is not located in Canada as well as non-Canadian students studying via the Internet (Statistics Canada, 2011). From 2014 to 2018, the number of international students enrolled in at Canada's community colleges and universities tripled, with international students making up increasingly large proportions of campus student

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populations, particularly in urban centres (Duff, Zappa-Hollman, & Surtees, 2019). In 2019-2020, there were 235,422 international students studying at Canadian universities and a further 153,360 at Canadian community colleges, representing 17.1% of total university enrolments and 19.3% of total community college enrolments (Statistics Canada, 2021b). The most recent data available show that students from India account for 67% of international students at the community college level, followed by China (3%) and Brazil (3%). At the university level, 21% of international students are from India, followed by China (19.5%) and France (10.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

### **Internationalization: Purposes and Benefits**

Trilokekar (2010) has argued that internationalization in the Canadian higher education sector is rooted in “a traditional Canadian ethos and soft power policy of anti-imperialism and a need for a just and equitable world order” (p. 144). The internationalization of Canadian higher education is frequently couched in terms of much celebrated academic-humanist objectives, including the advancement of cultural exchange, enhancing diversity on campus and in the broader community, and working across cultures to find common solutions (Cowan, 2021; Cudmore, 2005; Kirby, 2007; Knight, 2011). Higher education research frequently highlights the potential for students and institutions in receiving countries to benefit from intercultural exchanges with international students on their campuses. At the same time, governments, higher education institutions, and various private sector interests tend to promote internationalization in terms of advancing economic performance, innovation, investment, and making up for domestic labor market shortfalls. In fact, the recruitment of international students is a key economic growth sector for Canada as outlined in the federal government’s International Education Strategy (Government of Canada, 2014). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada (2020) noted, “international education represents a significant economic benefit to Canada, with international students contributing \$21.6 billion to Canada’s GDP and supporting nearly 170,000 jobs in 2018. International students are also often excellent candidates to apply to remain in Canada permanently, with nearly 54,000 former students becoming permanent residents in Canada in 2018” (para. 1).

### **Canada’s Approach to ‘Cash Cows’ Criticized**

While Canada’s higher education sector displays an eagerness to provide a rewarding educational environment that support international students’ academic and sociocultural experiences, the students themselves are a significant source of revenues (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015; Clarke & Kirby, 2022; Government of Canada, 2014). Interest in internationalization is increasingly driven by the necessity for institutions to generate revenues from beyond their domestic student markets in order to make up for declining local catchment populations and occasional reductions in public funding. As

institutions have become highly reliant on income from international students as a revenue source, fees for these students have significantly increased in comparison to domestic fees. The average tuition fees for international undergraduate students in Canada were \$33,623 in 2021-2022, compared to an average of \$6,693 for Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2021c). Statistics Canada (2021b), Canada's national statistical office, further noted:

[Post-secondary] institutions received \$12.7 billion in revenue from tuition and other fees in 2019/2020, up \$476.1 million from 2018/2019. While the share of funding from provincial governments has declined over time, the share of revenues from tuition and other fees has grown (from 25.5% in 2014/2015 to 31.6% in 2019/2020). This increase is partially due to the rising number of international students attending Canadian universities and the higher tuition fees they pay, which are roughly three times more than those paid by Canadian students. (Tuition Fees for International Students Increase section, para. 2)

This orientation towards international student recruitment has not gone without criticism, however. A recent article in *The Walrus* magazine noted that many international students in Canada “say they’re being used as cash cows” (Hune-Brown, 2021, *The Schools* section, para. 7). International student recruitment and the form of internationalization adopted by Canadian higher education institutions was characterized as follows:

[T]he entire system in Canada is built around the false premise that education, not work and immigration, is the primary aim for most students. According to a survey by the Canadian Bureau of International Education, 60 percent of students intend to apply for permanent residency, a percentage that is likely far higher if you look solely at students attending community colleges. “Everybody knows it’s just a pathway to [permanent residency],” says Prithvi Raj. “That’s what the government is encouraging. That’s what the [recruiting] agents are selling. Any way you slice it, everybody is in on this. (Hune-Brown, 2021, *The Agents* section, para. 15)

Writing in *University Affairs* magazine, McGinn (2022) noted that many international students in Canada face serious mental health challenges and financial problems. This article further pointed out that “while universities are becoming increasingly dependent on the financial contribution of international students, by not supporting them in a more robust way, the country as a whole may be missing out on much more” (McGinn, 2022, *Pathway to Permanent Residency* section, para. 3).

### **Impacts of the Pandemic on Enrollment**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on overall enrollments at Western higher education institutions, especially during the 2019-20 academic

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year, with traditional face-to-face and formal education disrupted in almost all countries worldwide (Stracke et al., 2022). Because of the pandemic, approximately 90% of the world's student population had left their conventional education environments by March 2020 (Liu & Gao, 2022). With travel bans and quarantines introduced by many countries, preventing entry for international students, higher education institutions were challenged to adapt to the pandemic by providing study alternatives such as distance and online enrolments. Students themselves were forced to contend with disruptions in their academic, employment, and immigration status, with some forced to defer their studies altogether. According to data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the number of study permits issued to international students in the first six months of 2020 was down 25% in comparison to the same period in the previous year (Gordon, 2020). Data from IRCC also indicate that overall international student enrolment in Canada dropped by 17% in 2020 compared to 2019, with 108,420 fewer international students enrolling at Canadian institutions. This was the first decline in international student enrolment in 20 years (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2021).

### **Recent Research**

As noted by Firang and Mensah (2022), to date there have been few in-depth examinations of the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian international students in the published scholarly literature. There were a small number of articles published on the subject early in the pandemic but these were brief and somewhat cursory in nature (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Firang, 2020; Kanwar & Carr, 2020). In their more recent article on the psychological and financial difficulties experienced during the pandemic, Firang and Mensah suggested that "Canadian universities need to identify underlying immigration policies that treat international students as the "others" and deny them of public support" (p. 14). Based on a review of the extant research literature in this area, it is presumed that this study is the first systematic analysis of its kind to be focused on illuminating, interrogating, and delineating how Canadian universities represented and responded to the financial challenges of international and domestic students during the pandemic.

### **CURRENT STUDY**

The foundational questions addressed in this paper are as follows: a) how did Canadian universities respond to the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic students?; b) how did Canadian universities respond to the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students?; and c) how did the responses to the financial needs of these two student communities differ? This work helps us to understand how financial assistance was provided to Canadian university students during the pandemic. It also reflects how the needs of international students were prioritized for financial assistance by universities and higher education policy-makers in Canada at the time. The

findings will be informative for higher education researchers and institutions seeking to recruit international students and ensure that their needs are better addressed.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework underling this study is the ecology of inclusive education model proposed by Anderson, Boyle and Deppler (2014). This model draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) and his subsequently reconceptualised bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The ecology of inclusive education is a useful framework that can be used to organise environmental factors and gain a deeper understanding of how they impact learners, such as students in higher education. By placing the learner at the centre of the theory, each contributory factor can be located in relation to the learner's educational ecosystem. Earlier work by Bronfenbrenner (1976) described learner environments as a "nested arrangement of structures" (p. 5), which he conceptualized as having five systems, which are crucial to understanding how inclusive education works and how it may be improved. These systems include the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, macro-system, and the chrono-system. The first system, the micro-system, places the learner at the core with family, peers, and educators, playing an influential role in shaping their development. Moving outwards, the meso-system acknowledges the interconnectedness of settings within the micro-system, like schools and communities. The exo-system includes formal and informal structures that "impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings containing the learner" (p. 6). The surrounding macro-system comprises the overarching culture that encompasses all preceding systems. The final system, the chrono-system, represents the passage of time. When it comes to creating an inclusive environment for students, it is important to consider how these systems intersect and how they shape student experiences. Students needing financial assistance are impacted by institutional resource decisions that span these various systems including micro-system resource allocation, exo-system support structures which are dependent on the dominate leadership structures, culture, values, and ideologies, and the broader macro-system which includes the political and social contexts as well as the overall organization of higher education systems. Much has been written about the experiences of international students and equity, diversity, and inclusion projects serving them but little research has focused on international students' inclusion in higher education squarely from a student financial need perspective.

### **METHOD**

The data collection process for this study began with the selection of a suitable, representative sample of Canadian universities. For this purpose, the member universities of the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC)

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were selected. Formed in 1994, this non-profit group of Canadian universities conducts an annual survey of undergraduate student activities, characteristics, experiences, perceptions, and levels of satisfaction (CUSC, 2021a). In the absence of other national surveys of its kind, the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) survey is regarded as an important source of information about university students in Canada (Berger et al., 2009; Usher, 2013). The consortium is comprised of both public and private universities of varying sizes, and its member institutions may change from year to year depending on the number of institutions opting to participate in the annual student survey. In 2021, the consortium included 32 universities across the country. The universities in the consortium range in size from Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario with close to 49,000 full and part-time students to Ambrose University in Calgary, Alberta with just over 900 students enrolled (Universities Canada, 2022). The results of the last student survey conducted by the CUCC showed that 46% of their graduating students reported having debt, with an overall average student debt of almost \$29,000 at graduation (CUSC, 2021b).

The next stage of this research involved the identification and collection of public statements issued by these 32 universities during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the beginning of January 2020 to the end of December 2021. As this information was compiled, the researcher noted the title of each document and the Internet web address in a table for each university, along with the date of release by the institution. Additionally, each individual Internet web page was downloaded as a Portable Document Format (i.e., .pdf) file. This compilation of documents consisted of 13,988 items posted on the universities' public websites and included a wide variety of advisories, announcements, media releases, and updates

As noted in the Limitations section below, there were some challenges associated with this approach. In particular, there was a lack of uniformity in a) the way the universities posted information to their public websites and b) how they archived this information after the fact. Regarding the former, in some instances universities provided all of their communications about the COVID-19 pandemic in one place on their websites but in others this information was mixed with all other university communications. With respect to archiving, when these data were collected by the researcher in December 2021 and January 2022 it was evident that some universities had not saved all of their pandemic-related communication on their websites – resulting in missing data. Each of these public statements were reviewed and, by using the search terms "COVID" or "pandemic", this examination identified a total of 4,347 items (31%) referencing the pandemic. Further review of this sub-grouping of public statements revealed that 175 (4%) referred to the provision of student financial assistance during the pandemic. Within these documents, 144 (82%) included information about student financial assistance for domestic students while the remaining 31 (18%) specifically referenced student financial assistance for international students.

## **Content Analysis**

Following the collection of this textual content, the compiled data were subjected to a systematic analysis to identify, critically appraise, and synthesize texts that were deemed relevant to the research questions (Carter et al., 2015; Davies, 2000). This emergent theme content analysis approach (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2013) was both structured and analytical. The collected texts were coded in an open-ended fashion and subjected to an extended period of analysis that involved the construction, validation, and confirmation of key themes and categories. This systematic process involved the four main stages of textual analysis identified by Bengtsson (2016). These stages are: a) decontextualisation (open coding of meaning units/themes), b) recontextualisation (cross-referencing themes with original data), c) categorisation (condensation of meaning units/themes into categories), and d) compilation (data analysis, summary, and validation).

## **Thematic Data Analysis**

The process of thematic data analysis involved coding data and then comparing these codes to reveal the emergent themes. This included initial familiarization with the data, the coding process, and identifying and reviewing themes. Key words, phrases, and sentences repeated in the data, representing emerging themes were copied and pasted into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and organized using colour codes. Coding, identifying, sorting, and reviewing data involved multiple iterations until themes were derived and categorized. Following the identification of initial themes, the words, phrases, and sentences that were repeated were organized into the same emergent themes. These themes, such as "emergency student loan", were then named. This was an iterative process that sometimes required textual data to be reorganized and the named themes to be modified to ensure the best possible categorization of data.

## **RESULTS**

Generally speaking, the public statements issued by the individual universities outlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university operations, especially during the initial months of the pandemic in Canada beginning in March 2020. These communications included changes and restrictions such as the suspension of in-person classes, the shift to on-line instruction, the cancelation of sports and on-campus activities, and travel advisories. In many instances, they provided information about health and safety issues such as mask-wearing, COVID-testing, vaccinations, and incidences of positive COVID cases on campus. Public statements pertaining to international students covered a range of issues including study permits, travel to and from Canada, medical coverage, and accommodations for students unable to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions. In a number of instances, universities highlighted the downward financial pressures on their institutional budgets due the pandemic. A number of

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these specifically pointed to the coinciding reduction of international student fee revenues. For example, Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec noted in one news release that: “The drop [in operating revenue] is attributable to lost income from on-campus activities such as residence room rentals, parking and conferences, and diminished tuition revenue because of a decline in international student registrations, particularly at the graduate level” (Carr, 2020, para. 6). Similarly, the University of Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba issued a public notice highlighting that: “Beyond the operating grant reduction, UWinnipeg is projecting substantial revenue losses from campus operations impacted by COVID-19 — most notably in international student enrollments, housing, parking, printing, and recreational services” (University of Winnipeg, 2020, para. 4).

### **Student Financial Relief Provided by Universities**

During the pandemic, especially the initial months, the public communications of the universities universally acknowledged the unforeseen burdens that the pandemic created for students including unforeseen expenses, greater accumulation of debt, unemployment and lost wages, food insecurity, and mental-health concerns. They shared details of their own financial assistance measures while also regularly including information about external sources of financial relief and assistance for students. Of the 32 universities included in the study, 24 provided information about how to access emergency student bursary funds. For example, in April 2020, Mount Saint Vincent University made the following announcement:

MSVU has established a new President’s Student Relief Fund to help students address financial burdens caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund will provide emergency bursaries to help impacted students cover costs associated with housing, food, tuition, technology, mental health services and transportation. (Mount Saint Vincent University, 2020, para. 1)

Similarly, in April 2020 Lakehead University announced:

Last week we launched our Student Relief Fund to help Lakehead students facing serious financial stress. In one week, we have raised \$75,000 (and counting) from over 260 members of our internal community, and the process to allocate these funds to students in need is already underway. (Lakehead University, 2020, para. 6)

In some instances, universities pointed out that these bursaries were newly established in order to specifically address serious financial stresses that had been caused for students as a direct result of the pandemic. In other instances, information was provided about existing emergency student bursary funds students could access in light of pandemic-related financial pressures. In many of these cases, the institutions announced fundraising campaigns or made public

appeals for donations from benefactors and/or members of the university community in order to provide emergency assistance to students. In a small number of cases, institutions announced new research funding for students or plans to create new employment opportunities. In several instances, universities announced that they would be reducing, pro-rating, or eliminating ancillary fees charged to students in light of reduced service provision or the outright suspension of selected campus services. This included fees for meal plans, residence accommodations, parking, fitness or athletics facilities, municipal public transit, student services or student union activities, application or administration fees, and interest charges on outstanding student account balances. In one instance, a bursary for textbooks was instituted to provide students with assistance with their purchase of course materials, while in another instance an expansion of open access to course reading materials was announced as a mechanism for reducing student financial hardship. There were no instances where the universities in the sample offered either full or partial refunds of tuition fees. Instead, in some cases universities announced that deadlines for payment of tuition fees had been extended due to the ongoing pandemic.

### **Domestic Student Financial Relief Provided by Government**

In addition to the financial assistance measures made available to students directly by universities, public communiques provided information about new provincial and federal government measures for domestic students, especially those made available by the Canadian federal government. Regarding the measures initiated by provincial governments, the universities located in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia pointed to steps taken by their provincial authorities. Several universities in Ontario noted the temporary suspension of interest on and payments to the Ontario Student Assistance Program, the primary provider of government student loans to university students who are residents of the province of Ontario, from March 2020 to the end of September 2020. For example, in May 2020 Brock University provided the following update for students:

The Government of Ontario announced Wednesday that it was taking important steps to reducing the financial barriers to post-secondary education. Starting immediately, students can apply to the Ontario Student Assistant Program (OSAP) for the 2020-21 school year. The government has also announced a six-month deferral of loan payments and interest through Sept. 30. (Brock University, 2020a, para. 3)

In British Columbia, a number of universities in the study highlighted a \$3.5 million fund created by the province to provide emergency financial assistance for domestic students enrolled at the province's public colleges and universities. This information was shared with students at the University of Northern British Columbia in an update on April 2, 2020, as follows: "We saw an important announcement from the provincial government this morning, who allocated \$3.5

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million in emergency financial assistance for domestic B.C. students at the province's 25 public post-secondary institutions" (University of Northern British Columbia, 2020a, Funding Support for Critical Needs section, para. 1). This funding was in addition to the provision of \$1.5 million to the province's Indigenous Emergency Assistance Fund to assist domestic Indigenous students who were facing unexpected financial challenges due to the pandemic.

Almost all of the universities shared the details of the significant financial supports offered to domestic students by the Canadian federal government as part of its \$9 billion national COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan for post-secondary students, including the Canada Emergency Student Benefit and the Canada Student Service Grant. This is how the information was shared with students at the University of Northern British Columbia in April 2020:

We awoke this morning to a terrific announcement from the federal government, in which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed plans for a new \$9 billion emergency fund for post-secondary students. This includes the proposed Canada Student Emergency Benefit program, through which students will receive \$1,250 per month from May through August . . . Legislation will be required to implement the benefits, with talks about how quickly a bill can be brought forward already taking place, according to media reports. (University of Northern British Columbia, 2020b, Federal Government Support for Students section, para. 1)

In this announcement, the federal government created the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) to provide financial support to current or graduating post-secondary students and graduating high school students in order to provide immediate assistance for those who could not access summer employment opportunities during the public health crisis. The CESB provided eligible students with \$1,250 per month, or up to \$1,750 per month for students living with dependents or having disabilities, for each month from May until August 2020. A second major new program, the Canada Student Service Grant (CSSG), provided eligible students and recent graduates who volunteered in an approved volunteer service activity during the summer and fall of 2020 with a grant between \$1,000 and \$5,000. Additionally, changes were made to the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP), the federal government's flagship student loans and grants program, to expand the Canada Student Grants program by doubling the amount of this non-repayable program for lower-income students from \$3,000 to \$6,000 per year. The national Emergency Response Plan also included \$75.2 million in additional targeted support for Indigenous students and \$291 million to extend federal graduate research scholarships and postdoctoral fellowships by an additional semester. The final component of the plan was the extension of a number of existing work placement programs to create 116,000 job opportunities in targeted sectors responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included the health, agriculture, food processing, transportation, and retail sectors.

## **Financial Relief for International Students**

Many universities acknowledged and singled out the particular financial hardships experienced by international students as a direct result of the pandemic such as lost income opportunities and food, housing, or travel costs. However, there was far less information provided about financial assistance specifically available to them, aside from emergency bursaries and ancillary fee changes that were provided to domestic students. In a number of cases, universities noted emergency bursaries that had been newly established or expanded to include international students facing immediate financial challenges. Here is how students at the University of Regina were advised of such a measure in May 2020:

With the Winter semester now complete, many international students would normally be heading back home or starting their summer employment to pay for the upcoming school year's tuition and expenses. In the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, summer jobs may no longer exist, financial struggles are mounting, and travel restrictions are forcing many students to stay put in Regina - away from their families. The University of Regina Student Emergency Fund is a lifeline for students – domestic and international - experiencing financial hardships because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (University of Regina, 2020, para 4.)

Several universities highlighted the availability of assistance from the Canadian federal government and suggested that international students inquire about their eligibility requirements. For example, universities noted that temporary modifications to the popular Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) Program would ensure that eligibility for a work permit following graduation would be maintained in the event that in-class, on-campus programs were moved to an online-only format. Previously, eligibility rules for the PGWP required that half of a student's program be completed in person at their institution with any distance courses completed outside Canada excluded. A number of universities also pointed to a temporary lifting of work restrictions which prohibited international students from working more than 20 hours per week as long as the students were working in specific fields: health care, critical infrastructure, or the supply of food or other critical goods. This was shared with students at Brock University in April 2020 as follows:

Restrictions being lifted that prohibit international students from working more than 20 hours per week if they work in health care, critical infrastructure or the supply of food ... While the programs announced will provide some immediate relief for graduate students struggling to survive, more can be done to support some of our most vulnerable, including international students not eligible for the CESB. (Brock University, 2020b, para. 7)

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit, a program created to assist those who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic, was not designed to assist

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international students in particular, however, they were eligible to apply if they were working in Canada and had to leave their job involuntarily due to COVID-19. As long as they met the program's criteria (e.g., they earned at least \$5,000 in Canada in 2019), some international students who had been working prior to the pandemic could qualify for up to \$2,000 in taxable monthly income. This program was available for four months from April to September 2020 (Government of Canada, 2021; Varughese & Schwartz, 2022).

## **Summary**

As noted, the findings show that universities provided a range of different interventions to provide financial relief for students during the pandemic. These measures widely varied from one institution to another and there were very few interventions that provided targeted financial assistance to international students in particular. For the most part, university students relied on financial supports that were provided by the Canadian federal government. This consisted of a relatively comprehensive package of financial measures that focused mainly on the needs of domestic students. Overall, targeted supports for international students were limited to a small number of university-based programs and federal government initiatives that required international students to be employed in order to qualify for assistance.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This research has a number of limitations that must be noted when considering the findings. First, there is a lack of consistency in the way universities provide public information on their websites. In some cases, information regarding the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and universities' responses to it, were placed on linked webpages separate from the university's main news or public announcements page. In other cases, all pandemic information was integrated into universities' central news pages along with a wide variety of other announcements and public information. It also appeared that smaller institutions tended to have fewer and less frequent public announcements, perhaps owing to comparatively fewer overall resources for public relations and engagement as compared to larger institutions. In addition, in a small number of cases, some university websites did not archive all of their pandemic-related announcements. This resulted in partial, incomplete data sets when this research was conducted.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Unequal Financial Assistance**

One of the key observations stemming from the results of this study is that all evidence suggests that there was far less financial assistance available to international university students during the pandemic, and the amount of assistance provided appears to significantly disproportionate to the overall amount of revenues generated by their enrolment numbers at Canadian

institutions. The amount of funds made available by universities on their own appears to have been, for the most part, equally available to both domestic and international students; this includes emergency bursary programs ranging in overall size from several hundred thousand dollars to several million dollars depending on the size of the university. Therefore, a reasonable estimate of the overall amount of direct financial assistance provided by the universities to international students would be in the millions of dollars. This estimate is starkly smaller than the billions of dollars in emergency funding for targeted government benefits made available to domestic students through the combined resources of provincial and federal governments. The temporary elimination of work restrictions on international students, along with government-funded job creation programs, may have provided an avenue for international students to earn a wage to cover their costs, depending on eligibility and hiring criteria. However, this opportunity for paid employment also stands out as another example of Canadian authorities taking advantage of the international student workforce to address a shortage of workers in the Canadian labour force. Despite the skills they may hold or their academic accomplishments, international students in Canada are often treated as a source of relatively cheap, exploitable, contingent workers. This continues following graduation, with international student graduates frequently employed in informal, low-skilled, and precarious forms of employment and earning less than domestic graduates (Ellis, 2023; Garcia-Sitton, 2022; Janzen & Fan, 2023; Thanthong-Knight, 2022).

### **Towards More Inclusive Practice**

Evidently, providing more generous or substantial direct financial assistance to international students runs counter to the current profitable practice of exploiting international students for their fee revenue to institutions, their labour, and other economic contributions as renters of accommodations and consumers of domestic goods and services. In the least, more coordination between institutions and government authorities could have better assisted international students during the global health crisis. In comparison, the national and state governments in Australia, which also relies heavily on international student fee revenues, coordinated far more closely with universities to support international students. This included taking measures such as delaying semester start dates and setting up special telephone helplines. Unlike Canadian universities, in some instances Australian universities also provided financial assistance to international students by refunding or discounting their tuition and other fees (Liu & Gao, 2022).

Contrary to the caricatured notion of international students as coming from positions of high societal status or affluence, more and more evidence suggests that many international students in Canada have much more modest means of supporting themselves, with some struggling to cover their education-related costs (Hune-Brown, 2021; McCartney, 2019; McGinn, 2022). In addition to the consideration of providing forms of financial assistance to struggling international students, our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic should trigger some

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reflection on how to better provide for their needs. This includes providing resources to support their educational needs whether they are taking distance, hybrid, or in-person classes. More can also be done to support the personal needs of international students, such as ensuring food security and providing more mental health supports. Further, Marom (2022) suggests that institutions take a more “consistent, holistic, and personal” approach to providing student services for international students, with this assistance “offered by staff of similar ethnicity and in [their] first language” (p. 13). To build an international education sector that is more resilient and responsive in the face of crisis, Nguyen and Tran (2022) proposed a number of approaches to academic capacity building. These approaches, including reduced faculty workload, greater financial support for institutions, improved library resources, enhanced technical infrastructure and support, and more opportunities for professional development, which have been shown to better position academic faculty and staff to more effectively engage in internationalisation activities and support international students. Reflecting on the experiences of international students in Canada during the pandemic, Varughese and Schwartz (2022) argued that the higher education sector should develop more effective, easily accessible, and culturally competent mental health services tailored to the needs of international students at Canadian universities and community colleges. They further suggested that, in light of the financial precarity that many international students experience, universities and community colleges should implement targeted and sustained financial supports for international students. Their suggestions include emergency grants or loans that may be accessed in times of financial difficulty as well as extending deadlines for payment of tuition fees for international students in such situations.

## **Conclusion**

The post-COVID outbreak discourse on international students has not revealed substantive evidence that institutions or jurisdictions are prioritizing the more academic-humanist aims of internationalization over economic and market-driven objectives. Instead, from Australia to America frenetic public hand-wringing over the operating revenues lost due to COVID-related travel restrictions has dominated news headlines and higher education trade publications. This has laid bare the profit-seeking objectives of Western higher education institutions which have spent years aggressively seeking to attract international students to their campuses. Amid talk of economic recovery, and despite calls for critical reflection on the vulnerability of overreliance on international student revenues and marketized approaches to internationalisation, the commercial value of international students continues to be a matter of priority for institutions and governments (de Wit & Altbach, 2020; El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Marom, 2022; Rizvi, 2020).

If Canadian higher education is to fulfill the academic-humanist objectives of the international education experience, including equity for those from diverse cultures and regions, educational leaders and policymakers must do more to attend to the needs of international students, especially in times of emergency.

International students are much more than a revenue stream to be exploited to prop up university operating budgets. These solutions are not simple or without cost. They include enhancing intercultural engagement and developing cultural awareness, and this begins with decision-makers and those who hold positions of leadership in government and across the entirety of the Canadian higher education sector.

One of the dominant narratives on higher education internationalization and international students is that a number of highly-developed, predominately English-speaking, western countries have become increasingly reliant on tuition fee revenues from international students to fund their higher education systems. The funding choices made by Canadian universities and governments in the midst of the pandemic illustrate how the needs of international students are differently prioritized as compared to domestic student counterparts. With few exceptions, the financial needs of international students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic were largely overlooked in the provision of emergency financial supports by their Canadian hosts.

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