

Leave Speculation to Bay Street

A submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' consultation on a Postsecondary International Education Strategy for Ontario

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Introduction

“The community college system was created to prepare Ontario citizens for the specialized, in-demand jobs that bring investment and prosperity to our province. Let the colleges do what they excel at, and leave speculation to Bay Street.”

- Warren (Smokey) Thomas, President, OPSEU

Increasing international student enrolment has clearly become a top priority for Ontario’s postsecondary institutions, including its 24 publicly-funded colleges, as government investment in the sector continues to decline. The government’s plan to reorganize the current student financial assistance program in order to cover the tuition fees of low-income students in 2017-18 is certainly welcome news, but it does not address the underlying problem of a badly underfunded postsecondary system.

According to Colleges Ontario, more than 33,000 international students are currently enrolled in the publicly-funded Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs).¹ International students pay more than three times the tuition and ancillary fees of Canadian students.² They are clearly viewed as a lucrative market for the CAATs, which have experienced an 18 per cent decline in per student operating funding from the province since 2007-08.³ International student enrolment is also being cast as a potential solution to projected declines in enrolment, especially in rural and Northern colleges.

But the drive for international students does not end at Ontario’s borders. A cursory scan of the CAATs’ websites shows that they run campuses and programs in numerous countries including Brazil, China, Ecuador, Egypt, Jordan, India, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyz Republic, Montenegro, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Vietnam, and the United Arab Emirates.

However, we also note with grave concern that neither the CAATs nor the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) have been fully transparent as to the scope and nature of these international activities. Colleges Ontario’s budget submission to the government for 2016-17 only highlights the “partnerships” of three colleges – Northern, Seneca and Niagara – with overseas institutions in China, Central Asia and Vietnam, respectively.⁴ Neither the MTCU nor Colleges Ontario have provided a full list of overseas programs, the jurisdictions in which they operate, the government institutions or private corporations they are partnered with, the staff teaching and supporting these programs, or the vetting process used to assess the financial, reputational and human rights risks associated with these activities. Of crucial importance: we also do not know how much funding has gone into establishing these programs abroad and the revenue being earned – or lost.

The issue of the colleges’ international activities has generated intense public concern and outrage. Some of that concern has come from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union after it came to light that at least three colleges have established branch campuses or programs in

Saudi Arabia, a repressive country known for its severe clampdown on freedom of expression, mass executions and gender-based violence.

Algonquin and Niagara College both operate male-only campuses in Saudi Arabia, and Centennial College offers male-only training programs. All three colleges are in violation of the United Nations commitment to providing equal access to education for women and girls. Female faculty – whether Canadian or Saudi – are forbidden to work in these programs. This is a clear violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Ontario government’s pledge to support gender equality in the workforce.

Algonquin, Niagara and Centennial have all reported significant financial losses, despite promises that the programs would bring in significant revenue within the first five years of operation. Furthermore, leaked documents from Centennial College provided to the media show hundreds of thousands of public dollars being spent on benefits for Saudi nationals and their families who do no work for these programs. Both Centennial College and the MTCU should be explaining why this highly irregular practice is taking place.

We are disappointed that the colleges’ and MTCU’s response to the concerns raised by college faculty, their union, human rights groups and many Ontarians through letters to the editor and radio call-in shows has been to continue the expansion. According to media reports, both Algonquin and Niagara have plans to open female-only colleges in Saudi Arabia, apparently with the approval of the province.⁵ We believe it would be more appropriate to place a moratorium on the further expansion of overseas campuses pending a review of the current international activities.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union, which represents over 8,600 support staff and nearly 12,000 faculty at Ontario’s 24 public colleges, believes that there is a place for international activity within the colleges’ mandate, but that the status quo of financial irregularities, human rights abuses, and gender inequality is simply not acceptable.

The notable lack of transparency makes it difficult to assess the value of international education. Despite these hindrances, this submission will outline the core principles and values that we urge the government to adopt:

1. The focus of our 24 publicly-funded colleges must be on providing quality education in Ontario. The government must increase funding per full-time post-secondary student up to the national average.
2. The focus of international activities must be on providing quality education, consistent with Canadian values and United Nations recommendations, rather than simply generating revenue.
3. All international activities must abide by robust and transparent auditing and reporting principles.

4. Intellectual property must rest with faculty in order to foster innovation and ensure the sound application of curriculum in Ontario and internationally.
5. The treatment of all non-academic employees involved in the building and maintenance of foreign campuses must abide by internationally recognized labour standards and must encompass those employees employed by contractors and subcontractors.

Core Principles

1. The focus of our 24 publicly-funded colleges must be on providing quality education in Ontario. The government must increase funding per full-time post-secondary student up to the national average.

At the time of their founding nearly 50 years ago, approximately 75 per cent of operating funding for the CAATs came from provincial government grants.⁶ In 2013-14, grant revenue from all sources accounted for just less than half of college system revenue.⁷ In 2014-15, real operating funding per student was 18 per cent lower than during the peak in provincial funding in 2007-08.⁸

Put another way, combined revenues from net tuition fees and operating grants per student are almost \$700 lower, in real terms, than combined revenues were in 2007-08.⁹ Tuition fees remain a significant source of revenue for colleges. Regulated and high-demand tuition fees account for just over 20 per cent of system revenue. Non-tuition and ancillary fees account for an additional 11.6 per cent.¹⁰

On a per student basis, the colleges receive less in operating grants than secondary schools and universities. Considering the fact that colleges provide higher education to greater numbers of lower-income students (more than half of college applicants report household incomes of less than \$60,000 per year¹¹), one would think the appropriate policy response from the province would be to allocate greater resources and supports to the colleges, not less.

Ontario also fares badly when compared to other provinces. Funding per student in Ontario colleges is the lowest of all the provinces. According to Colleges Ontario, the per student operating grant combined with tuition fee revenue in Saskatchewan is two and a half times higher than in Ontario.¹²

It's clear that the future looks no brighter for college budgets than the immediate past. The Ontario government has no plans to close the funding gap that has grown since 2007-08. According to the "Multi-Year Outlook for Operating Grants to Universities and Colleges," a supporting document to the 2016 Budget compiled by MTCU, operating grants to colleges will increase by 1.2 per cent in 2016-17, 0.2 per cent in 2017-18, and nothing at all in 2018-19.

The province's cap on tuition fees expires in 2017. For Colleges Ontario, the answer in part to underfunding seems to be an increase in tuition fees. We emphatically disagree. We believe the answer is to bring government funding per full-time post-secondary student up to the national average.

The province's recent announcement that it will reorganize the current student financial assistance program in order to cover the average tuition fees of students with financial need whose family incomes are less than \$50,000 is welcome news. However, the underlying problem of a badly funded postsecondary system remains.

2. The focus of international activities must be on providing quality education, consistent with Canadian values and United Nations recommendations, rather than simply generating revenue.

The 1997 UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel* is the international instrument that sets out the norms and standards for working in educational institutions around the world.

It is essential that all international initiatives undertaken by Ontario's colleges and universities respect the UNESCO recommendation, with its emphasis on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, collegial governance, non-discrimination, and employment security.

One of the key principles in the UNESCO recommendation relevant to Ontario's international mission is academic freedom. The recommendation defines academic freedom as:

...the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies. All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfil their functions without discrimination of any kind and without fear of repression by the state or any other source.¹³

Faculty teaching for Ontario's colleges in international contexts require academic freedom to deliver appropriate curriculum that teaches the full range of content and skills necessary for quality educational outcomes. According to the Ontario Government's *Framework for Programs of Instruction*, the mission of the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology goes beyond providing high quality career-oriented postsecondary education. It also includes Essential Employability Skills such as critical thinking as well as a general education component intended to develop citizens who are "able to contribute thoughtfully, creatively, and positively to the society in which they live and work."¹⁴ Achieving these outcomes, especially in countries with severe human rights abuses and restrictions on freedom of expression, are impossible without academic freedom. The Government must guarantee that an Ontario credential delivered

abroad is equivalent to an Ontario credential delivered at home. Anything less undermines the value and perception of Canadian education internationally.

In these ways, academic freedom is not an esoteric concept. It exists for a crucial reason: *it protects the integrity of research and teaching*. Without such freedom, decisions about grade assignments, pedagogical methods – and, indeed, even what can be spoken in the classroom – can be directed by corporate partners, foreign countries, or managers who have no professional or academic knowledge of the relevant discipline. Faculty must possess academic freedom to ensure that program standards do not suffer in the pursuit of lucrative international business partnerships, where quality is sacrificed to profit.

The failure to adhere to the global standards set out in the UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel* will do incalculable damage to Ontario's global reputation as a leader in international education.

3. All international activities must abide by robust and transparent auditing and reporting principles.

As we have noted earlier, there is a disturbing lack of transparency on the part of the colleges and the MTCU as to the scope of the colleges' international activities, their operating costs and the revenues being earned from them. For example, a media report about a Centennial College program training automobile technicians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that prohibited female students and trainers noted that more than \$300,000 was paid out to cover the health insurance costs of Saudi government officials.¹⁵ On the face of it, this seems to be a highly irregular practice to say the least. It is not clear why Centennial College's subsidiary corporation, Centennial Training International, paid the medical insurance costs of individuals, and their families, who were not its employees, but were in fact, employees of a Saudi government agency, Technical and Vocational Training Corporation.

The media report quoted a college spokesperson as saying their training programs in Saudi Arabia were currently profitable, but documents obtained by the journalist found the program had suffered losses in the previous three years. Four days after the media report was published, Centennial announced it would not renew its apprenticeship training contract in Saudi Arabia beyond April 2016.¹⁶ However, it remains unclear whether Centennial's other Saudi training programs will continue.

Niagara College opened its male-only campus in Taif, Saudi Arabia in 2014, offering tourism, hospitality and business courses. In 2014, OPSEU Local 242, representing Niagara faculty, was told the college expected to make \$8 million over five years. At a meeting with Local 242's president and vice-president in January, the revenue estimated was halved to \$4 million over five years. It was confirmed that the College lost more than \$966,000 in the first year of its agreement to operate in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

Algonquin College opened its men-only Jazan campus in Saudi Arabia in 2013. As OPSEU Local 415 representing Algonquin faculty has noted, when first discussed the Jazan campus was projected to raise \$100 million in five years. That figure was whittled down to \$20 million. Now it's only \$4.4 million over five years, and last year the college lost nearly \$1.5 million.¹⁸

College faculty have helped to shine the spotlight on their colleges' activities, but the colleges and the MTCU have done little to be transparent about these activities. We believe the secrecy must end. The colleges must publish on their websites the contracts they have signed with overseas institutions, private or public, to deliver technical, vocational and applied programs, along with the full financial statements and audit reports for these overseas activities.

4. Intellectual property must rest with faculty in order to foster innovation and ensure the sound application of curriculum in Ontario and internationally.

Several CAATs have created partnerships with private colleges in which the publicly-funded institution sells their "brand" to the private corporation. Examples include the relationship between St. Lawrence College and Alpha International Academy, Lambton College and Cestar College, and Cambrian College and Hanson International. These agreements allow private corporations to offer certifications and diplomas in the name of the public college, and to deliver curriculum developed by publicly-employed professors. In a similar vein, some CAATs are taking curriculum, funded by Ontario citizens, and licencing or selling it outright to corporations and countries overseas. It is exceedingly difficult to monitor educational quality, employment standards, and adequate student services at these private colleges when they are in Ontario, and even more so when they are overseas.

The outsourcing of Ontario college faculty curriculum to private colleges serving international students at home and abroad leads to a significant "innovation chill." Seizing, monetizing and selling curriculum without faculty input provides a major disincentive toward faculty contributing their independent research and writing and inventive curricular design to college courses. Considerable research has been done on the qualities that make a research- and innovation-friendly environment, and academic freedom and intellectual property protection are two of the most important.

Ontario's college faculty, with their unique combination of extensive education, training, and industry experience, are rapid-response innovators, but the failure to provide an appropriate balance between creator and college rights has stunted their capacity and readiness to contribute fully to Ontario's economy.

While it is beyond the scope of this submission to discuss the specific parameters of a suitable IP framework, OPSEU urges the government to adopt a new approach that supports college faculty innovation and protects the investment of Ontarians.

5. The treatment of all non-academic employees involved in the building and maintenance of foreign campuses must abide by internationally recognized labour standards and must encompass those employees employed by contractors and subcontractors.

In their drive to earn revenue, Ontario's publicly-funded colleges are becoming global institutions and as such should conform to international labour standards. The International Labour Organization (ILO) maintains and develops a system of international labour standards aimed at promoting opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity.¹⁹ The ILO notes that: "The rules of the global economy should be aimed at promoting the rights, livelihood, security and opportunities of peoples, families, and communities around the world."²⁰ We wholeheartedly agree. In our view, it is the obligation of the Ontario government and the colleges to ensure that fundamental rights as identified by the ILO, in its Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work²¹ are adhered to, including:

- freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- the effective abolition of child labour; and
- the elimination of discrimination in respect to employment and occupation.

We believe that Centennial College's training program in Saudi Arabia, with its prohibition against women faculty, is in violation of the right to the elimination of discrimination. We further note that Saudi Arabia has not ratified ILO Conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining. In fact, 11 of the 16 countries where we know CAATs have established training programs or campuses have not ratified the ILO Conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining.²²

Conclusion:

Ontario's 24 publicly-funded colleges need stable, adequate funding. In the absence of adequate funding, the CAATs have turned to risky ventures in jurisdictions governed by corrupt and repressive regimes. To add insult to injury, the colleges' overseas activities are losing money. Further, the experience of other Western-based educational institutions in these countries does not appear to be positive. A media report found that two of the three colleges in Saudi Arabia operated by the publicly-funded Lincoln College in the U.K. closed earlier this year, having only been open since the fall of 2014. The same media report said the British education company, Pearson, which had operated three colleges in Saudi Arabia, pulled out of the country in the summer of 2015.²³

As Jack Wilson, Vice-President of OPSEU Local 415 and a professor at Algonquin College, has said, the decline in Ontario government support has led colleges to find revenue from whatever

means necessary. “When your back’s against the wall, options are considered that would have been unthinkable before,” he said.²⁴

College faculty believe operating training programs or whole campuses in countries with appalling human rights records is not the way to go. Ontarians rely on our publicly-funded community colleges to keep Ontario’s economy competitive. The key to prosperity is excellent public education accessible in Ontario for all Ontarians. It is time for the government to make the necessary investments in postsecondary education to make that happen.

Notes

- ¹ Colleges Ontario. *Building on a 50-Year Legacy of Excellence*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Ontario, 2015. Web.
- ² Centennial College. *Tuition Information*. Rep. Toronto: Centennial College, 2016. Web.
- ³ Colleges Ontario. *College Resources Environmental Scan 2015*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Ontario, 2015. Web.
- ⁴ Colleges Ontario. *Building on a 50-Year Legacy of Excellence*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Ontario, 2015. Web.
- ⁵ Miller, Jacquie. "Algonquin Moves Ahead on Plans to Open a Women's College in Saudi Arabia." *Ottawa Citizen*. 8 Feb. 2016. Web.
- ⁶ Mackay, Kevin, Ontario Public Service Employees Union. *College Faculty (CAAT-A) Report on Education in Ontario Colleges*. Rep. 1st ed. Toronto: Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2014. Web.
- ⁷ Colleges Ontario. *College Resources Environmental Scan 2015*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Canada, 2015. Web
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Colleges Ontario. *Building on a 50-Year Legacy of Excellence*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Ontario, 2015. Web.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Colleges Ontario. *Student and Graduate Profiles Environmental Scan 2015*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Ontario, 2015. Web.
- ¹² Colleges Ontario. *College Resources Environmental Scan 2015*. Rep. Toronto: Colleges Canada, 2015. Web.
- ¹³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*. Publication. UNESCO, 1997. Print.
- ¹⁴ Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. *Framework for Programs of Instruction*. Publication. Toronto: Universities, 2005. Minister's Binding Policy. Web.
- ¹⁵ Christina Blizzard. "Centennial College Program in Saudi Arabia Excludes Women." *Toronto Sun*. 21 Jan. 2016. Web.
- ¹⁶ Centennial College. *Centennial College to Let Apprenticeship Training Contract in Saudi Arabia Lapse*. Release. Toronto: Centennial College, 2016. Web.
- ¹⁷ Martin Devitt, President, and Ravi Ramkissoonsingh, Vice-President. "Saudi Campus Update." Letter to OPSEU Local 242. 1 Feb. 2016. Print.
- ¹⁸ OPSEU. *Saudi Arabian College Fiasco Tied to Underfunding Here: Algonquin Prof.* News release. Toronto: Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2016. Web.
- ¹⁹ International Labour Organization. *Introduction to International Labour Standards*. Rep. ILO, 2004. Web.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ International Labour Organization. *ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and Its Follow up*. Rep. 2nd ed. Vol. 86. Switzerland: ILO, 1998. Web.
- ²² International Labour Organization. *Country Profiles*. Rep. ILO, 2004. Web.
- ²³ Miller, Jacquie. "Algonquin Moves Ahead on Plans to Open a Women's College in Saudi Arabia." *Ottawa Citizen*. 8 Feb. 2016. Web.
- ²⁴ OPSEU. *Saudi Arabian College Fiasco Tied to Underfunding Here: Algonquin Prof.* News release. Toronto: Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2016. Web.