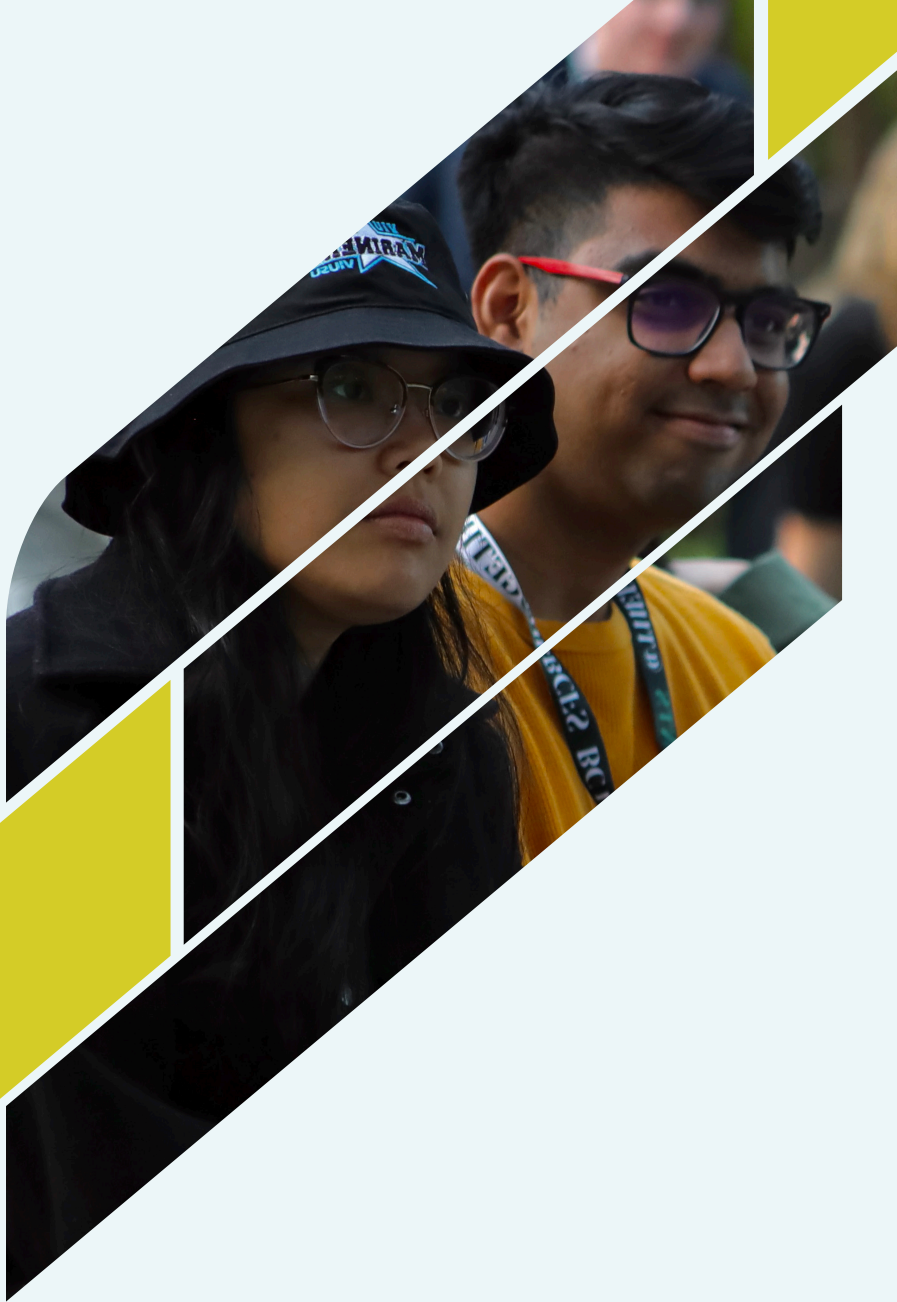


# International Education in British Columbia: Keeping the Post-secondary System Afloat



BRITISH COLUMBIA FEDERATION OF STUDENTS



# EDUCATION SHOULD BE FOR EVERYONE

## ABOUT THE BC FEDERATION OF STUDENTS

The British Columbia Federation of Students represents over 170,000 students at colleges, institutes, and universities in all regions of the province. The Federation represents full- and part-time students at the college, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Together these students advocate for a well-funded system of post-secondary education in BC that is affordable and accessible for all students.

The Federation's membership is comprised of:

- Camosun College Student Society
- Coast Mountain Students' Union
- College of New Caledonia Students' Union
- Douglas Students' Union
- Emily Carr Students' Union
- Justice Institute Students' Union
- North Island Students' Union
- Northern British Columbia Graduate Students' Society
- Okanagan College Students' Union
- Selkirk College Students' Union
- Students' Union Okanagan of the University of British Columbia
- Students' Union of Vancouver Community College
- Thompson Rivers University Students' Union
- Vancouver Island University Students' Union

Researched and authored by  
British Columbia Federation of Students

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207-245 East Columbia Street  
New Westminster, BC V3L 3W4  
(604) 733-1880  
[wearebcstudents.ca](http://wearebcstudents.ca)

# INTRODUCTION

September 2011 marked a shift in how the provincial government viewed international students in post-secondary education. Premier Christy Clark announced that her government would pave the way to doubling international student enrolment by 50%, an increase of 40,000 students. As part of the BC Jobs Plan, this increase in enrolment of international students was meant to deliver two things: a new base of young British Columbians to replace our aging population, and increased support to local economies through the paying of tuition fees, accommodations, and living expenses.<sup>i</sup>

When Federation representatives met with then-Minister of Advanced Education Andrew Wilkinson in March 2015, the Minister stated that the sale of education at a profit to international students by institutions was designed to be a major component of the funding model for BC's public post-secondary system. The multi-year, coordinated effort to recruit international students to BC to subsidize the system has resulted in international students' tuition now making up a substantial portion of the revenue at BC's public universities and colleges. The slow and steady move away from institutions relying on government grants and instead depending on tuition fees for their operational funding has numerous negative impacts on the system and leaves all British Columbians at risk. 7 out of the 11 universities in the province receive more in tuition fee revenue than in the operating grants provided by the provincial government. On average, international student tuition fees make up 23% of all revenue; in some places this is as high as 32%.<sup>ii</sup>

The dependency on revenue from international student tuition fees has become so dire that institutions commonly adjust international fees as the final piece of their budget plan. They increase the fees by whatever amount is necessary as a fail-safe against any unforeseen expenses and structural deficits. This pattern of budgeting and the lack of regulation on international tuition fees leads to wildly unpredictable tuition increases for international students in any given year. As a result, international students are unable to properly budget for the cost of their education when they move to BC to begin their studies.

When the post-secondary system relies primarily on international student funding, it is also at risk of failure for reasons outside of the control of administrators and governments. We saw this firsthand during the COVID-19 pandemic, but we have also seen how small changes in the market can have devastating impacts on institutions, specifically on deficits. This research document was initially created in 2017 to warn the government and institutions about the dangers of relying primarily on international student fees to fund BC's public post-secondary education system. After seeing the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on public post-secondary institutions, we have the opportunity to improve the resiliency and financial stability of the post-secondary system. BC's post-secondary system is crucial in supporting the growth and strength of our economy. This government has announced its *Future Ready Plan*, with the goal of filling the more than one million job openings over the next 10 years. As written, the government intends on "making post-secondary more affordable, accessible, and relevant, providing the innovation and skills needed to fill the jobs of tomorrow faster".<sup>iii</sup> But, to do this we must invest in the post-secondary system. Institutions across BC need more funding to be strong enough to serve the social and economic needs of our province and local communities, while being able to weather any changes in the international education market. By increasing funding to post-secondary institutions, we will be able to ensure fairness for international students and affordable education for all.

# History of International Student Education

International education has changed significantly over the last 50 years in Canada. Before the 1970s, providing educational opportunities for international students was considered a piece of foreign aid. But quickly, during the 1970s and 1980s, this shifted and international students began to be viewed as ‘wealthy’ foreigners.<sup>iv</sup> When the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education was formed in 1970, more than 15,000 international students attended post-secondary in Canada (totalling 5% of all students enrolled at Canadian institutions).<sup>v</sup> Along with the shifting view of international students, provinces began adopting policies of differential fees, charging international students more than domestic students.

In British Columbia, the then-Social Credit government drastically cut post-secondary budgets in 1982, which caused universities across the province to implement differential fees since there was no direct provincial policy on international student tuition.<sup>vi</sup> Through the 80s and the 90s, it was no secret that all levels of government were interested in maximising the financial benefit international students could bring to the province, not only through their contribution to the economy while studying here, but through their substantial contribution to institutional budgets.

## Supersizing the International Student Base

In 2001, the federal government revised the Canadian immigration policy to make studying in Canada the first step toward citizenship because young international students became ideal immigrants; consequently, international student enrolment soared, showing no signs of slowing down.<sup>vii</sup> In 2014, Canada’s International Education Strategy called for doubling the international student base from 239,131 in 2011 to over 450,000 by 2022.<sup>viii</sup> However, by 2017, Canada had surpassed this goal five years ahead of schedule, recruiting 494,500 international students.<sup>ix</sup> As a result, Canada released a new strategy in 2019. Having achieved the goal of increasing international enrolment, the focus of the new strategy was on diversifying countries of origin of international students, given that 50 percent of international students come from two countries – India and China.<sup>x</sup>

The shift in focus between the 2014 and 2019 federal international student strategy is simple: the government sees the economic value of international students but recognises the precarity of being overexposed to external forces with the vast majority of international students coming from only a few countries. In addition, the 2019 federal strategy also recognises challenges in the following areas: increased competition from other international education sectors; the concentration of international students in large cities and; the social and economic benefits of international students being distributed unevenly around the country.<sup>xi</sup> In two short decades, the federal strategy around international students has shifted from simply increasing enrolment numbers to managing the unforeseen consequences of unmanaged growth in Canada’s international education sector. While more can be done, having the federal government recognise weaknesses in Canada’s current international recruitment strategy is a step in the right direction.

In BC, the government also adopted an aggressive recruitment strategy for international students that led to impressive growth in enrolment. British Columbia created their international student strategy in 2012 as part of the BC Jobs Plan, committing BC to increase the international student base by 50% in 4 years.<sup>xii</sup> Following the federal trend, international education in the province increased far faster than initially projected. In the 2011-12 academic year, public post-secondary headcounts in the province were 32,500, by 2019-20 the headcount reached 80,255, an increase of 147 percent.<sup>xiii</sup> In the 2020-21 academic year, following national enrolment trends, 35% of international students studying in BC came from India, 26% from China, and 4% from Vietnam, the United States, and South Korea. The remainder of international students (27%) are spread across 164 countries.<sup>xiv</sup> Much of the growth of international enrolment in the province has been seen in the college system, particularly in regions like the North, Cariboo, Kootenays, and Thompson Okanagan.<sup>xv</sup>

Unlike the federal government, the provincial government has yet to produce and release an international education strategy since 2012. As such, we have seen no provincially coordinated efforts to mitigate risk or manage international recruitment and enrolment. We do not believe it is a coincidence that since 2017 BC has been losing its share of international students studying in Canada.<sup>xvi</sup> Though it may not seem significant, we believe that this downward trend is a result of the increasingly challenging conditions international students face in BC such as the high cost of living, high cost of tuition fees, and institutional outcomes.



*Their public funding decisions have caused the post-secondary education system's over-reliance on international student tuition.*

*And worse still, neither government has acknowledged that their divestment of public post-secondary funding has exacerbated social, academic, economic, and cultural tensions in community, and that further inaction threatens the entire enterprise of international and domestic education in BC and Canada.*



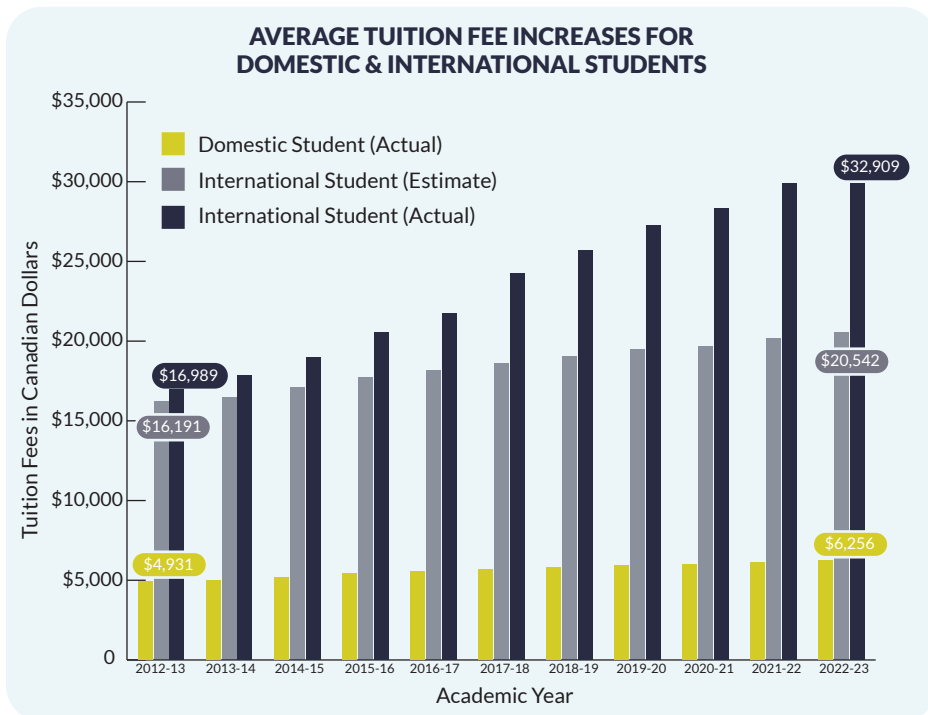
Past international education strategies, both national and provincial, recognise the vitality international students bring to our economies, particularly to our regional economies and institutions. International students play a very important role in communities, and many come with intentions of working; one does not have to look far to see international students working in restaurants, grocery stores, hospitals, care homes, and the trades. International students are a crucial part of the workforce and social tapestry, especially in smaller communities. Nevertheless, all strategies have failed to address the stress expedited international enrolment has on student and community support services.

Ken Steele, co-founder of Academic Group Inc., summarises the dilemma quite well: "Growing international student recruitment has created real financial and social benefits for Canada's institutions, but has also contributed to new strains on student support services, amplified faculty complaints about student academic preparedness, and perhaps set the stage for incidents of racial tension and conflict on campuses and in surrounding communities."<sup>xvii</sup> This never-ending quest for tuition fee revenue and to maximize the economic benefits that international students bring, requires careful management and partnership by both the federal and provincial government. Up to now, international education and domestic education have been seen and addressed separately. However, government must realize that the shifting reliance from public funding to tuition fees have tied international education and domestic education together. Neither government has acknowledged that their public funding decisions have caused the PSE system's over-reliance on international student tuition. And worse still, neither government has acknowledged that their divestment of public post-secondary funding has exacerbated social, academic, economic, and cultural tensions in community, and that further inaction threatens the entire enterprise of international and domestic education in BC and Canada.



# International Students: Tuition Fees are Funding our System

International students in post-secondary pay significantly higher tuition fees than their domestic peers. International tuition fees differ across institutions and programs and can be 4 to 5 times higher than domestic fees. According to Statistics Canada, international undergraduate students in BC paid 426% more for their academic year than domestic students (\$32,909 vs \$6,256) in 2022-23 (see figure below).<sup>xviii</sup> International fees are entirely unregulated in the province, meaning institutions can increase tuition at any time by any amount. Because of the lack of regulation, it is close to impossible to track how much institutions are charging above cost-recovery, especially given that international tuition fees are often set based on shortfalls in the institutional budget. What is clear is that these price increases are consistently unrelated to any academic key performance indicators that could explain fee increases.



Average annual tuition fees paid by domestic and international students from 2012-13 to 2022-23. Also included is the estimated international tuition fees, if they were regulated by B.C.'s Tuition Fee Limit policy which as of now only regulates domestic tuition fee increases.

For example, in December 2022, Emily Carr University of Art and Design (ECUAD) announced a 30% increase in international tuition fees for incoming international students and a 10% increase for current international students. When questioned in the media about the massive increase, the university responded that due to the University Act, there was a requirement to table a balanced budget: "The tuition increase is required for the university to continue providing a quality education for students today and into the future".<sup>xix</sup> In the case of ECUAD, it is clear that international students are viewed as the solution; but this will not change the systematic issues of underfunding or mismanagement at the university. This happens across the province, in fact, we have heard institutional administrators even refer to international students at "revenue generating units".

The over-reliance of post-secondary institutions on international tuition fee revenue is not only evident in institutional decision-making, but also in the lack of resiliency and planning for fluctuations in this particular revenue source. The pandemic provides a small but impactful study to the systemic weakness caused by the over-reliance on international tuition revenue, which was compounded by the lack of institutional preparedness for a drop in non-domestic enrolment. Okanagan College, as an example, lost 25% of its international students during the pandemic which roughly translated to 380 students.<sup>xx</sup> Those 380 students resulted in a loss of over \$2.3 million dollars in revenue; in comparison, the college also lost 900 domestic students which resulted in a loss of \$2.0 million dollars.<sup>xxi</sup> While neither Canada nor the province had control over the pandemic, both the federal and provincial governments must create resiliency in the post-secondary education systems from fluctuation in international enrolment caused by external factors. Geopolitical struggles (seen recently in Ukraine) and natural disasters (such as the flooding in Bangladesh and India) are just two examples of external forces that negatively affect international enrolment, more precisely, international tuition revenue for institutions. Institutions have a lot to gain from recruiting international students, but a lot to lose with the current lack of regulation.

External forces are not the only threat to the international student enrolment, and the tuition revenue that comes with it. Living, employment, and social conditions in the province and country, have an impact on international enrolment patterns. International students can only tolerate so many fee increases, especially since their education costs are compounded with other costs like rent, utilities, groceries, medical expenses, and transportation. The record high inflation seen in 2022 is a prime example of how internal conditions in the province negatively affect international students' ability to live and study in BC. The harsh reality is that British Columbians cannot afford to not have international students on our campuses. Policy makers and institutions need to understand the risk posed by unregulated and unpredictable international student tuition fees on the viability of the current post-secondary system. It is important for policy-makers to address the weaknesses caused by an over-reliance on international tuition fees, through regulation and careful management. Not to take action in this direction is irresponsible and creates great economic risks and instability to the province and the country.

# Community Impact of International Education

The financial benefit of international students does not just impact institutional budgets alone. In addition to tuition fees, international students invest vast sums into local economies across BC on staples such as housing, food, transportation, and entertainment. In a report by Canmac Economics Limited, in 2018 alone, the annual spending of international students amounted to \$4.7 billion, created 53,493 jobs, and contributed \$5.0 billion to the provincial GDP.<sup>xxii</sup> In economic terms, international education services are conceptualized as Canadian commodities, and money spent by international students in Canada is considered an export because international student money comes from abroad. As such, in 2017, international education services were the top export in BC, only after wood and mineral exports, and accounted for 10.5 percent of BC's total value of exported goods.<sup>xxiii</sup> Not only are international students providing economic benefits to the province through their spending, but their positive impact on the educational sector can be seen in the job growth in universities and colleges. In 2022, universities were the fifth largest employer in the province (behind restaurants, elementary-secondary schools, hospitals, and grocery stores).<sup>xxiv</sup> This has significant positive impact on the economic state of the province, and this benefit is not just felt in the Lower Mainland. International student enrolment has increased 89% in the North, 69% in the Kootenays, and 66% in the Thompson Okanagan between 2011 and 2021.<sup>xxv</sup>

This impact is especially important in rural BC; not only are colleges and universities important employers in the area, but institutions have become important community hubs. Research out of the United States shows the benefits beyond the money generated for small communities: it increases the ability to attract talent to the region, raises the income of residents, promotes entrepreneurial activities, promotes the creation of new industries and enhances the perception of the town for residents and visitors.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The significance of international students' contributions was evident during the pandemic, exemplified by the consequences to institutions. Decreasing enrollment during 2020 caused a loss of roughly \$7.3 billion in total student expenditures, leading to a total loss of \$7.1 billion from Canada; in BC there was a loss of \$1.2 billion in its GDP.<sup>xxvii</sup> Overall in 2020, Canada saw a 17% decrease in the number of international students<sup>xxviii</sup> and headcounts show BC's loss was only about 1.7% from the previous year, yet this resulted in a \$1.2 billion loss in the provincial GDP<sup>xxix</sup>. Some institutions had positive international enrolment despite the pandemic, which we will look at later, but some experienced major losses which resulted in massive budgetary problems.



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## 2018 Economic Impact of International Students

**\$4.7B**

annual spending of international students in British Columbia.

**53,493**

jobs created by international students in British Columbia.

**\$5.0B**

contributed by international students to the provincial GDP.

# Threat to Enrolment: Unregulated, Unsustainable, and Unfair

The biggest financial challenge facing international students is the inability to adequately budget throughout their education. In addition to fee increases being unregulated, there are no regulations governing when, how or in what manner increases are applied to students. Because the decision-making on tuition increases is tied to institutional budgetary needs, it is almost impossible for students to predict with any sort of certainty what international tuition will be from year to year at an institution, or between institutions in the same year. The level of unpredictability puts inordinate pressure on international students, and often results in students struggling to stay in BC to finish their studies. A US study found that international students' top three areas of dissatisfaction with their post-secondary institutions were all related to finances: access to jobs/internships, affordability, and availability of scholarships are all factors that contribute to international students leaving their institution or dropping out. Cost and affordability are crucial factors in international students' decision-making on whether to pursue studies in the province. Hence, the unregulated and unsustainable practices around international tuition fee setting threaten to tank the market, and represent the sector's self-cannibalisation that will eventually be its downfall.

"It is important to realize that many international students are taking an 'investment' approach to studying abroad and hence, are looking to measure their experiences and outcomes in terms of tangible and intangible payoffs."<sup>xxxix</sup>

As the cost of education increases, BC and Canada are becoming less desirable places for international students to study. In 2016, BC was home to about 20% of post-secondary international students, while Ontario had 41% of international students in Canada. By 2021, however, BC was home to 17% of international students, while Ontario's share rose to 51%.<sup>xxxix</sup> These are the early warning signs that something about the situation in BC is driving away international students. Even factoring in the global pandemic due to COVID-19, which affected all provinces of Canada, there was still a significant difference on how this impacted Ontario and BC. There was a loss of enrolment in Ontario of 1% between 2019-20 and 2020-21; meanwhile, the loss was 9% in BC.<sup>xxxix</sup> That 9% loss in enrolment equates to significant losses of revenue for the province and its institutions.

The lack of regulation on international student tuition, driven by the lack of government funding to post-secondary institutions, poses considerable risk to BC's international education sector. This analysis is echoed in a report on international recruitment from 2016, which warned that BC could only defend its position as a "prime international student destination" if it addressed three key challenges: cost, diversification, and competition.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The lack of regulation is even more evident when comparing how vastly international student fees range between institutions and by the program. The range of variance makes comparing the average cost around the province difficult, and, if it were easier, not as useful as knowing the median or mode. The table on page 8 shows the cost of the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) at public post-secondary institutions across BC, as it remains the most popular program for international students to take. These program costs were calculated based on publicly available information on institutional websites as of Spring 2023.

We need to look critically at what international students are being charged and how it impacts the sector as a whole. North Island College charges international students \$15,740 a year, nearly four times the amount domestic students are charged (\$4,260). Whereas University of British Columbia charges \$58,948 a year, ten times the amount domestic students are charged (\$5,843).<sup>xxxix</sup> Even accounting for economies of scale and other market conditions, institutions are going far beyond a simple "cost-recovery" model. The way that institutions have exercised their autonomy in setting fees demonstrates a lack of foresight into how fee setting at each institution creates disharmony in the international education sector. If the public and prospective international students cannot discern rhyme or reason for how fees are assessed and set in the province, the impression of predation by institutions becomes near impossible to combat.

Individual institutional decisions impact the entire sector. Failing to regulate the system puts institutional budgets and the whole public post-secondary system into an incredibly precarious situation. Often, we are told that the market will just adjust, and tuition will only go up as much as the market will allow. This is only true if the public post-secondary system functioned in a true market: in such a scenario, institutions could survive on domestic tuition alone, and fluctuation in international tuition, including decreases, would be possible.

Currently, whether because of underfunding or institutional mismanagement, international tuition fees cannot decrease according to market forces and have the public post-secondary system survive. The market-driven defence of the current fee regime in BC does not account for the rapidly changing, interconnected, and digital world we live in and deep institutional dependencies on these fees. The market-driven defence of the current regime also does not consider that quality international education is available in other markets outside the US, or the cost-sensitivity of international students as consumers. Cost sensitivity has been found to be an important factor in the decision of international students. In a 2015 survey of international students conducted by the BC Council On Admissions & Transfer, 59% of students considered the



cost of tuition and 52% considered the cost of living a very important factor in deciding where to attend school (both categories reached 87% when including the 'somewhat important' categories).<sup>xxxvi</sup> Since publishing that report, tuition fees have gone up over 38%<sup>xxxvii</sup> and those pressures are only increasing. Using tuition fees as a significant revenue source for institutions leaves our entire post-secondary education system at the mercy of international market stressors. We cannot afford to have our post-secondary institutions crumble by gambling on what institutions think the market will allow them to charge.

One strength of post-secondary in BC is its transfer system, meaning students in BC, including international students are able to pay less tuition by attending a college for two years then transferring to a university. The existence of the transfer system puts the final nail in the coffin of the market-driven defence of the current international tuition fee regime. The transfer system is predicated on the principle that there is no difference in the quality of public post-secondary institutions in the province, meaning that quality cannot be considered as the driving force behind tuition differences between the price of education at different institutions. As has been said earlier, it is the underfunding of post-secondary institutions that is driving increases in international tuition fees. This underfunding also has a negative impact on the sustainability of the transfer system. Many colleges have reported, in their submissions to the 2022 Funding Review, that they are having difficulty recruiting staff due to low wages and constrained budgets. Colleges are a crucial component to our post-secondary system. Not only have they historically provided higher education opportunities in regions where none existed previously, but they also provide retraining, continuing education, and skill development opportunities, including university preparation. Colleges in the province need more public funding to support the mandates they were given in the McDonald report. If they are unable to keep up due to underfunding, we lose them as a competitive advantage.

### INTERNATIONAL TUITION FEES: COST OF THE BACHELOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (BBA) AT PUBLIC POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS ACROSS BC

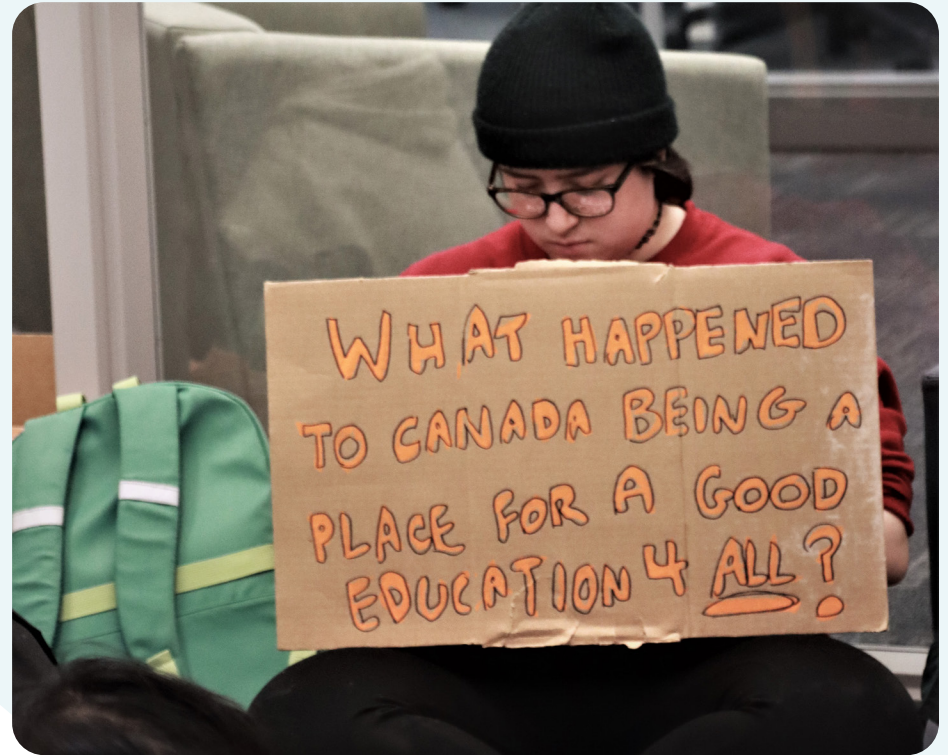
Institution	Int. Tuition	Other Fees	Total	Yearly
North Island College	\$56,181.60	\$6,781.28	\$62,962.88	\$15,740.72
Langara College	\$61,248.00	\$5,280.00	\$66,528.00	\$16,632.00
Thompson Rivers University	\$63,152.00	\$4,424.00	\$67,576.00	\$16,894.00
Camosun College	\$62,160.00	\$5,488.00	\$67,648.00	\$16,912.00
Okanagan College	\$64,000.00	\$5,040.00	\$69,040.00	\$17,260.00
College of the Rockies	\$66,491.70	\$2,646.11	\$69,137.81	\$17,284.45
University of Fraser Valley	\$62,976.00	\$6,760.00	\$69,736.00	\$17,434.00
Douglas College	\$74,910.00	\$2,627.28	\$77,537.28	\$19,384.32
Capilano University	\$78,871.80	\$6,762.48	\$85,634.28	\$21,408.57
Vancouver Island University	\$86,968.00	\$4,520.00	\$91,488.00	\$22,872.00
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	\$83,769.00	\$9,756.00	\$93,525.00	\$23,381.25
University of Northern British Columbia	\$95,273.00	\$4,136.00	\$99,409.00	\$24,852.25
University of Victoria	\$119,506.00	\$14,953.00	\$134,459.00	\$33,614.75
Simon Fraser University	\$127,096.00	\$8,344.00	\$135,440.00	\$33,860.00
Royal Roads University	\$134,763.00	\$4,199.00	\$138,962.00	\$34,740.50
University of British Columbia	\$232,560.00	\$3,232.00	\$235,792.00	\$58,948.00

# Cost of Living

International students in British Columbia are already struggling bearing the costs of their education, and the financial strain this causes can be seen on every campus. This is evident in the high usage of students' union food bank and grocery store voucher services by international students, particularly because they are not eligible to access existing bursaries or emergency funding. Research done at universities in western Canada found that a lack of income to meet the high costs of obtaining an education was the predominant factor in food insecurity.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Students reported struggling with food insecurity because they were un- or under-employed and their families at home were unable to help.<sup>xxxix</sup> Many of these students suffer in silence out of fear that admitting they need financial help will interfere with their study permit. Given the likelihood of international students who do not know about support or do not want to use supports, international students are still disproportionately represented as users at food banks. One Vancouver food bank said up to three-quarters of the students they help are international students.<sup>xl</sup> Students' unions in communities like Kamloops have reported international students are being turned away from food banks because there is not enough food to go around.

Many British Columbians struggle with the ever-increasing cost of living, especially in 2022-23 when the province and the country was experiencing record high inflation. International students carefully plan and budget for their living and educational needs before studying internationally. This careful planning also factors in the restrictions on their employment. Drastic increases in tuition and the cost of living create financial precarity for international students that cannot be solved by simply getting a job or working more hours. Typically, international students are only allowed to work 20 hours per week off-campus; this provision was temporarily lifted from November 2022 to December 2023, but it may not remain a permanent change. Even with restrictions lifted, many factors make finding employment hard for international students: lack of domestic experience, the need for flexible scheduling, and work hours that fall outside 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Domestic students face similar challenges but have more avenues to access funding, like the Canada Student Loan Programs, or various government grants, bursaries, or other need-based aid. International students only have access to a small number of private scholarships through institutions that are typically grades-based not needs-based. 71% of international graduate students and 63% of undergraduates reported a difficulty adjusting to the cost of living in 2015.<sup>xli</sup> But since then, the cost of food has increased 350% and shelter 443%.<sup>xlii</sup>

Increases in the cost of living and the difficulties in finding employment that permits full-time study, are not the only challenges that international students face when budgeting for their education. Another challenge international students are facing is the inaccurate information about the cost of living provided by institutional websites and recruiting agents. As an example,



Douglas College tells international students to budget \$12,300 per year for food and rent (or \$1,025 dollars a month).<sup>xliii</sup> The average rental costs per person according to information gathered from the primary and secondary rental market show the average cost of rent in BC per person is \$1,415 for a two bedroom and \$1,099 for a three bedroom.<sup>xliii</sup> International students often report using homestay, living in illegal suites, or filling apartments above safe occupancy levels in order to afford rentals. Often on-campus housing is touted as the solution to the affordability crisis for students and has garnered significant investment from government; but there are no regulations in place to ensure pricing, nor are students afforded renter rights under the Rental Tenancy Act. Often, the on-campus housing can be cheaper than market rentals, but students are frequently forced to get meal plans, which raises the overall price. Also, campuses with residences tend to be in more isolated areas, making students dependent on university or college services without access to variety of options for goods and services.

Combating the cost-of-living increases is a challenge. Institutions cannot control costs externally, but they can control costs within their institution, including tuition fees. Institutions and the government cannot afford not to control up-front costs of international education, given the uncertain economic times facing the province.

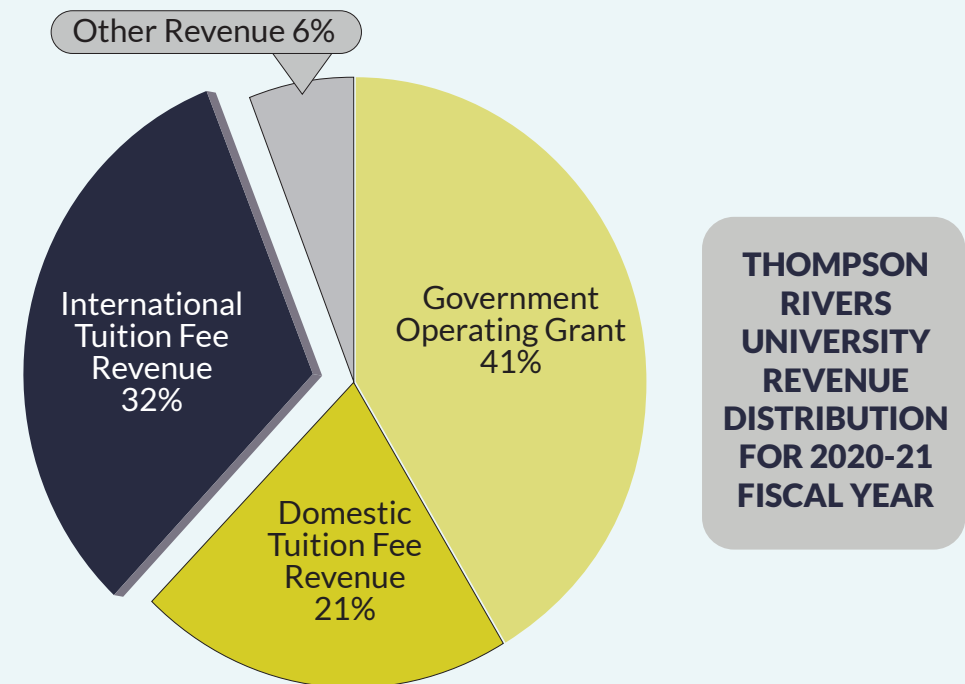
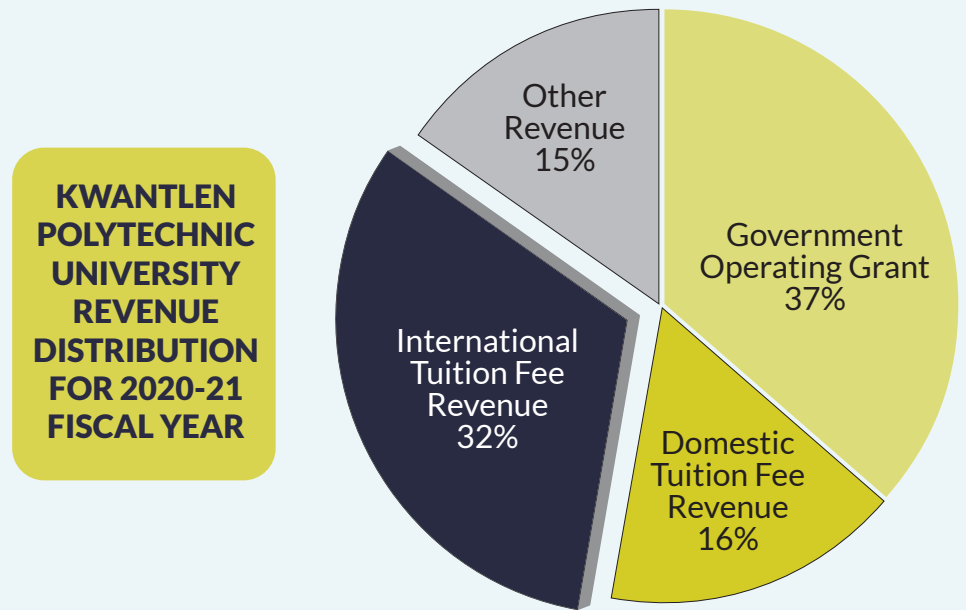
# More Than Their Fair Share

Following the national trend, British Columbia receives immense benefits from international students attending school in the province through their contribution to our workforce and our GDP. Still, international students experience no reciprocal benefits from the province, as they shoulder the increasing public funding shortfall in our public post-secondary education system. When looking at individual institutional budgets, it is clear that international student tuition is a huge proportion of the revenue at public institutions, showcasing yet another way that the over-reliance on this revenue source is manifesting itself. The unfairness of the current tuition regime to the province's international students remains apparent, even when looking at the issue from a purely provincial lens.

It is not difficult to see the national patterns and trends discussed above, reflected in the behaviour and budgets of institutions in BC. In 2020/21 both Kwantlen Polytechnic University and Thompson Rivers University saw international student tuition fees comprise 32% of the total operating budget.<sup>xiv</sup> At Thompson Rivers University, international students' tuition fee revenue was only \$7.5 million less than the government's operational funding in 2021-22 fiscal year.<sup>xvi</sup> International students pay more tuition fees than all domestic students combined at 10 of the 12 institutions looked at for this report.<sup>xvii</sup> At 3 of the 12 universities looked at, tuition fees (domestic and international) made up more of the revenue than the provincial grant.<sup>xviii</sup>

The perils of relying on international students for the solvency of BC's publicly funded institutions were made abundantly evident during the pandemic. Even with the decreased spending during the period, 20 public institutions were approved deficit budgeting for the 2020-21 academic year, and 17 were approved to have another deficit budget in 2021-22.<sup>xix</sup> Though institutions were able to pivot to online delivery during the pandemic (and still charge differential fees), variances in international student tuition (and user fees charged to all students) still exposed the weakness of the current system. The levels of over-reliance on international tuition, coupled with the reliance on other variable revenue sources, is an unsustainable model for maintaining a strong post-secondary education system in the province.

The skyrocketing cost of international student fees has been masking the problem of chronic underfunding in our sector. In 2000, provincial funding made up 68% of operational revenue and now makes up only 40%. Funding to the sector has not been stable or predictable, it changes frequently with the priorities of government. As a result, our public institutions are no longer funded by the government but by young people and their families through the collection of tuition fees. Institutions often include in their public budget documents that international tuition fees are higher than domestic fees to offset the cost citizens have paid for post-secondary through lifelong tax collection; however, that is not the case when considering the differential fees. Institutions are charging more because the proportion of public funding has been reduced significantly, while education costs have increased.



# No Financial Support Available

There is a harmful stereotype that international students come from wealthy families and thus have endless financial means to send their children to schools abroad. But that is not the case. Given the data available about who comes to study in BC and why, the stereotype is nothing more than a thinly veiled justification – with racist undertones – of the systematic and institutional maltreatment international students face. A survey by Punjabi University found that 67% of students studying in English language training institutes and planning on studying abroad, come from farming families; and 54% of students' families will sell a property or take loans to fund their education.<sup>i</sup> First and foremost, this is a massive stress to put on any student, much less someone moving to a new country without access to family support. But additionally, these students are exposed to economic issues in their home countries. With tuition fees between \$15,000 and \$58,000 a year - before any money for the cost-of-living

expenses - this leaves very little room to handle financial variability. Even though the Canadian government has temporarily removed the 20-hour cap for off-campus work, there are few jobs available suitable to maintain with full-time studies simultaneously. 78% of students rely on funding from their families or communities, 53% have used their personal savings, and 33% use their off-campus work income to fund their studies.<sup>ii</sup> In 2021, a survey out of Carleton University showed 80% of international students were either very concerned or concerned about their ability to pay for their education.<sup>iii</sup> With a dearth of additional funding sources that are needs-based and not merit-based, struggling international students being pushed further out in the cold. Many institutions do not provide needs-based financial aid for international students, or they offer very small emergency bursaries.

It is also important to state that international students are not a monolith. Wealth and academic preparedness are important ways that international students diverge in profile, behaviour, needs and expectations. A study by World Education Services (WES) researched different profiles of international students from 115 countries in 2011 to better understand the information international students use to decide where to study. The study examined students' financial resources and academic preparedness levels and how they affected their decision of where to study. WES firstly segmented the international student market into four categories: high financial resources/low academic preparedness (Explorers), high financial resources/high academic preparedness, (Highfliers) low financial resources/high academic preparedness (Strivers), and low financial resources/low academic preparedness (Strugglers). Those with low financial resources make up 47% of the market (low financial resources and academic preparedness is 16%).<sup>iiii</sup> In addition, 30% of respondents prefer information on financial aid opportunities, and 25% are interested in the student services and support of the institutions. In comparison, 21% prioritize both due to financial resources and academic preparedness limitations. Additionally, 46% of the Indian respondents selected costs (tuition and living costs) and post-graduation career opportunities, and 38% chose financial aid opportunities as the top three factors. The study busts the stereotype that international students come from wealthy families; instead, international students come from diverse economic backgrounds. To make the international education market sustainable in Canada and BC, steps to regulate education costs and provide quality support must take priority.

This cuts both ways in British Columbia. If costs become out of reach for the Indian market, we will lose students to other, more affordable provinces and countries; and with China being our second largest market, those students have ever increasing choice available to them, as BC's national and international competitors continue grow. In a well-funded public post-secondary system, variability in enrolment from two source countries would be generally manageable, but over-reliance on international tuition fees means even the smallest shift in the market has huge institutional impacts that neither the province nor institutions can afford.



78% of international students surveyed rely on funding from families and communities



53% of international students surveyed rely on personal savings



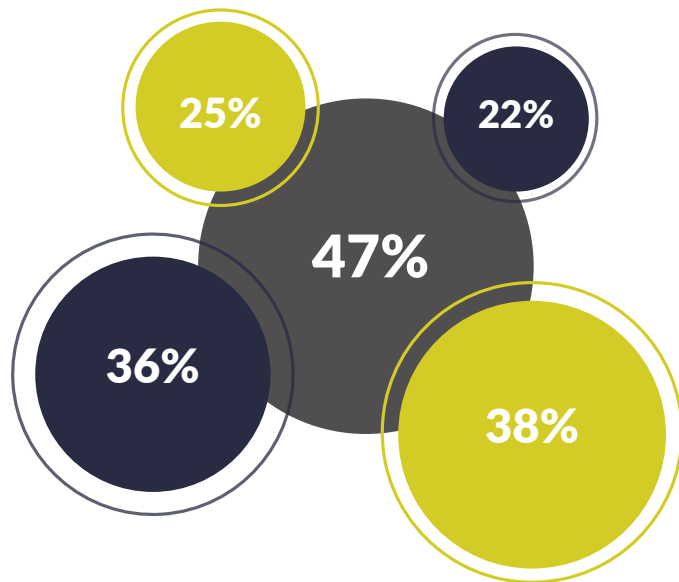
33% of international students surveyed rely on off-campus work income

# Lack of Institutional Support: Causing Current and Future Problems

International students face many of the same problems domestic students face in balancing financially supporting themselves during their studies. Domestic students are afforded the option to study less courses but spread across more semesters, which is now very common. Differently, international students must attend full-time classes<sup>iv</sup> as defined by Immigration, Refugees and Citizen Canada (IRCC). At most colleges and universities this means a minimum of 9 credits (typically 3 classes). However, a “normal” course load is two semesters of 15 credits (5 classes each), which allows for graduation in the allotted 2 or 4 years. Additionally, there are varying minimum credits for a full-time designation. For example, at University of Fraser Valley international students are charged for a minimum of 12 credits in the Fall and Winter semester. If an international wanted to take three classes, they would be charged for four regardless.

Many institutions suggest allotting anywhere from 30 to 50 hours a week for studying and coursework, in addition to instruction hours. Most classes are roughly 4 hours per week (up to an additional 4 for courses with a lab component). Students with a four-class semester will expect to spend anywhere from 46 to 80 hours working on school. That leaves anywhere from 22 to 88 hours to eat, work, socialize, tend to your personal needs, and sleep. For all students, this leaves little time to work without impacting their studies. International students are often doing all this without necessary social supports.

It is no wonder that international students report not feeling like they are connected to their communities and other Canadians. Research conducted by the Canadian Bureau for International education in 2019 showed that 47% of international students felt disconnected from their community, and 36% felt disconnected from Canadian students from other cultural backgrounds.<sup>iv</sup> Institutions unintentionally contribute to this lack of social integration by the programming organisation. For example, many colleges and universities offer ‘international cohorts’ – programs with slightly different classes but no integration between international and domestic students. Though organising these international cohorts helps reduce the administrative burden on institutions (e.g by offering specific orientation, tailoring course work, or lowering entrance requirements), these programs isolate international students even more and reinforce existing prejudices. However, if Canada and BC intend to use international education as an immigration pathway, it is crucial to ensure many opportunities for social integration, both inside the classroom and outside, are made available for international students.



**47%**

of international students felt disconnected from community members.

**38%**

of international students felt disconnected from Canadian students who share their cultural background.

**36%**

of international students felt disconnected from Canadian students from other cultural backgrounds.

**25%**

of international students felt disconnected from other international students from their home country.

**22%**

of international students felt disconnected from international students from other countries.

International students also need and deserve specialized services on campuses. Students' unions often become the first point of contact for international students. Commonly, international students go to their students' unions to find resources about immigration, worker rights, employment opportunities, mental health supports, housing registries, emergency aid, or renter rights. The BC Federation of Students provides a legal aid hotline for participating students' unions that provides students access to free legal advice and heavily discounted legal services if needed. Immigration support is the third highest advice category sought out by students at 17%, (first is civil litigation and second is tenancy law). More and more students' unions have stepped up to provide these services because they do not exist or are limited at the institution. However, supporting student success should be the institution's responsibility, not the students. Research has shown that when institutions take action to embrace diversity and create socially supportive school contexts, this can improve the social inclusion and academic success of not just international students but all students.<sup>lvi</sup>

The current system of wholly unregulated fees is based on two false assumptions: international students are a monolith (rich), and that BC has the comparative advantage in international education, when compared to other provinces and other countries. In light of what has been presented, it is foolhardy that any stakeholder or policymaker would continue to gamble that international students and their families will easily shoulder unpredictable tuition increases or will make greater sacrifices to study in BC. There is very little research on international student retention in the Canadian market. The decision of fee increases is not being made with a view of a full environmental scan of Canada and the rest of the world, but rather to balance current budgets. This short thinking is not only unfair for international students, but severely limits BC and Canada's ability to recruit and retain international students because year after year it dishonestly increases the financial threshold for entry.

## Lessons to Learn From

*Canada needs immigration. In 2020, Canada saw its lowest birthrate in 14 years in every province and territory.<sup>lvii</sup> It is not just a matter of population, it is also about geographic density. Between 2016 and 2021, BC has only seen an increase in rural populations by 0.5%, whereas the urban population increased by 8.7%.<sup>lviii</sup> BC has an opportunity to expand its pool of skilled workers and supplement its rural population by recruiting and retaining international students. However, the current state of international education in the province is precarious. We have seen first-hand the enormous impact COVID-19 had on our post-secondary system and numerous other examples of what happens when post-secondary systems are highly dependent on international students.*

## Case Study: Australia

Australia spent over a decade rebuilding its reputation, after a major shift in its international enrolment. Between 2002 and 2009, international enrolment from India grew from 10,073, 4.4% of all international students to 89,416, 18%.<sup>lix</sup> There was a growing discontentment among Indian students surrounding the cost of their education and feeling taken advantage of that was coupled with a lack of student supports and efforts for community integration.<sup>lx</sup> In May 2009, two assaults on Indian students in Melbourne made the national media in India. The first assault was caught on CCTV cameras at a Melbourne train station; student Sourabh Sharma was brutally mobbed and robbed by five youths. The second assault was another unprovoked stabbing of the student, Shravan Kumar, in the head with a screwdriver. These stories were picked up by Indian media and featured prominently in their news cycle in the months that followed.<sup>lxi</sup> In January 2010, a student, Nitin Garg, was murdered in Melbourne and the story circulated across social media and traditional media. The stories of violence struck a nerve with the millions of middle-class families with many family members studying abroad.

Additionally, the Indian media began interviewing students in Australia about their experiences in the country and the racism they experienced regularly. This all culminated in a 4,000-student protest in Melbourne in June 2009, organised by the Federation of Indian Students of Australia, with complaints of police and government officials not taking the concerns of students seriously.<sup>lxii</sup> In January 2010, India's Ministry of External Affairs issued a travel warning for Australia.<sup>lxiii</sup> As a result of this ongoing negative media, Australia saw a sharp decline of international students from India, from 89,416 in 2009 to 36,060 by 2012<sup>lxiv</sup> resulting in an economic loss of \$2.5 billion.<sup>lxv</sup> International student enrolment from the Indian market did not rebound fully until 2018.<sup>lxvi</sup>

BC should not ignore this lesson. The rush to take advantage of the ever-changing market of international students without proper means of support can have devastating consequences. In the Indian student market, 68% of students use the recommendation of someone they know and 48% use social media when determining which country or region to go to school in.<sup>lxvii</sup> This means the experience of others in the country is a significant factor in decision making. In BC, we see reports of international students struggling, specifically those from India. In January 2023 Narinder Singh Walia, President of Surrey's Gurdwara Dukh Nivaran reported that four students died from the toxic drug supply.<sup>lxviii</sup> There has also been an alarming number of international students dying by suicide which is often underreported based on the way the Coroner collects citizenship information.<sup>lxix</sup>

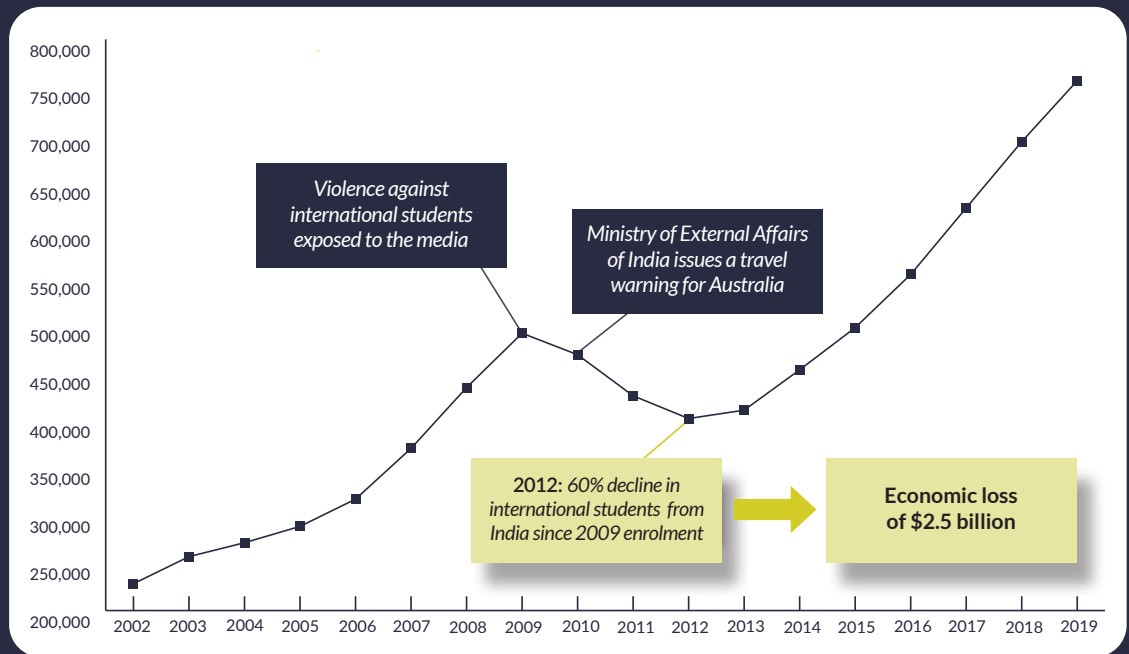
In September 2022, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a warning to Indian students in Canada about the rising threat of hate crimes faced by international students.<sup>lxx</sup> The World Sikh Organisation of Canada has said this warning was not a because of increased violence against Indian students but rather in retaliation for Indians in Canada expressing political support for the Khalistani secessionist movement.<sup>lxxi</sup> In either case, a warning for Indian students, no matter its origin, can have a significant impact on enrolment in Canada.

We cannot view international students as a renewable resource – replaceable and abundant – and view their challenges as inconsequential. Ignoring the significant financial and social challenges faced by international students, while depending on them to provide tuition fees, fill labour shortages, and support population replacement, is a recipe for disaster, as Australia learned. More and more students are ripe for exploitation because of the financial burden they carry year after year to pay for their school and the cost of living. The incredible amount of stress combined with social isolation and lack of mental health support will cause this problem only to get worse. BC should be very concerned, especially given what happened in Australia, and be proactive in reducing the harm to students.

## Case Study: Saudi Arabia

In 2018, just before the start of the academic year, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland tweeted a criticism of the Saudi government over its detention of a human rights activist. The Saudi government responded by expelling the Canadian Ambassador. It announced they would be pulling out more than 15,000 students in Canada and suspending any students' funding if they chose to stay in Canada.<sup>lxxii</sup> Though this number is not huge, many of those students are represented in important programming for the Canadian government looking to have graduates stay in Canada: Science and Medicine. The Saudi government then recommended that their students instead go to schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. Schools in the United States, primarily because of the proximity to the students, created accelerated acceptance streams to accommodate the exiting Saudi students before the Fall semester began.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Thankfully, after significant diplomatic efforts, students were permitted to stay; significant efforts had to be made because the Canadian government "realized the cascading effect."<sup>lxxiv</sup> But despite best efforts, some institutions were hit hard, for example Lakehead University lost 2% of their revenue from the loss of about 152 students and overall Canadian institutions lost about 6,360 students.<sup>lxxv</sup>

At any time, a political issue could arise and have devastating impacts on our post-secondary institutions. These political issues are hard to predict and difficult to manage. Any numbers of issues, like wars, famine, economic or political crisis, could result in decreases of enrolment and many of our institutions would have a challenge handling any lost revenue. Our post-secondary system needs to be able to survive with public funding because it is a crucial component for the economic welfare of the province.



### INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLMENT IN AUSTRALIA

# Global Competition: Threats to British Columbia's International Student Enrolment

*The recruitment of international students is not a uniquely Canadian phenomenon; the international market of students is enticing to many different countries for many different reasons. Though anglophone countries continue to be the most popular destinations for international students, other countries worldwide have adopted English instruction to compete in the market. However, given the percentage of international tuition fees as a component of BC college and university budgets, this is a considerable threat to the operation of almost every institution in BC. The movement of international students is constantly evolving based on institutional, provincial, national, and multi-national policies and economic factors such as the value of the dollar, cost of living, housing arrangements, and tuition. COVID-19 also dragged every school into offering some type of online education, some more than others, creating even more competition internationally.*

## United States

The United States is home to some of the world's highest ranked universities and is a powerhouse in terms of its cultural output. Many international (and indeed Canadian students) dream of attending one of the country's ivy league or state schools. The United States continues to be the top destination for international students, housing over a million international students in 2019-20, but their popularity is waning over the years.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Some challenges the United States has in terms of their recruitment are the cost of education and living. Some estimates say on average, Canadian post-secondary education costs 27% less.<sup>lxxvii</sup> The United States, also suffers from a complicated immigration system that makes it challenging and confusing for international students to stay after graduation. In addition, increasing violence and violent rhetoric have shifted the perceived value of American education.

Many institutions have noticed this trend and have taken action to reverse these effects. Universities like Missouri State have created an International Care and Advocacy Team that assists in providing culturally relevant mental health supports, a food pantry stocked with cultural food options, and scholarship assistance. For the 2022-23 academic year, two-thirds of institutions report increased applications, a complete rebound from their COVID-19 numbers.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In 2021, the US Department of State and the Department of Education released a joint statement of principles to support increased recruitment of international students.

Similar to BC, many states cut funding to post-secondary as international tuition fee revenues grew by as much as 10%.<sup>lxxix</sup> International students are now making the same determination as domestic students: *is the investment worth it?* However, the US and many universities and colleges still have a lot of financial resources at their disposal to reverse the tides and be able to tap into the ever-growing market of international students who do not have the funds to go to an American school.





## China

Though China is the top supplier of international students to OECD countries, China has also risen to the third most popular destination for international students, second only to the US and on par with the United Kingdom.<sup>lxxx</sup> China does not look at the exchange of international students from an economic lens, but rather an international one: looking to increase its country's role in international diplomacy. As such, some universities charge a differential fee, but the costs are considerably lower than in Canada. A semester at Peiking University for an undergraduate art degree costs about 26,000 RMB or \$5,101 CAD a year, \$10,000 less per year than BC's most affordable college for international students.<sup>lxxxii</sup> China has been stepping up its recruitment, focusing on mostly international students from surrounding countries in Asia or Africa, where it knows it can outcompete the price of more expensive global north schools.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Consequently, China is becoming a popular choice for all students to consider, with seven of its universities in the top 150 university rankings. Additionally, it has a lower cost of living and a growing economy looking to recruit talent. China is well positioned to begin recruiting international students out of the Canadian market and has already begun retaining students who would have otherwise been international students in Canada.

## United Kingdom

Due to Brexit, Canada and other host countries have undoubtedly benefited from some increase in enrolment of students in the European Union. Prior to 2020, students from the EU were charged home fees (on average 10,255 euros) and could qualify for financial assistance if they went to school in England or Wales; however, upon their withdrawal, those fees soared to an average of 43,300 euros.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> As a result, enrolment of EU students plummeted, dropping by 53% between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic year. The United Kingdom had already launched an aggressive international student recruitment strategy in 2019 with the goal of increasing the number of international students in the United Kingdom from 500,000 to 600,000 by 2030. Despite the pandemic and Brexit, they reached this goal in 2020-21 (10 years early) thanks to increasing enrolments from other markets, like China.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Like Canada, institutions in the United Kingdom would struggle to sustain their operations without international students. As such, the government is working on a number of initiatives to become more enticing for the international student market, including extending the post-study leave period, and improvements to the visa processing system, and are looking to implement programming giving international students more financial assistance.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

# CONCLUSION

Canada and British Columbia may benefit from record-high enrolments now, but this will not last forever. The international student market is dynamic and dependent on so many different factors far outside the control of our governments. The growing segment of the international student market is those students without high financial means, and their decision-making on where to go to school is exactly the same as domestic students from low means: where can I afford to go? Given the financial resources available to countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and China, there is a very real concern about Canada's ability to compete in the market. In British Columbia, many institutions are struggling to keep up. Programs are being cut due to enrolment or funding issues, institutions do not have the resources to keep innovating curricula or learning practices due to lack of funding, and many institutions are struggling to hire and retain instructors and staff due to low wages.

Years ago, it was thought that a viable alternative to public funding was international tuition fees. However, this set a dangerous precedent for international students, institutions, and governments alike. Unregulated, unpredictable, and unaffordable fees are detrimental to international students and their well-being. International students struggle to survive in a new country, far away from home, with limited financial resources. This level of precarity has dire consequences. In the United Kingdom,<sup>lxvii</sup> United States,<sup>lxviii</sup> Australia,<sup>lxvix</sup> and Canada<sup>xc</sup> international students have become targets of human traffickers in prostitution or forced labour. Research on international students shows that academic stressors are directly and positively linked to suicidal ideation<sup>xcj</sup> and the cost of education is one of the largest stressors on the mind of international students.

Canada and British Columbia have identified international students as a key component of our immigration system. It allows for the requirement of immigrants trained in Canada and allows for the promotion of immigration to specific regions of the province. But as we saw in the case of Australia, if these students begin to feel unsafe and taken advantage of, they will leave. Currently, the future Canada promotes is through the key driver for international enrolment. Our institutions provide high-quality education, plentiful post-graduate work opportunities, and our country is safe. However, if international students continue to struggle here with impossible academic conditions and deal with wholly unregulated fee increases, that will change.

International students do not just bring economic good to the country, but their participation in our classrooms and our communities is incredibly valuable. Creating a post-secondary education system that works for governments, institutions, and students is possible.



# Moving Forward: A Plan that Works for Everyone

The BC Federation of Students has identified the following issues and recommends the following solutions:

## 1. Review the funding model and increase funding to post-secondary institutions

The post-secondary funding model is outdated and has created many constraints for institutions. In March 2022, the provincial government undertook the process of reviewing the funding model through sector-wide consultation. This is an excellent step in knowing where the inequities are in the system, but one thing is clear throughout all the submissions: we can spread the funds out differently in the sector, but there needs to be a significant increase to the operational funding. The Federation calls on the government to invest an additional \$500 million annually then implement a tuition fee freeze for domestic and international students.

## 2. Regulate international student tuition fees by including them in the tuition fee limit policy

The unregulated nature of international student tuition fees is causing the exploitation of international students – even if it is not intended. International fees should not bear the burden of making up for the short fall of funding to institutions. International students are not ‘revenue-generating units’, but people. The Federation calls for the immediate regulation of international tuition fees by including international fees in the Tuition Fee Limit policy at 2% allowable increases per year, to align with fee regulation for domestic students.

## 3. Reduce fees

After institutional funding is fixed and invested in, fees for all students need to be rolled back to reasonable levels, especially international fees. If the province wants to remain competitive in a rapidly changing environment, the cost of education is one of the strongest motivators in the growing international student market. Reduced fees will also result in less stress on international students and less dependence on other social services. British Columbians cannot afford to lose international students. Taking advantage of international students to fund our post-secondary institutions is a long-term losing strategy; it only works until it doesn't.

## 4. Create an international student strategy that focuses on, and centres success

If we want to continue to grow an educated, mobile, and skilled workforce, we need to invest in student success by reducing fees and allowing students to focus on completing their studies and joining the workforce. BC needs a strategy that centres the student, not enrolment, and needs to work with its federal counterparts to streamline the process of coming to the country. This plan should also include increased access to specialized support for international students at a community level such as culturally relevant mental health services, immigration services, support finding housing, and support learning about Canadian customs and laws.

## 5. Diversification and incentivization

The government should consider incentives such as grants to encourage enrolment in target areas and degrees, and increase the seats available for international students in programs like nursing, which are often only for domestic students. If the growing market of international students comes from lower financial support, the government should invest in ways to make our educational programming affordable and accessible.

## 6. Include student voices

Students are the experts in student experiences. The Federation calls on the government to ensure that student voices are represented in all bodies that provide recommendations to the government around international education and recruitment. It is crucial that government builds a relationship with international students in order to hear unbiased reports about their experiences throughout their education journey.

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