

International students: challenging the misconceptions

by Sue Vohanka
of Canadian University Press

When you think about international students on your campus, what assumptions do you make? Chances are, the assumptions you do have are actually misconceptions.

For example, many people grumble that visa students are typically rich Americans who've come to study in Canada to avoid paying the far more expensive tuition fees in the United States. Or, they assume that visa students are taking places in the education system that would otherwise go to Canadian students. Or, they gripe that international students are getting a free ride at the expense of the taxpayers because visa students don't pay that great a share of the costs of their education here.

These kinds of assumptions have provided the rationale for various government actions. The federal government, in an attempt to control the flow of visa students, has enacted legislation which makes it difficult for visa students to remain in Canada after finishing their studies and to work during their stay in Canada.

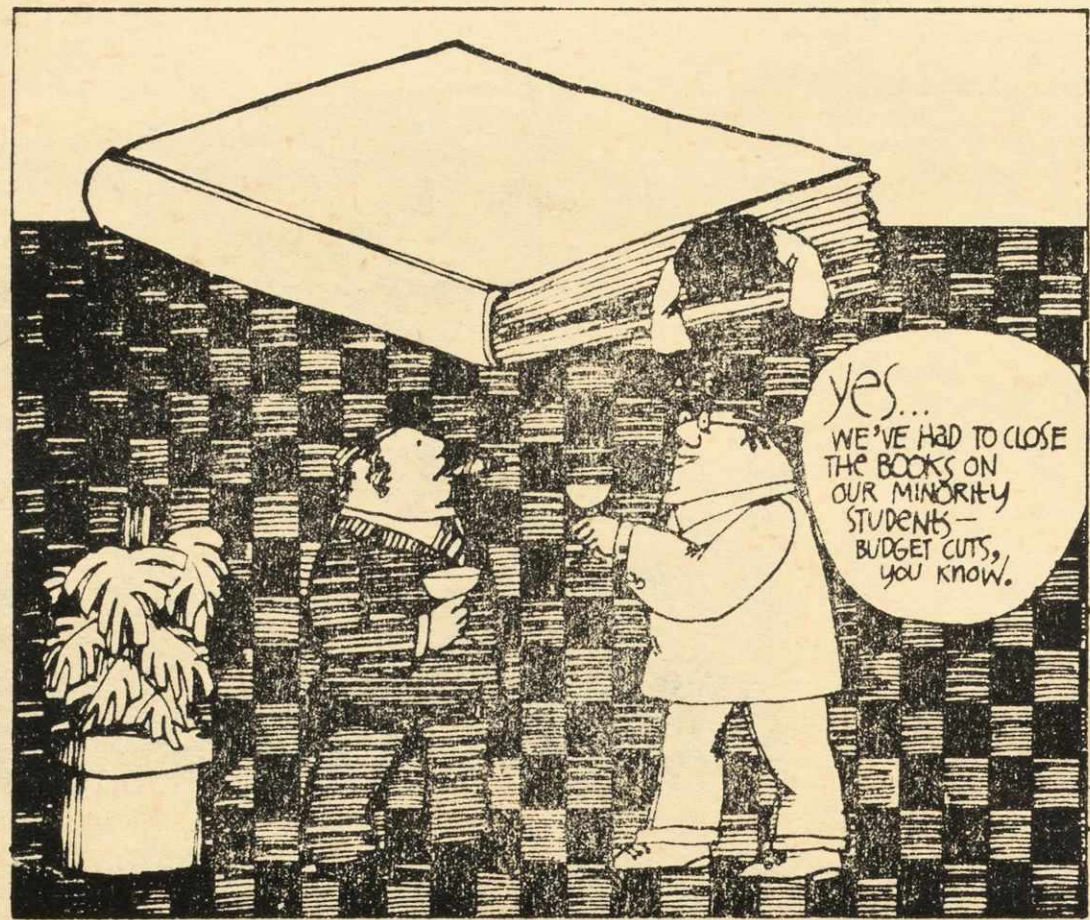
Provincial governments in Alberta and Ontario, responding to public pressure to "do something" about visa students, implemented differential fees for international students so that those students pay a far larger share of the cost of their education.

However, those actions, and the misconceptions which they are based on, are the result of a lack of correct information, according to a recently released statement on visa students prepared by the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

The CBIE statement says: "These governments and the Canadian public either did not recognize the benefit of foreign students in Canada, or felt they were paying too much for that benefit."

But the document, based on a series of surveys and reports on international students, also points out that visa students are not an economic burden on Canadian taxpayers because they effectively pay for themselves.

The legislation has followed a significant increase in the numbers of visa students entering Canada. But at the same time as the numbers have been increasing, the countries



of origin of visa students have been changing.

Traditionally, the United States was the main source of visa students. However, in recent years, the numbers of visa students coming to Canada from the U.S. have remained relatively stable—at between 9,000 and 10,000—while the numbers from other parts of the world have increased.

The most visible increase in students has been from Hong Kong. Between 1973 and 1976 the number of students from Hong Kong studying in Canada nearly tripled from about 6,000 to nearly 17,000. In fact, according to a CBIE-commissioned survey of full-time visa students at Canadian post-secondary institutions, well more than half of Canada's visa

students are Far East or Asian in origin.

"We all have our own ideas about the appropriate proportion of foreign students on Canadian campuses, and about the amount of money we should be spending for their presence. On the other hand, no one criticized the presence of foreign students when the number was small and the students themselves were indistinguishable from the mass of Canadian students," notes the CBIE statement.

The CBIE also laments the way visa students have been received in Canada, characterizing their reception as "an unplanned, haphazard operation," and suggesting that this may be due to a generally "random and impressionistic" understanding of visa students.

A soon to be released report on the costs of visa students has found that "the expenditure of money by the Canadian taxpayer, through grants to institutions, is roughly equal to the amount of money imported into Canada by incoming students," according to the CBIE.

"This foreign student money would not otherwise find its way into the economy. On this basis alone, foreign students pay for themselves.

"Moreover, the educational system could not do without the government funds they receive as a result of their foreign student population. Faculty and staff must still be paid and the physical plant must be kept up, even if there are fewer students. These costs cannot be cut without a major restructuring of Canadian educational systems. Therefore, for many Canadian institutions and their communities, foreign students are economically essential."

The numbers of visa students in Canada have grown rapidly, from about 30,000 in 1973 to nearly 56,000 in 1976, and institutions have been accepting increasing numbers of visa students.

But the statement is quick to point out that: "We have seen no evidence that this is being done at the expense of qualified Canadian applicants: those Canadian programs that are in very great demand, such as medicine, admit very few foreign students."

Although in a few, exceptional cases, visa students have put substantial but short-lived pressure on some institutions, there is no evidence that their presence generally puts pressure on the education system.

"... it is fair to say that they are simply picking up slack in the Canadian system... In fact, with the numbers of Canadian students decreasing because of demographic changes, one could argue that foreign students are needed to fill empty places and to maintain employment at the post-secondary level," says the CBIE.

But, if it's true that many people's assumptions about visa students are, in fact, misconceptions based on a lack of information, why have governments introduced legislation to limit numbers of international students entering the country and in some provinces charged them higher tuition fees than Canadian students pay?

The statement warns that: "Closed-door, insular thinking is not to Canada's advantage. In our rapidly shrinking and increasingly politicized world, Canada cannot afford to alienate its friends through a lack of generosity with its resources."

And it criticizes the restrictive measures taken recently against visa students, noting

that the way international students are treated in Canada has an effect on Canada's foreign relations.

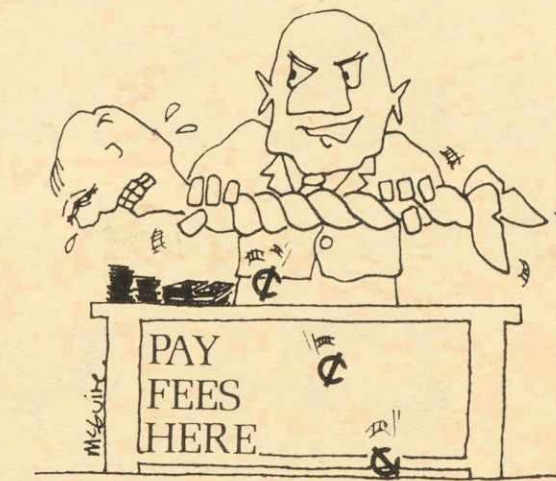
The CBIE points out that governments as well as institutions must share responsibility for the way international students are treated.

"The federal government is the first contact of most foreign students, through Canadian missions abroad. It is important to make foreign students feel welcome. Unfortunately, the new Immigration Act has quite the opposite effect. Its implementation will put additional barriers in the way of potential foreign students..."

Provincial governments, particularly those in Alberta and Ontario which have instituted differential fees for visa students, also come in for criticism.

The CBIE says that differential fees "have no positive, and a potentially negative, effect on the mix of students that come to Canada. They are highly visible and hurt precisely those students who do come. They discriminate in favour of the wealthier inhabitants of foreign countries, thus making a mockery of Canada's claims for equal educational opportunity.

"Moreover, since the amount by which fees have been increased does not nearly match the amount it costs to educate a student,



differential fees do not meet the objective of removing the burden of educational costs of foreign students from the Canadian taxpayer.

"In this respect, a small differential fee is considerably worse than a large one, since it projects a negative image without saving Canadian taxpayers any meaningful amount of money.

"When governments chose to implement differential fees, they took the easy rather than

the logical alternative."

The CBIE statement also corrects another misconception Canadians may have about international students, especially those students from the Third World.

"Many Canadians believe that by accepting individual students from the Third World, Canadian institutions are somehow furthering 'international development' and that this, in itself, justifies the presence of Third World students in Canadian institutions," the statement says.

However, in recent years, development agencies have brought fewer and fewer Third World students to study in Canada, sending them instead to countries that can offer an education which is more relevant to development of the student's home country. And governments in Third World countries are sending fewer of their students abroad, preferring them to study at home.

The presence of Third World students in Canada tends to benefit Canadians more than the Third World, says the CBIE.

"Canadians need to know more about the world, more than two-thirds of which is the Third World. The presence of Third World students in Canada is of great importance—but to the quality of our education, not necessarily to theirs."

comment

Racism motivating government?

by Sue Vohanka
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The Canadian Bureau for International Education has performed a valuable service by providing long-overdue information about the position of international students in Canada. It's just too bad that the CBIE doesn't argue its case more forcefully.

The information, as the CBIE points out in its statement on visa students, challenges many of the misconceptions Canadians have about visa students, and shows that restrictive policies resulting from these misconceptions have been rooted in a lack of information.

But the bureau's statement, at points where it deals with key issues, borders on the wishy-washy, shies away from clearly stating things it instead only hints at, and attempts to legitimize some actions that it should be condemning if the facts it bases its report on are true.

The bureau bases its statement on several principles, beginning with the fact that the presence of non-Canadian students is beneficial to post-secondary institutions.

From the reports the bureau has commissioned come other facts: that visa students effectively pay for themselves because of the money they pump into Canada's economy, and that they provide additional economic benefits—allowing more money to institutions and wider course options by picking up slack in enrolment of Canadian students.

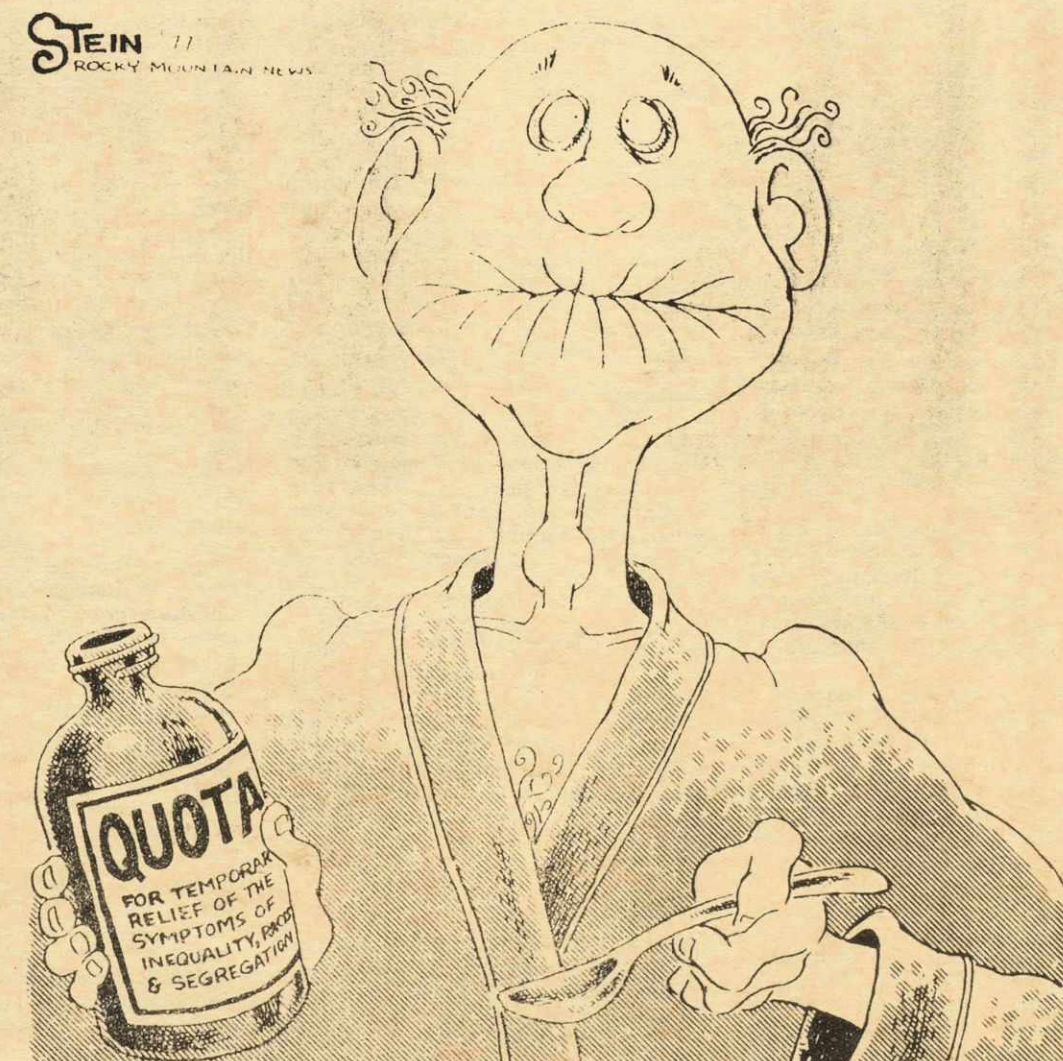
All of this without discernible ill effects. The CBIE's information presents no evidence that Canadian students are losing educational places because of the presence of visa students.

But, when the bureau's statement deals with differential fees—which it does term restrictive and damaging—the wishy-washy nature of the statement becomes clear.

Instead of devoting its energy to arguing against restrictive, regressive measures, the bureau suggests an alternative. It says that if governments are going to be regressive, they may as well do it in a less obvious way—such as by instituting enrolment quotas on visa students.

"They are invisible, at least to the student, and they affect only those who do not come to

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Canada," the statement says. The CBIE supports the option of enrolment limitations rather than differential fees. It is necessary to persuade both government and institutions that this is the fairer alternative."

But shouldn't the CBIE be persuading both governments and institutions that the really fair thing is to get rid of restrictive measures

but to implement differential fees, let them do it at least on a reciprocal basis. If we must charge differential fees, let us only charge those who discriminate against Canadians. In reality, this is not a satisfactory solution, and as we have said, enrolment limitations make more sense, but at least there is a modicum of rough justice in this position."

Rough justice for whom? Certainly not for the students who would be forced to pay the fees. The CBIE-commissioned survey of visa students found that more than half of Canada's visa students couldn't continue studying in Canada if their education costs increased \$750. Shouldn't the CBIE concentrate on ramming those figures home to governments and institutions rather than suggesting that differential fees have any justice at all?

The statement takes a very timid look at the reasons why governments are instituting differential fees and restrictive immigration laws affecting students. It notes that these restrictive measures come at a time when numbers of visa students have noticeably increased. And it does point out, parenthetically, that it's the same time that a majority of visa students are coming from Asia and the Far East rather than the United States.

Shouldn't the CBIE be asking, in much more definite terms, whether racism has motivated government policies on differential fees and immigration? And shouldn't the bureau be pointing out that if these policies persist despite facts showing that there isn't an economic basis for them that the logical conclusion is they are motivated by racism?

The CBIE maintains that the purpose of its statement is to provoke discussion. And the statement speaks of the need to re-examine Canadians' motives and methods for the way we receive international students in Canada.

But wouldn't a stronger statement, one which more directly challenges the assumptions and misconceptions Canadians have, be more useful in generating that kind of discussion? Doesn't a statement which suggests that compromises aren't quite as bad as more obvious repressive measures do more to reinforce biases and misconceptions than call them into question?

Uof T sets foreign student quotas

TORONTO (CUP)—Administrators at the University of Toronto set quotas on the number of international students to be admitted to the university's nursing faculty only moments after condemning Ontario's differential fees policy.

Administrators decided the 10 per cent international student quota would "ensure a reasonable mix of non-Canadians" in the nursing faculty. The number of qualified international applicants to the faculty has always been far below the 10 per cent level.

Earlier in the meeting, administrators had said the fee increase had no "academic merit" and would be damaging to the cultural life of the university.

But they noted the university's decision to implement the differential fee structure was "the lesser of two evils" offered by the government. One professor said that international students would have had to pay the fee or all students would have received less in terms of lab materials and tutors.

To have absorbed the fee increase would have cost the university \$500,000 this year, and an additional half million dollars a year to a limiting figure of about \$2 million a year in four years.

