

**FASS Essay Competition
Halifax Overseas Club Essay
More Than A GDP Booster
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International students contribute significantly to Canada's GDP and overall economic well-being. According to the federal department of Global Affairs (2016), in 2014, "international students in Canada spent around \$11.4 billion on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary spending," a figure that translates to \$9.3 billion in GDP. (Global Affairs, 2016)

It is important to understand how significant these economic contributions are because during the 1980s and 1990s, Western governments reduced their funding to postsecondary institutions as part of broader moves toward neoliberal restructuring. Subsequently, educational institutions and the federal government frame international students as imperative to the sustainability of economic growth as they contribute significantly to the revenue of the university and the GDP of the national economy. However, by merely perceiving international students as commodities that increase GDP, the underlying factors, such as the motivations for international students to study abroad, the financial difficulties faced by international students, and the resources available to assist foreign students in their transition to a new academic environment are often overlooked. Given the magnitude of the economic contributions made by international students, these underlying factors need to be critically examined in order to develop a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of international students so that educational and governmental policymakers can develop effective policies to attract, integrate, and retain foreign students. To better understand why international students' economic contributions are important, neoliberal restructuring needs to be explored.

Neoliberal Restructuring

Neoliberal restructuring is when education resembles a “global service industry” rather than an institution designed to educate and produce productive and critically thinking citizens of society (Shanka et al, 2005). In other words, higher education is much like a business with the goal of making as much profit as possible, rather than a right that citizens have access to. As a result, postsecondary institutions have turned to full-fee-paying international students to offset the reduction of government funding. Neoliberal restructuring of education is not necessarily a bad thing if you examine it from the perspective that universities are forced to compete with each other to attract the best and brightest international students; therefore, they are more likely to design high-quality education programs in order to recruit top students. In the process of doing so, it is important to be mindful of international students’ overall well-being by implementing resources and policies to help them navigate the new academic system and transition to life in a new country. This is necessary so that students are more likely to stay in the country after graduation, which benefits the economy because we need more workers due to labour shortage. Education is emulating a global service industry. This may not change because we live in a capitalist society, which means universities and the government are profit-driven. However, it is important to be mindful of the well-being of international students because they will not be cash-cows and commodities if they are unsatisfied with the service (education) that they are receiving. Their well-being is tied to academic success. If international students are dealing with stressors, like problems navigating the new pedagogical system and housing issues, their mental health suffers. Subsequently this hinders their academic success.

Many universities in the West, such as Australia and the United Kingdom are adopting a market-oriented approach to education by engaging in aggressive marketing and recruiting of international students as well as exporting education to generate revenue (Chen, 2008). By exporting education through internationalization, universities are able to not only increase revenue, but also increase the institution's profile and contacts in target countries (Chen, 2008). Increasing profile and contacts in target countries enable universities to deploy recruiting strategies to attract prospective international students.

Knight (1999) defines internationalization as "The process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" (Chen, 2008, p.4). There are four rationales for internationalization: political, economic, social, and academic (Chen, 2008). Canadian post secondary institutions are highly motivated by the economic rationale (Chen, 2008). The strategies Canadian universities have used to internationalize education include Master of Business Administration (MBA) Tours and education fairs, joint venture schools, and twinning programs. Twinning programs entail Canadian universities establishing partnerships with an institution overseas to design and deliver education curricula that are taught in English. Chen's research of undergraduate students enrolled at Ontario universities demonstrate that international students' decisions to study abroad are highly influenced by twinning programs (Chen, 2008). One of the Chinese students in the study asserted that

I think I decided to come to Canada because my high school is an international school, called Dalian Maple Leaf International School. So our courses are

basically British Columbia province courses. When you decide to go to that kind of school, you have to get ready for it (study abroad). (Chen, 2008, p. 21)

Internationalization of education leads to increased profits for universities. Exporting higher education increases the institutions' profile and presence in target countries while simultaneously recruiting prospective international students to study abroad. Universities and the government use media as an effective medium to market international education (IE) in order to generate more profit from international students' tuition fees (Cover, 2016).

International Students Contributions to GDP in Canada

Cover (2016) argued that IE programs have taken on a new form of privatization of public education. Privatization is the transfer of ownership and governance of public services from the public sphere to the private sector (Cover, 2016), and it needs to be critically examined in order to understand the subtle shifts in educational reform. Cover (2016) discusses Ball and Youdell's concept of endogenous privatization, which indicates "a shift in the thinking and behaviour of public education actors towards more 'private-like' motivations (e.g., efficiency, entrepreneurialism, image management) (p.170)." We can critically examine how the government and universities are using media as a platform to increase enrolment. Endogenous privatization of higher education is evident as the government is highly motivated to increase international enrolment for economic benefits. For example, Amrik Virk, former Minister of Advanced Education, posited:

International students spend a great deal of money while they are here, supporting local jobs and businesses. They travel around our beautiful province to see the sights, ski, hike and bike, as well as eat and shop. In 2010, international students

spent \$1.8 billion in British Columbia on tuition, accommodation and other living expenses, generating 22,000 jobs (Cover, 184).

International students' expenditures are beneficial to the economy by increasing profits of universities as well as generating jobs, which lead to significant economic growth. Media outlets reinforce the economic benefits of international students, which further denotes how the government and universities portray them as commodities.

Media plays a significant role in highlighting the "private like" motivations of government and universities. Headlines leading with, "Cashing in on Foreign Students" and "Foreign Students Inject Millions Into School Cooffers" in *Macleans* magazine and the *Globe and Mail* newspaper indicate that governments and universities are explicit in communicating the economic benefits of international students (Cover, 2016). As a result, the lived experiences, such as the motivations to study abroad, transition to a new academic system, and the financial burdens of foreign students are undermined. This undermining is detrimental to educational and governmental policies because policymakers need to critically examine the lived experiences of foreign students in order to implement policies and resources to integrate and retain international students. Furthermore, media outlets are highly influential in developing public perceptions of international students. By portraying international students as commodities to stimulate economic growth, the general public fails to develop a comprehensive understanding of the adversities that international students face while adjusting to a foreign academic system and culture. This ignorance is damaging because international students also contribute to the social fabric through their interactions with domestic students. It is not merely an economic transaction; it is also a cultural exchange. While it is important to

communicate the magnitude of the economic contributions of international students, it is critical to examine the impact these students have from a holistic approach so that they can be effectively integrated into the academic system and culture.

Through this cultural exchange, domestic students are made aware of the different cultures, customs, and values of international students. This knowledge is critical to implement effective strategies in order to integrate international students. Furthermore, domestic students benefit significantly from engaging with international students. By interacting with the students from around the world, they are immersed in cultural diversity, which students need in order to excel in the global economy (Chakma, 2012). This reinforces how international students make significant contributions to the economy and the diversity of the university, which enriches the quality of education. In order for universities to remain competitive and attract the best and brightest international students, universities must meet the needs and expectations of these students. To do so, universities need to critically examine the underlying factors that influence international students' decisions to study abroad and their choice of institution.

Underlying Factors and Motivations That Influence International Students' Decisions to Study Abroad

The international education industry is expected to expand; by 2025, it is estimated that 7.2 million students worldwide will be international students (Shanka et al, 2015). This trajectory of growth is beneficial for universities as international students are a lucrative source for helping universities make up for the shortfall due to the reduction of government funding. Kizilbash (2011) reiterates how universities are becoming a global service industry by drawing on de Wit's claim, "The more foreign students there are paying high tuition fees, the higher the economic return and the less the national

government needs to invest in higher education (p.3).” More than ever, universities are depending on the income of international students to subsidize their services (Shanka et al, 2015). Research from a correspondence analysis of students from Australian universities located in Perth and Western Australia demonstrate that researching the factors that influence international students’ choice of institutions is pertinent to recruitment (Shanka et al 2005).

In order to maintain a competitive edge in attracting international students, universities need to consider these underlying factors that influence students’ choice of institutions: “academic reputation, the variety of courses, the quality of education, campus safety, cost/fees, campus location, and the opinion of others [family and friends]” (Shanka et al, 2005, p.34). Academic reputation stems from the prestige of the university with regard to the competence and expertise of the academic staff and faculty (Shanka et. al, 2005). For instance, students determine the academic reputation of a university based on university ratings, such as the World University Rankings published by Times Higher Education. Cost and fees of tuition and living expenses impact international students significantly; countries that compared favourably against their competitors attract more international students (Shanka et al, 2005). Research indicates that the in the United Kingdom, 37 percent of international students’ choice of university was influenced by the opinions of their parents and friends, especially friends who have studied abroad (Shanka et al, 2005). While these underlying factors are critical to understand why international students choose to study abroad, it is also pertinent to understand their motivations for seeking an international education.

Globalization is an important driving force in motivating students to study abroad. Altbach and Knight (2007) define globalization as “The economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement. Global capital has for the first time, heavily invested in knowledge industries worldwide, including higher education and advanced training. This investment reflects the emergence of the “knowledge society” (p.290). Knowledge industries worldwide have used English as the *lingua franca*, which means the language that has been adopted as the common language (Altbach & Knight, 2007) English is used in scientific communication, communication firms, and information technology (IT) (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Since English has been adopted as the common language between speakers of different native languages in the knowledge society, international students are motivated to study abroad to acquire proficiency in English. Fluency in English and work experience abroad are revered in international students’ home countries, which heavily motivate students to study abroad (Chen, 2008). If international students are proficient in English and have experience working abroad, it increases their chances of securing a covetable job back in their home countries (Chen, 2008). As the economy is becoming more global and English has been adopted as the *lingua franca*, companies are looking for employees who are proficient in English; therefore, students are highly motivated to study abroad so that they can be more employable. It is critical to note that international students choice of institutions are not dependent on a single factor, but rather on a combination of underlying factors and motivations.

In efforts to attract the best and brightest international students, universities have been engaging in branding in order to make their institutions appealing to students based

on the factors that shape their choice of institutions (Chen, 2008; Shanka et al, 2005). Through branding, universities are able to present an image that occupies a distinct and valued place in the target students' minds relative to their competitors: they are able to market the excellence and quality of educational services being provided (Shanka et al, 2005). The universities' promotional material, such as pamphlets, websites, and online-videos are instrumental in communicating how the institution will be able to satisfy the needs of international students based on these underlying factors.

Hardships Faced By International Students In Canada

Once universities have successfully attracted prospective international students, efforts need to be undertaken to adequately integrate them in the new academic system. The unique challenges that Canadian international students face need to be critically examined in order to understand the ways in which universities can implement policies and resources to address these adversities so that students can be aptly integrated. Research from an online survey that was administered to 2,000 randomly selected students at a western Canadian university reported that students faced substantial housing issues (Calder et al, 2016). More than half of the international students reported that they did not know where to get help with regard to finding off campus housing because they are strongly encouraged to live in residence (Calder et al, 2016). Since international students are full-fee-paying students, their tuition is substantially higher than domestic students; therefore, they struggle financially to find affordable housing. As a result, some international students face homelessness (Calder et al, 2016). Furthermore, inadequate resources are provided to educate international students on their rights as tenants. When students face issues like overcrowding or substandard housing, such as not having access

to water or privacy, they do not know how to lawfully confront their landlords with these issues (Calder et al, 2016). This is detrimental to the mental health of international students, which negatively affects their overall well-being and academic performance. Campus resources groups, such as health and wellness facilities, international centres, and finance offices need to acknowledge these issues so that they can better implement programs and policies to assist students.

International students face stressors while adjusting to the new Canadian academic system. Universities need to offer pedagogical support because international students are unfamiliar with the Canadian curriculum, teaching and evaluation methods, technology used, and different instructor-student relationships (Calder et al, 2016). These challenges need to be brought to the forefront because students need to adjust to the Canadian academic system in order to achieve success. As a peer supporter at the Dalhousie International Centre, I can attest to the adversities international students face while trying to adjust to the academic system. For example, numerous students approach international student advisors to ask for help because they do not know how to properly write an email to their professors when they need extensions on assignments or when they need a reference letter. Furthermore, many students are unaware of the Writing Centre as a resource for writing support even though they have received failing grades on writing assignments because English is a second language and they struggle with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Besides issues pertaining to adjusting to the Canadian academic system, international students also experience tremendous financial barriers.

International students have difficulty understanding the cost of living because of the currency exchange and they do not realize how expensive tuition, accommodation, and living expenses are (Calder et al, 2016). Students are surprised to learn that off campus housing is less expensive, which demonstrates the need for better information-sharing structures. Service providers, university personnel, and faculty reported that international students resort to couch surfing and staying overnight at the university because they are unable to afford the cost of living (Calder et al, 2016). Faculty members asserted that funding for international students is very minimal “because we do not take into account the realities of what it actually costs to live here” (Calder et al, 2016, p.104). When international students fail to meet their basic needs, they are uncomfortable communicating their struggles because of the stigma of asking for help. As an agency worker stated, “Pride is such a big thing with these folks....Nobody wants to say, as an adult, ...I can’t feed my family” (Calder et al, 2016, p.105). In other words, university personnel and service providers need to acknowledge the realities of the cost of living and take initiatives to reach out to students who are struggling to make ends meet. To do so, university personnel and service providers must exercise the sociological imagination. C. Wright Mills developed the concept of the sociological imagination as: “The quality of mind that enables a person to see the connection between personal troubles and social structures” (Brym et al, 2016). By seeing the connection between the adversities international students face while adapting to the Canadian academic system and the inadequate resources in place to assist students, university personnel and service providers will be able to implement services and policies to address these issues.

In order to improve international students' financial well-being, services like the finance office should offer emergency bursaries so that students will not have to resort to couch surfing or staying overnight at the university. This hinders the students' mental health. Research demonstrates that students need to make their challenges known to universities so that campus resource groups can develop effective policies and programs to assist students in order to adequately integrate them (Calder et al, 2016). To do so, international students need to communicate their adversities to university service providers, faculty, and personnel (Calder et al, 2016). Drawing on Anthony Giddens' concepts of structure and agency, we can examine the benefits of international students communicating their struggles in order for university structures to change so that students can be better integrated.

Giddens (as cited in Rooyen, 2013) defines structure as: "the structuring properties or rules and resources, which allow the 'binding' of time-space in social systems" (p. 497). The university as a structure provides the rules and resources which international students need to navigate in their transition to a new academic system. As research demonstrates, the structure of the university does not provide sufficient financial support for international students. For example, international students have limited access to emergency bursaries and subsequently fail to meet their basic needs (Calder et al, 2016). In order to navigate institutional structures to reduce financial barriers, international students must exercise agency. "Agency refers to those things that agents are actually doing or their capability of doing things" (Rooyen 2013, p.497). International students are agents within the structure of the university. How they act independently to reproduce the structures can lead to social change at varying levels (Calder et al, 2016).

By exercising agency, international students can influence university structures by communicating their hardships to university administrators, personnel, and service providers so that better policies and resources can be implemented to assist students. This is critical to aptly integrate international students in order to increase retention rates.

International Students Contributions to GDP in Nova Scotia as Spenders and Potential Workers

Universities and the government are interested in retaining international students as they contribute significantly to the economy as consumers, and potentially, workers. In terms of consumption, according to an expenditure analysis of the economic impact of international students enrolled in Nova Scotia universities in 2009, the economic impact of international students was found to be \$154 million per year with an injection of \$91 million of new money to Nova Scotia (Siddiq et al, 2009). Nova Scotia universities collected approximately \$19 million in differential fees from foreign students in 2008-09 (Siddiq et al, 2009). The differential fees contribute significantly to the operations of the universities to offset the reduction in government funding.

Turning to the labour market, like most developed countries, Canada and its provinces face significant demographic declines and labour shortages (Siddiq et al, 2009). Nova Scotia in particular is expected to have fewer workers than the number of jobs available for them over the next decade (Siddiq et al, 2009). Accordingly, the government is seeking to retain international students as prospective immigrants to fill gaps in the labour market (Siddiq et al, 2009). However, unless governments understand the motivations of and challenges faced by international students, even with the proliferation of the international education sector—valued at \$2.2 trillion worldwide—

they will have difficulty continuing to attract, and especially to integrate and retain, the international students they see as crucial for fixing future labour market problems (Siddiq et al, 2009).

Without question, international students contribute significantly to the country's GDP and revenues for universities. However, foreign students cannot be merely portrayed as commodities that inject millions of dollars into school coffers. The underlying factors and motivations that influence students' decisions to study abroad need to be critically examined so that universities can develop effective strategies, like the twinning program, in order to successfully attract prospective international students. Once universities have recruited international students, service providers, faculty, and university personnel need to understand the struggles these students experience so that they can develop policies and programs to integrate students in the new academic system in order to maintain retention rates. It is critical to retain international students because not only are they beneficial to the revenue of the university and GDP, but they are also a valuable source of potential immigrants who will be able to address the issues of labour shortage. By understanding the underlying factors that motivate international students to study abroad and the adversities they face while adjusting to a new academic system, educational and governmental policy makers will be able to develop comprehensive policies to successfully attract, integrate, and retain international students for the benefit of the economy and beyond.

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