

Vianne Timmons

Internationalization of post-secondary education in Canada is a laudable pursuit, but does it make sense in these economic times? Should universities and colleges focus on cutting back on any international initiatives that are not central to their particular academic missions?

These are important questions, particularly because Canada is a country that values multiculturalism.

But as a value, is multiculturalism central to our post-secondary system?

My view is it is, not just for the inherent value of ensuring our campuses reflect our national and global societies, but also because internationalization makes economic sense.

Universities and colleges in the United States have long been known as leaders in internationalization.

After Sept. 11, 2001, however, the United States implemented more restrictive student visa policies than before, with the result that international student numbers decreased.

Since 2006, however, international student numbers in the United States have once again been increasing and, according to the National Association of International Educators, international students contributed \$17.6 billion to the national economy in 2008-2009.

Impressive as that number is, on a per capita basis, it lags behind Australia, a country that has recognized and embraced the economic benefits of bringing international students to its campuses.

An April 2009 report for the Australian Council for Private Education and Training concluded that in Australia, “education services rank[ed] as the third largest export category earner for the year 2007-2008, behind coal and ore.” The report also notes that during that

year, “each international student...contribute[d]

an average of \$28,291 in value added to the Australian economy and generate[d] 0.29 in fulltime equivalent (FTE) workers,” a total of \$12.6 billion in value added for a country of approximately 20.6 million people.

In 2009, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada released a report that estimates that in 2008, international students spent more than \$6.5 billion and created more than 83,000 jobs in Canada. With that kind of impact, Canada and its universities and colleges should be looking seriously at how we can maximize this obviously positive economic story.

An important question that we should be asking—and more importantly, should be answering—is this: Why does Australia, a country whose population is roughly two-thirds that of Canada’s, generate double the economic impact through international recruitment of post-secondary students? This may be due to its location, but it is also a result of strong federal government investment.

The DFAIT report recommends that we “ensure that international students are recognized and supported commensurate to their importance to Canada relative to other similar sized exports of goods and services.”

The social scientist in me bristles when students are described in this report as “goods and services,” however this language may speak to economists and politicians.

Nonetheless, the important message, no matter how we present it, is that it makes good financial sense to invest in international recruitment, especially in these economic times. This is an investment that has minimal risk as well as significant financial benefit for our country.

That is a quick snapshot of the economic benefits of internationalizing our universities and colleges, but that’s only part of the story. As both a university president

and board chair of the Canadian Bureau for

International Education, I am reminded every day of the educational benefits of investing in internationalization on our campuses. I would like to highlight some of those as well. Our classes and our campuses are culturally richer with a diverse student population.

Diverse student populations afford Canadian students the opportunity to learn from their peers from other countries and cultures, for example, helping domestic students get an international education “in their own backyard.”

The communities beyond our university and college campuses are also enriched by the presence of international students.

International students do not live in residences only. Many live off-campus in the larger community, often in home-stay settings with local families. These settings provide wonderful opportunities for Canadian families to support international students and learn about cultural diversity. In addition, children in our communities have the opportunity to grow up in a rich multicultural environment with young international students as friends, role models and teachers.

In uncertain economic times, another important aspect of internationalization can be minimized or overlooked—the need to support Canadian students to study and work internationally.

Universities, colleges and governments must continue to enhance investments that create opportunities for student mobility. We want our students to have a global perspective and graduate with the ability to understand the importance of cultural diversity in society, and opportunities to study abroad are an important means of achieving that. For many students, having an international experience as part of their educational program is transformational. This type of learning

cannot be captured in economic language as easily as we can measure the financial impact of recruiting international students, but that does not diminish its importance. We need to ensure that Canadian people, post-secondary institutions and politicians view international education opportunities not as a luxury, but rather as an imperative.

Canadian students deserve an international education through our Canadian post-secondary institutions. These students are our future teachers, physicians, lawyers, politicians—and so much more. Investing in their international education is an investment in our country's future—a future in which Canada must have the talent, knowledge and understanding to serve as leaders in the world. This is what I want as a parent of university-aged children, as a university president, and as a Canadian citizen.

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