

# Click/Hear Quick Take

International Student Hunger

20  
23



Daily Bread  
Food Bank

# Background

Food is a human right, yet almost every university and college in Toronto has an on-campus food bank to support post-secondary students who are experiencing food insecurity. The high cost of tuition, housing, textbooks, and living expenses in the city make it difficult for post-secondary students to afford their basic necessities.

International post-secondary students face additional challenges, with those in Ontario paying an additional \$37,322 on average in tuition above what domestic students pay.<sup>1</sup> Their tuition fees are rising at a faster rate than domestic students, as displayed in Table 1. They may experience challenges finding employment, have a limited support network, face challenges sourcing culturally appropriate and affordable food, and have limited access to scholarships and financial aid.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

**Table 1: Average Tuition Fees in Ontario<sup>5</sup>**

Level of Study	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Domestic Undergraduate	\$7,938	\$7,850 (-1% YOY)	\$7,920 (+0.1% YOY)
International Undergraduate	\$40,525	\$41,744 (+3% YOY)	\$45,242 (+8% YOY)
Difference	= \$32,587	= \$33,894	= \$37,322

As a result, international students are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity than domestic students and over three times more likely than Canadians at large.<sup>6,7</sup> According to a study conducted in 2017 at the University of Saskatchewan, 58% of international students experienced food insecurity in the past year, compared to 37% of Canadian students.<sup>8</sup>

The number of post-secondary international students attending Canadian institutions has steadily grown since the early 2000s.<sup>9</sup> From 2013 to 2021, the number of international students has grown from about 300,000 to 807,000.<sup>10</sup>

Ontario's Auditor General found that public colleges rely on international students to "subsidize the provincial costs of domestic students' education and colleges' administrative and capital expenditures."<sup>11</sup> According to a President of a college in Toronto interviewed for this report, colleges receive approximately 20% of their funding through government operating grants, which have been frozen since 2009. The remainder comes primarily from student tuition. In 2020/21, Ontario's Auditor General noted that international student tuition accounted for 68% of tuition revenue while comprising only 30% of student enrollment at public colleges. Public colleges in Ontario received a total of \$1.7 billion in tuition fees from international students.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Ontario provides the lowest amount of funding for full-time domestic students of all Canadian provinces,<sup>13</sup> providing only \$7,915 per student as of 2017-18, 37% lower than the national average of \$12,490.<sup>14</sup>

Anecdotally, some food banks have reported an increase in food bank use among international students in recent years, but we currently do not have any data to support this. We will be looking to collect further data in our 2024 annual food bank client survey, but in the meantime, we wanted to hear directly from international students accessing food banks about their experiences navigating food insecurity in Toronto.

## Methodology

Through the Click/Hear program, Daily Bread maintains a client panel to stay connected with people who use food banks and to engage in discussions about the daily challenges they face. The Click/Hear panel is built from food bank clients who have expressed their desire to participate in Daily Bread's research and advocacy activities. Regular short surveys are sent out by email, and in-person data collection is used to supplement online responses. In-person surveys were conducted at four university-based food banks to target the post-secondary student population. In the latest survey, 180 respondents participated.

## The Opportunity to Study in Canada

When asked what led them to study in Canada, many survey respondents mentioned that they came to Canada to pursue a better education and improve their job prospects. For example, one student mentioned that they came to Canada for the “better quality education and job opportunities,” while another mentioned the “better research opportunities” available in Canada. In addition, respondents noted they were attracted to study in Canada because of the high quality of education, the vibrant and inclusive culture in Toronto, having family or friends here, and the prospect of permanently immigrating to Canada. For other students, their motivation was driven by a need to leave unsafe situations in their home countries.

While international students saw a benefit in coming to Canada, they also contribute greatly. According to the Auditor General, the international students’ “sector contribute[s] to local economies through spending, increase[s] the diversity of colleges and local communities, and can help regions meet future labour demands where the local demographics are unable to meet employer needs.”<sup>15</sup> In 2018 alone, the annual expenditures of international students contributed \$22.3 billion to Canada’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>16</sup>

## Expectations vs. Reality

Over 1 in 5 survey respondents learned about studying in Canada from university/college recruiters in their home country. Ontario’s Auditor General found that none of the four public colleges reviewed at the time had any formal policies to guide the selection and removal of recruitment agencies, and that they have limited oversight of their third-party agencies to confirm whether those agencies are providing services with honesty and integrity.<sup>17</sup> While the majority of the recruitment firm websites audited by the Auditor General contained factual information, a handful contained misleading claims including guaranteeing visa approvals and guaranteeing scores on the International English Language Testing.

## Top 3 ways respondents learned about the university/college where they were studying in Canada



Among survey respondents, there was a disconnect between what they were told would be the cost of living, versus the reality. When applying for a temporary visa to study in Canada, applicants must prove they have \$10,000 to support themselves on top of their tuition fees, which amounts to \$833 per month.

In contrast, when we asked survey respondents how much they were spending per month on living expenses, excluding tuition, they reported an average of \$1,517, which is close to double what the Government of Canada advertised as the cost of living.

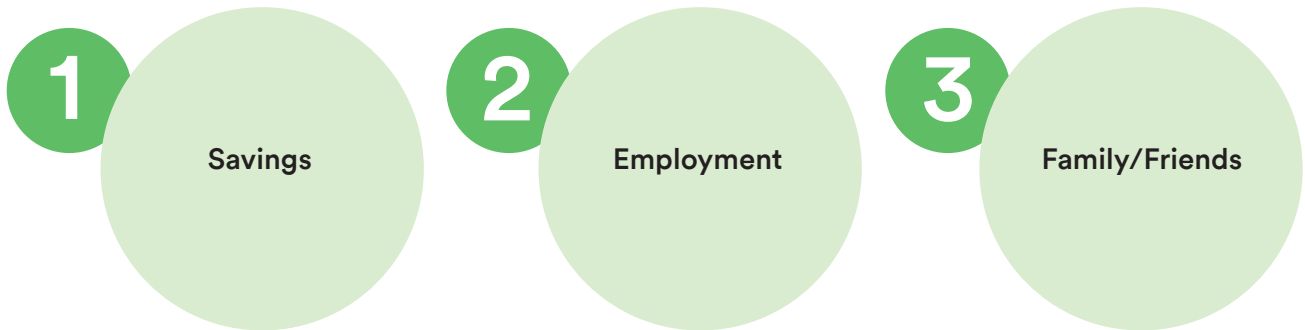
When asked how their experience in Canada compared to what they were expecting, respondents noted that Canada was much more expensive than they thought it would be, particularly with respect to housing and food. This is not surprising, given that, in 2022, rents in Toronto increased by 29% for vacant units<sup>18</sup> and food inflation was at 9.1% from June 2022 – June 2023.<sup>19</sup> Some noted that finding a place to live was a challenge, given that there are few affordable options available and lots of competition for these units. Landlords may be less willing to rent to international students because they do not have a Canadian credit score, or because there is discrimination against post-secondary students in general in the housing market. Many participants also commented that finding a job was harder than anticipated, as will be discussed below. On the flip side, a number of respondents noted that their experience was better than expected due to friendly people, quality education and strong social services and community.

I believed that I would have a higher standard of life. I believe I will achieve that one day, but for now, I am prevented from working enough hours to live a good life here.

# Barriers to Work

The majority of survey respondents reported supporting themselves through employment and savings.

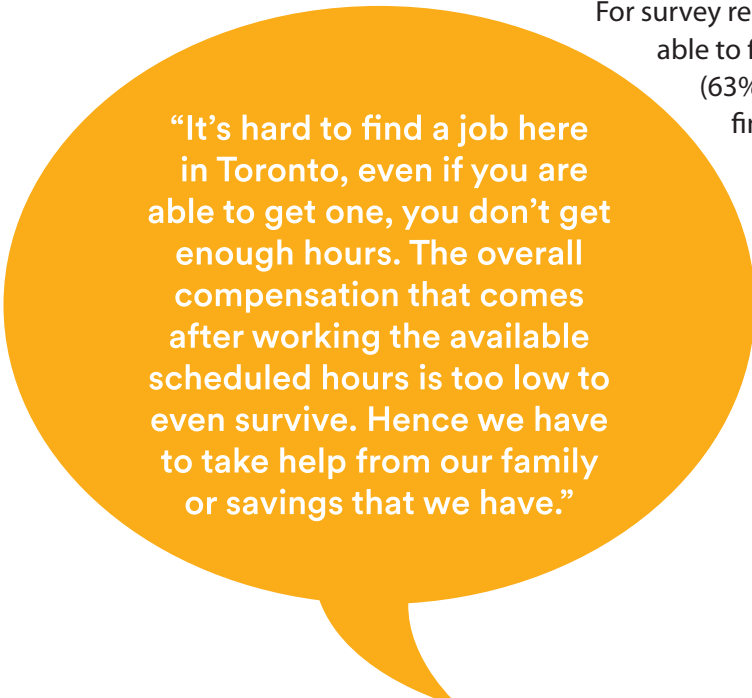
## Top 3 ways respondents financially support themselves in Canada



Despite the strong reliance on working to make ends meet, international students face many barriers to employment. The majority (69%) of employed survey respondents reported working less than 20 hours per week. International students are allowed to work unlimited hours in on-campus jobs, but there are a limited number of on-campus job opportunities available making it difficult to secure these opportunities. International students have typically been limited to working 20 hours per week off-campus, but last year the Government of Canada launched a pilot to allow international students to work up to 40 hours per week off-campus. This pilot is currently scheduled to end December 31, 2023.

“There are a lot of jobs out there, but I have struggled to secure interviews and employment. I was only to get the job I had from a reference from my friend. It’s difficult to build a social network of people to refer you as a newcomer.”

Among those who were employed, the majority (61%) earned \$15.50 (minimum wage) to \$18.50 per hour. Concerningly, 17% of respondents reported earning less than minimum wage, likely due to working under-the-table jobs.



“It’s hard to find a job here in Toronto, even if you are able to get one, you don’t get enough hours. The overall compensation that comes after working the available scheduled hours is too low to even survive. Hence we have to take help from our family or savings that we have.”

For survey respondents who had jobs, 17% reported being able to find a job in less than one month. The majority (63%) reported an average time of 1 – 4 months to find employment. For 22% of respondents, it took five months or more to find a job. When asked whether they faced any barriers to employment, respondents spoke about how it was difficult when they had no Canadian work experience, challenges finding a job that would allow the flexibility to attend classes, fierce competition for a limited number of jobs, being unable to find a job with sufficient hours or pay, and linguistic barriers and discrimination.

## Recommendations

The financial challenges faced by international students highlights the necessity for Canadian institutions to provide catered support systems to protect their well-being and academic success.<sup>20</sup> As international students primarily rely on personal and family resources to fund their education, many international students are left with limited financial means for living expenses, after covering high tuition costs.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, some international students arrive to Canada misinformed or uninformed about the high cost of living, exacerbating their financial issues.<sup>22</sup>

When asked what should be done to better support international students, survey respondents noted first and foremost they are looking for increased access to job opportunities, followed by reducing the cost of living through housing and transit subsidies, reducing tuition and/or offering more financial aid to international students, and providing better information before arrival and shortly after arrival to ensure international students understand the realities of living in Canada and are better supported upon arrival to navigate how to successfully live here. In addition, many respondents noted that the food bank was a lifeline for them, and community supports and services should be expanded and supported because of the large impact they have.

It is critical that Canada realize it's obligations with respect to the right to food. No one in Canada should experience food insecurity, regardless of immigration status. We recommend the following actions to address food insecurity among international students:

## Stakeholders Recommendations

### Universities and Colleges

- Enhance supports for international students to help them address their two biggest needs: affordable housing and employment. This may include offering more on-campus housing options and on-campus employment opportunities, providing assistance with searching for housing/employment, or partnering with non-profits who provide these services.
- Fully vet recruitment agencies to ensure they are not providing false information.

### Government of Canada

- Review and update requirements for how much money students need for their monthly expenses, since they have not been updated since at least 2015.
- Permanently increase the number of off-campus hours international students are able to work.
- Expand Canada Summer Jobs eligibility to include international students.

### Government of Ontario

- Increase government funding for universities and colleges so they do not need to rely so heavily on international student tuition to subsidize domestic students.

### City of Toronto

- Expand the Fair Pass Transit Discount program further to all residents in Toronto whose income falls below the Low Income Measure After Tax (LIM-AT), not just those under the 75% of the LIM-AT.

### All levels of Government

- The federal, provincial, and municipal government must work collaboratively to rapidly expand access to affordable housing in Toronto, while also protecting the existing supply of affordable units.



# Challenges Faced by International Students

“I was expecting that I could easily find a job right away. It’s been nine months, and I can’t even find an entry level job. Now, I’m relying on my family to financially support myself. My mental health has suffered while I’ve been in Canada. I used to be healthy, but now I feel constant anxiety. My college expects me to find a placement, but they haven’t supported me in the process. My mental health is also a barrier to me finding a placement.”

“I thought that job hunting wouldn’t be this difficult. Sometimes it’s hard to sustain myself given the fact that the right employment opportunities are really limited and that international students seem to get exploited more easily than the domestic peers.”

“The cost of living and rent shot up too quick to be able to manage. I starve myself of healthy food and meat products because I cannot afford it after paying my monthly rent. I only survive on lentils and noodles. This is not what I expected. My health has deteriorated in the last 2 years greatly.”

“The expectations to reality is totally opposite. I can’t afford a rental room itself in Toronto how expensive renting a house can be then the groceries are so expensive basic survival \$200-300. Further transportation is expensive, TTC pass are also expensive monthly \$180-200. The earnings after taxes and deductions are used on such expenses than saving some to pay back loans. Cost of education for a international student is increasing and housing is hard to get for a international student.”

“Canada is not heaven, just a country with more opportunities and less corruption than my home country.”

“I don’t have Canadian experience. It’s limiting me to find a job. Canadian companies are interested in hiring Canadian residents with Canadian experience.”



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