

Controversy over Christmas

Traditionally a quiet period, the holidays were anything but peaceful for international student recruiters in Canada. Canada's national newspaper, the Globe and Mail, reported that a Canadian visa officer in New Delhi upset a visiting group of university and college representatives from British Columbia. Reportedly, the visa officer questioned why the institutions recruit students in Punjab, an Indian state north of the capital New Delhi. (British Columbia has more than a hundred thousand people of Punjabi origin in the province, including several important politicians).

The Globe reported the visa officer challenged the institutions on their recruitment efforts in "the Punjab with the highest crime and forgery rate anywhere; the highest human-trafficking statistics in the world."

Visitors and immigrants from Punjab are an important and sensitive area for BC, and its institutions labelled the visa officer's comments as racist and called upon British Columbia's Attorney General, Mr. Wally Oppal, to investigate with the Federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

The story received considerable media attention and the Globe and Mail invited Higher-Edge to comment for its online publication. Excerpted below from the Globe article, Higher-Edge principals Mel Broitman and Dani Zaretsky wrote on December 20, 2007:

It would be helpful if Mr. Oppal channels the outrage into a more probing review of why Canada underperforms in the complex arena of international student recruitment. These failings are a reflection of the nearly incoherent strategic planning by our provincial and federal governmental bureaucracies and of our higher education institutions' own poor and weakly funded efforts.

First, Mr. Oppal should remind the Immigration Minister that Canada underperforms because when it comes to educational recruitment, there is no "team" in Team Canada. The constitutional delegation of educational responsibility to the provinces has turned Canadian higher education into a patchwork of schemes, with each province pursuing its own strategy or non-strategy, as the case may be.

The Foreign Affairs and Citizenship and Immigration departments should be working closely together in these matters. Instead, our overseas offices are routinely consumed by scrimmages between officials from the two agencies.

And on the marketing side, Ottawa spends much less promoting education in India than even single small British colleges do. Even New Zealand and Ireland, with a handful of universities to promote, have cohesive and coherent India strategies that surpass Canada's student totals.

Second, Mr. Oppal should acknowledge that our higher education institutions' lack of international sophistication is part of the problem. He should note that in India alone, many Canadian universities and colleges engage recruitment agencies that are known to aid and abet fraudulent misrepresentation. Mr. Oppal should allow that educational institutions often disavow responsibility to do rigorous fact-checking, and that their marketing plans are often poorly conceived.

Third, Mr. Oppal should make clear he understands that different markets offer different challenges in regards to (let's call it what it is) cheating and fabrication of documents, and that he respects the job Canada's overworked and under-resourced overseas immigration officers face with these varying challenges. Perhaps the visa officer in this case was trying to point out that our institutions should stay away from areas known for high rates of fraud in favour of those with low rates of fraud unless they invest in more rigorous screening. Honest people should not pay for the errors of others, but screening costs money, and institutions should to be prepared to pay for it.

Finally, Mr. Oppal can move on to some pressing problems within the Immigration Department. Canadian student visas can take weeks or months to process, while student visas for the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand come through in as little as a single day. There is a great deal of inconsistency and unpredictability among our visa officers - many lack the comprehensive training necessary to perform what is complex work. And there is no meaningful administrative remedy to serve as a feedback loop for government to identify systemic problems. A foreign student could study for an entire year or two in Australia while awaiting the disposition of her right of appeal to the Federal Court of Canada in the hopes of a later reversal of a visa refusal. Moreover, Canada lacks a more evolved and integrated system of checks against abuse, like the U.S. SEVIS system. We have no formal procedure for educational institutions to report to Ottawa when a given international student arrives on campus - or doesn't.

Ideally, Mr. Oppal and the minister will conclude that this collective let-down has led to a most un-Canadian outcome: a multicultural country that presents an unwelcoming face to many international students. Far too often, their fees, expenses, intellectual capital and long-term commercial ties end up in other countries.