

Executive Summary: Understanding Trends in Canadian Higher Education Supports Programs for Displaced Students

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This Executive Summary presents a brief overview of the key themes and trends emerging from the mapping and analysis of the support services and resources available to refugee and displaced students in Canada. The main criteria upon which the universities investigated in this paper were chosen based on their affiliation with Scholars-At-Risk (SAR) Canada, a national network of 28 higher education institutions. These universities host scholars facing threats and persecution in their home countries, providing them with learning, mentorship, research, and teaching opportunities. Thus, given that these universities highlight their commitment to supporting endangered scholars and promoting academic freedom, it makes them an apt subject for evaluation. The mapping and analysis reveal several key themes, which are explored below.

Firstly, the lack of a centralized support system has resulted in a fragmented landscape of support programs across campuses, wherein students are expected to seek support from different centers and agents on campus. This fragmentation and absence of a unified system through which students can receive services leads to students navigating complex, often bureaucratic processes. This prolongs the support process and leads to decreased quality of services and inconsistencies in their delivery. However, by developing centralized support structures, academic institutions can make seeking support more accessible and better fulfill their commitment to academic freedom and the support of endangered scholars. One notable exception is the Refugees and Newcomers Program (RNP) at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Administered by SFU's International Services for Students (ISS), the RNP stands out for offering long-term support, which is provided by a centralized hub. It provides assistance in various areas, including mental health, academics, religious integration, settlement, career development, volunteer services, and financial aid for current SFU students from displaced backgrounds.

The second major theme regarding the support programs offered by SAR universities is their reactionary and temporary nature. Most of these programs were launched in response to specific crises, such as the Ukrainian invasion in 2022. For example, the Special Response Fund for Trainees (Ukraine) was established to provide financial assistance to Ukrainian Master's students across Canada, including at SAR-affiliated institutions like Dalhousie and McMaster, to continue their research projects. This analysis is not intended to critique these support initiatives or to undermine their significance. The importance of such programs is indeed tremendous. However, by highlighting the lack of long-term support programs and the discrepancies involved, I aim to shed light on the absence of durable solutions. This results in the need to constantly reinvent the wheel and create new short-term programs at the onset of each new episode of war and displacement. To elaborate, some universities across Canada initiated programs in response to the Syrian crisis in 2015 but then had to establish new systems for students displaced by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, followed swiftly by the conflict in Ukraine in 2022. Currently, attention is geared towards supporting Palestinians. This ad hoc approach leads to cross-purposes and a lack of institutional learning. However, establishing more permanent support systems would allow for better coordination and efficiency, saving time and resources and avoiding the scramble to respond to each new instance of scholarly displacement. An exemplary program that provides long-term support and has the potential to address various episodes of conflict and displacement globally is WUSC. WUSC, which primarily supports students from refugee camps in Africa, is the largest and most stable program across Canada, offering well-rounded support for students throughout their undergraduate studies.

The third significant theme identified is the systemic racism present in the provision of support services to refugee and displaced students across the studied universities. This is particularly noticeable in the responses of Canadian universities to major global conflicts and displacement events. For instance, while a range of support was offered by Canadian universities in response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the attention given to each crisis varied significantly. Among the support and programs identified across SAR-affiliated universities, 1 initiative was launched in response to the Syrian refugee crisis (2015), three in response to the Afghanistan crisis (2021), and 16 in response to the war in Ukraine (2022). In total, this mapping identified approximately 70 programs to support displaced students from around the world. Of the 70 programs, approximately 27 are WUSC operating across the investigated higher education institutions

(with the exception of OCAD University). Although WUSC mainly sponsors an average of two students from the African continent each year, in recent years, it has sponsored students from Afghanistan and Syria as well. The remaining programs are either geared toward all students with a lived background of displacement or students who come from marginalized backgrounds (meaning not just displaced students. This data highlights that while a significant number of targeted support programs were launched in response to the war in Ukraine (2022), there has been a lack of direct and targeted support programs for students from Syria and Afghanistan. Such discrepancies further highlight the need for more equitable approaches, ensuring that assistance is based on need rather than nationality. Such discrepancy in responses highlights that although programs are launched to support the needs of displaced students and scholars, they, nonetheless, contribute to creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for access. Even within the context of WUSC, as mentioned earlier, which primarily supports students from Africa and has recently expanded to Syria and Afghanistan, discrepancies in support allocation are evident. These discrepancies highlight that while programs are designed to support displaced students and scholars, they also create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. To address systemic racism, moving beyond creating temporary and short-term programs could be a viable solution. Establishing long-term programs that support the needs of all displaced students, regardless of their citizenship status, has the potential to help reduce unconscious bias and systemic racism, ensuring that no group of students is prioritized over another based on nationality.

In conclusion, while Canadian universities, especially those affiliated with SAR Canada, are making strides in supporting refugee and displaced scholars, the research conducted to compile the mapping highlights significant gaps within these university systems. Thus, a more integrated and long-term approach is needed to ensure equitable and inclusive access to higher education for all displaced scholars and students.