

Spring Education Report

Lukewarm Reply to Caribbean Scholarships

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Back in the summer of 2007, Canada announced a \$10-million scholarship program for Caribbean students to study in Canadian universities and colleges. But a year on, the initiative has not attracted the kind of enthusiasm that was expected, in part because of disagreements and misunderstandings over how the program was launched and is being run.

Chilean officials, however, are beaming with excitement following the successful launch of a similar program that sees an exchange of hundreds of students between Chile and Canada every year.

The creation of the Canada-Caribbean Community Leadership Scholarships program was announced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in July 2007 during the Canadian leader's highly publicized tour through Latin America.

However, since then, only 79 students have applied for the 100 slots set aside for the four- and six-month study programs for graduate and undergraduate students.

"There are teething problems with the program," acknowledged Brendon Browne, high commissioner of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, which includes nine of the smallest CARICOM members. "But we have put our concerns to DFAIT and they are currently being addressed."

While Mr. Browne would not provide details on the perceived problems, Peter Kent, minister of state for the Americas, said: "Part of the problem is capacity in some countries to engage in a mutual program. Part of it was a lack of information."

"I think we didn't do the job we might have done to publicize the availability of these scholarships," the minister said, speaking from Trinidad and Tobago last week.

Last November, the Canadian Bureau for International Education hosted 10 heads of universities from the region as part of efforts to raise awareness about the scholarships.

The low interest, according to Jennifer Humphries, the CBIE vice-president of membership and scholarships, has more to do with "promotion [and] visibility because the program has not been as popular as we thought."

"With a first year of experience, we have good ambassadors for the program, who will share information with their peers at home," she said.

Some sources say another shortcoming with the scholarships lies with how they are managed.

The program is open to current Caribbean students who are studying at post-secondary institutions in the region. They apply to attend a particular Canadian university. When their application is approved, the Canadian institution must submit a request for funding. However, both the Canadian and Caribbean universities must also have an exchange agreement and very few Caribbean universities happen to have such partnerships.

Mr. Kent said the two sides are working on "fine-tuning the scholarship plans" and that progress is being made.

"In the last, I would say six months, there has been increased engagement and we have to have collaboration and support in the institution, the educational institution in the region to really make it work," he said.

Aside from administrative concerns, Caribbean governments are also worried that because they have very little control in choosing who participates in the program, students could opt to stay in Canada by refusing to return home—a recipe for brain drain.

Mr. Kent said the Canadian government is very much aware of these concerns, and shares them with its Caribbean partners. For

that reason, Canada wants to see participants spend part of their time studying at home.

"There has been a tendency, where scholarships have been all-inclusive and off-shore, a tendency sometimes for students to stay on in the country where they're receiving the academic training," he said.

"We'd like to work with the individual countries to provide at least some of that education and ensure they've taken at least part of their scholarship training in their home country or in an academic institution in the region."

Hundreds from Chile

Meanwhile, Canada and Chile have finalized plans for a massive initiative that is already underway and could see up to 300 students coming to Canada to study this year alone.

When Chilean President Michelle Bachelet was in Ottawa last June, she signed a series of agreements on trade and education. The Canada-Chile Equal Opportunities Scholarship Program was part of the deal.

Chilean Ambassador Eugenio Ortega Riquelme said the number of students coming to Canada will grow to several hundred, and he proudly says his government will be footing most of the bill.

Sofia Contrucci is spending the winter term studying at Queen's University's School of Business. She found out about the scholarship program through her home university in Santiago, where she is a fourth-year business and economics student.

Ms. Contrucci said she was fortunate to find out about the program because it is not very well-known, and that she is extremely happy with her experience so far.

"I am very happy that I received this scholarship because otherwise I would not have been able to afford a semester in Canada," she said. "For Latin American people, life in northern countries is very expensive and it's hard for us to afford this."

"I have learned a lot about business. I have met people from all over the world and learn a lot about Canada as well. Also, I have improved my English skills."

Mr. Ortega says he has also negotiated deals with the Association of Community Colleges of Canada, while Chileans are benefiting from different international scholarships that Canadian universities have every year. Paid Canadian professors and volunteers will also be funded to teach in Chile.

"In Canada, not only do you find very good universities, but also excellent centres of research, which is very important for us," said Mr. Ortega.

Chile will also send 40 language teachers to Canada for six-month tours to acquire instructional skills in English and French. The Spanish-speaking nation is joining the Anglo-Saxon league with "English as the second language," the envoy said.

As Mr. Ortega put it, Canadian businesses stand to significantly gain from this relationship because Chile will have the "human capacity" to act as the stepping stone into the region.

For Cesar Astudillo, a post-graduate student in computer science specializing in artificial intelligence at Carleton University, Canada offers a wide range of programs from which he can benefit.

A former assistant lecturer at the University of Talca, he came to Canada in September 2006 to pursue his PhD through a different exchange partnership.

"From my world-class supervisor at Carleton, I have learned several skills like writing a paper of first class impact for conferences and journals", he said. "I also plan to keep my large network of contacts here."

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Chilean Cesar Astudillo is pursuing a computer science PhD in artificial intelligence at Carleton University. A former assistant lecturer at the University of Talca, he came to Canada in September 2006 through an exchange partnership.

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