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Options sparse for international students impacted by college strike

Those on study permits have to accept alternative schedule or risk jeopardizing their future immigration options.



Silvia Sansoni, an international student at Humber College from Brazil, is one of thousands of international students impacted by the Ontario college teachers' strike. (SILVIA SANSONI PHOTO)

By **ALEX MCKEEN** Staff Reporter
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In the wake of the longest labour disruption Ontario colleges have ever seen, thousands of students paying some of the highest tuition fees in the province are finding themselves hard-pressed to get full value.

International students are facing a choice between continuing their studies on condensed schedules with the option to apply for \$500 in “hardship” relief, or withdrawing for a refund and potentially jeopardizing their study permits and future immigration prospects.

“You came, you made a long-term plan, you forecast your expenses and your time. I think the international students are the ones who are most affected,” said Silvia Sansoni, a Humber College student from Brazil.

Classes resumed Tuesday for 500,000 students after a five-week labour dispute between college instructors and their employers. Upon their return, all students were given revised class schedules, and two options: stay in class with the option to apply for \$500 in “hardship” compensation from the college, or withdraw for a full refund and start the semester over again at a later date.

Some domestic students were eager to accept one of the two options and move on [after the long disruption](#). But for those who came from other countries to study, often paying several times the domestic tuition rate to do so, the options may seem meagre at best.

Sansoni, who studies alternative dispute resolution at Humber College, enrolled in the two-semester program at a rate of about \$7,800 per semester, almost triple the rate domestic students pay for the same program.

“I really support the desire of the professors and the faculty,” she said, “but students are paying the price, especially international students.”

Sansoni said she appreciates that Humber College is offering to try to compensate students for the lost time, but she thinks \$500 is not sufficient given the high rate she paid.

“They are compressing some weeks and I didn’t pay for compressed weeks,” she said.

Meanwhile, the option to withdraw may not be available to international students because study permits require them to be enrolled in school full-time to stay in Canada.

Some international students at Humber were taken aback after receiving an email that advised them to leave Canada should they take the option to withdraw.

“We appreciate this concern being raised and regret any confusion the language may have caused our international students,” said college spokesperson Andrew Leopold.

He said the emails were meant to help international students understand what their options were, and that all students considering withdrawal due to the strike should speak with an adviser before doing so.

A followup email Thursday from Humber’s international dean, Andrew Ness, reiterated that the school hopes students will choose to remain enrolled, and that they should seek advice about their

study permits.

“It is important that you speak with one of the trained and certified professionals in the International Centre regarding the implications of withdrawal on your study permit, residency in Canada and future aspirations to stay and work in Canada,” Ness wrote.

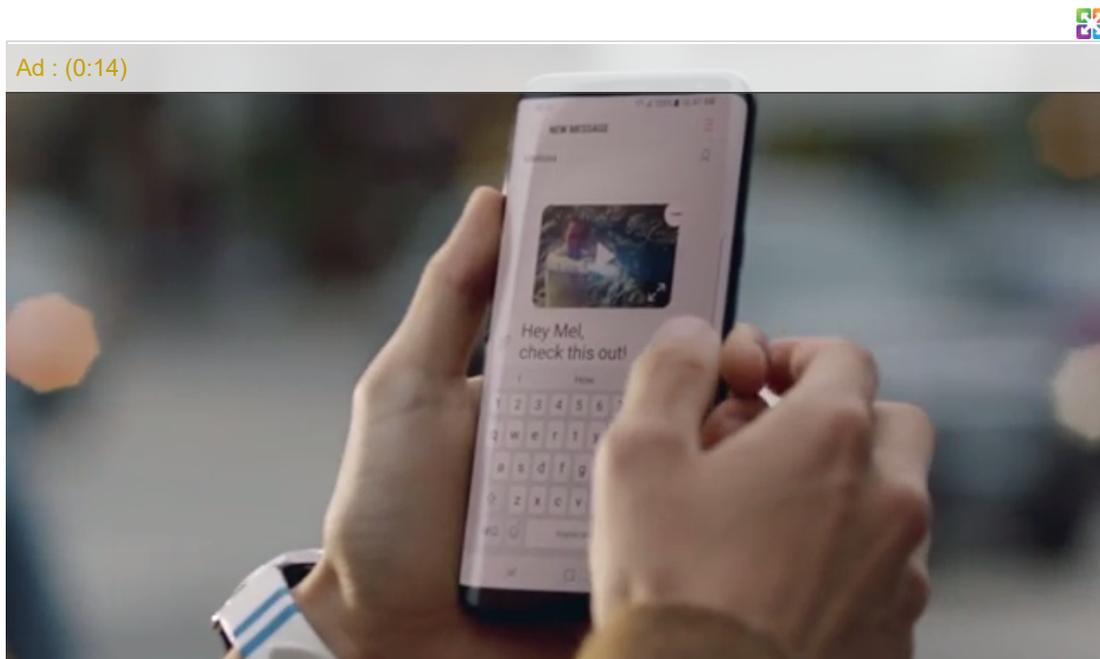
Immigration lawyer Sergio Karas said even though the circumstances following a five-week strike might be difficult for international students, the advice he would give them is clear.

“If an international student came to see me, I would advise them to remain a full-time student — don’t withdraw,” Karas said. “In terms of immigration it’s very, very important for students not to withdraw from their program.”

“Of course it goes without saying that perhaps students will be disappointed with the lack of quality of their studies. That’s a different story,” he said.

Karas said the Immigration Department could implement a “blanket policy” to accommodate international students affected by the strike, but he said he has not heard of such a measure being taken in the past.

Sansoni said the strike has had a huge impact on her. “I cannot just withdraw and come back,” she said.



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