

RE: THE DANGERS OF NAVITAS

Since the late 1980s, Canada has progressively shifted from a publicly-funded to a publicly-assisted, system of post-secondary education. For decades, international students have been used as ATMs to cushion budget lines while institutions continue to source easier and more 'efficient' methods for revenue.

Enter, Navitas.

Navitas is a growingly popular privatized pathway system that relieves the international student recruitment pressure from universities. Originating from Australia, Navitas was introduced to Canada in 2006 with partnerships at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and the University of Manitoba (UofM). Until recently, no further partnerships were secured until Ryerson University signed a contract in September of 2020.

Navitas prides itself in being a pathway to universities for international students who would not otherwise meet the admission and/or English proficiency requirements of the institution. It operates through opening independent International Student Colleges on partnering university campuses, where students engage in one or two-year programs in efforts to build their skill sets to a level that will qualify their admittance into the partnering university.

Privatized pathway systems are not necessarily new to Canada. Less-invasive and shorter pathway programs exist at a number of universities, but still, prove to be extremely problematic as they further corporatize our post-secondary education system and reserve education for those who are most economically privileged. Looking forward, pathway programs have the potential to be beneficial, should they be made available free of cost to actually support - rather than exploit, students in pursuing post-secondary education.

Narrowing in on Navitas, the closer we look at its practices, the more disastrous it proves to be. I will spend the rest of this piece outlining four primary dangers of Navitas:

1. Student deception
2. Alienation from student representation
3. Vulnerable labour conditions
4. Threat of scope creeping and further privatization

The first danger, student deception, pertains to the false Navitas promise that entrance into their program equates to enrollment at the students' dream institution. In reality, we've learned that students risk spending thousands of dollars with Navitas, only to discover that at the end of their pathway program they still do not meet the admission requirements for their desired program. Students have also shared that Navitas recruiting agents were not forthcoming about the actual tuition costs of the program, nor that they may be required to take additional English courses at an additional cost. Moreover, students enrolled at the International Student College at the UofM

have shared that it was not made clear upon enrollment that during the pathway program they would be considered Navitas students and not actual members of their desired university.

This brings us to the second danger of Navitas, alienation from student representation. Due to Navitas' restrictions that students are taught separate from the partnering university, students are explicitly excluded from student representation or any form of university resource support. Drawing again from experiences at the UofM, upon a recent ten-year contract renewal, students enrolled with the International College of Manitoba are restricted from representation through the University of Manitoba Students' Union. This means that they have no access to the U-Pass or any other academic advocacy support or services available through the students' union. Additionally, International Colleges often exist geographically separate from the main campus, so that Navitas students do not have the opportunity to engage with students enrolled at the housing university.

Transitioning into the third danger, vulnerable labour conditions, Navitas disastrously utilizes the lowest cost contract labour to deliver some of the highest cost undergraduate programs. Instructors in both Canada and in Australia have expressed alienation and strong pressures to pass and push students through Navitas programming, despite performance abilities. Instructors have also shared that their precarious employment status leads to a loss of academic freedom and fear to criticize their employer for poor working conditions. Within Canada, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is aware of Navitas and in 2011 even helped fight off a possible partnership at Carleton University.

These vulnerable conditions are exacerbated by the fourth danger, the threat of scope creeping and further privatization. Once established at an institution, Navitas looks for additional sources of revenue. Within a number of its Australian partnered institutions, Navitas has expanded to form a privatized pathway system for domestic students. At Simon Fraser University, Navitas has essentially taken over all ESL programming, leaving only one in-house ESL program still existing. At both the UofM and SFU, Navitas has started offering programming within the university in addition to the first-year pathway program.

On the whole, Navitas solidifies precarious working conditions within post-secondary education and promotes the ideology that any student who can foot the bill, can get an education. Especially amidst the worst global pandemics in recent history, it is both insensitive and inappropriate for Lethbridge University among other Canadian intuitions to be investigating partnerships that directly serve to further exploit international students. It is our collective responsibility to protect our students and workers. Now is the time for action so that, together, we can ensure a safe and accessible education for all.

In Solidarity,

Nicole Brayianis, National Deputy Chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students
The Canadian Federation of Students represents more than 530,000 students across the country and includes both domestic and international students at the college, undergraduate and graduate levels, including full- and part-time students.