

# **Quality, Cost, and Time**

## **The Iron Triangle of International Postsecondary Programs in Ontario**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines complexities related to the program quality of an in-bound International Student and Staff Mobility (ISSM) program (Knight, 2018) at a university in Ontario, Canada. The paper considers the perspectives of three chief stakeholders—students, faculty, and administrators—within the context of international programs and adopts the iron triangle (Adams, 1981; Blaich & Wise, 2018) comprising cost, time, and quality as its framework to examine the sustainability of academic programs and ways to enhance program quality. The authors argue that quality is a critical part of the prestige of a program and even the institution, and high quality programs can be delivered in a myriad of ways depending on context. The authors raise thought-provoking questions corresponding to the competing interests of the three chief stakeholders and posit that solutions catering solely to international students' interests will not be sustainable. Support for international students, albeit essential for their overall adaptation to cultural and academic norms, requires closer vigilance so that the program costs do not become unsustainable and raises questions about quality. The paper concludes by inviting all stakeholders to engage in honest discussions to ameliorate raised issues.

### **Introduction**

As of 2019, Canada had the third-highest international student population globally (behind the United States and Australia) with 642,480 international students in various levels of study, representing

a 185% increase from 2010 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2020). International program and provider mobility (IPPM) programs offered in students' home countries have gained in popularity (e.g., see Niagara College KSA, 2019), with up to 40% of international students accessing some form of higher education in their own jurisdictions through IPPM (Knight, 2018). The majority of international postsecondary programs rely on international students leaving their home countries to study in the host country, in what is termed international student and staff mobility (ISSM). With its long history compared to IPPM, ISSM boasts higher numbers of students and remains attractive to postsecondary institutions, particularly from a financial standpoint due to government funding reductions.

Although postsecondary institutions have sought out private and public partnerships to relieve funding deficits (Altbach & Knight, 2007), such agreements risk compromising educational institutions' research and teaching activities (e.g., see the Oliviere case in Thompson et al., 2005). The situation is further exacerbated in Ontario where the provincial government has capped the annual increase of tuition of domestic students at 5% (Norrie & Lennon, 2011). Consequently, postsecondary institutions have turned to international student fees, which remain unregulated (Crawley, 2017), as a way to resolve universities' underfunding predicament. In short, universities aggressively recruit international students and charge them higher tuition fees to increase revenues in the face of reduced public funding (Canadian Federation of Students, 2015; Crawley, 2017; Hegarty, 2014; Ibbitson, 2018; Macrander, 2017; Maru, 2018; Norrie & Lennon, 2011; Rhoades, 2016). This situation is further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic because international student participation in some programs has been curtailed due to travel-related bans, thus augmenting universities' financial challenges (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020; Friesen, 2020).

Despite international programs' emergence as the apparent solution to postsecondary institutions' fiscal shortfalls, a new set of complications arises pertaining to cultural differences, a need for greater student support services, and the question of academic integrity. In this paper, we focus on program quality because (a) it most closely matches our own experiences in planning and delivering international programs, and (b) it is an aspect of the program over which universities have the most direct control. Our experiences suggest that the challenges facing international programs' students, faculty, and administrators have not been addressed adequately. We examine this gap and demonstrate the complexities of postsecondary international student programs from these stakeholders' perspectives concerning program

quality. While we acknowledge that international program stakeholders' motivations, aspirations, and intentions may differ individually and collectively, we focus on issues pertinent to each stakeholder group. We do so using our institution's case as an exemplar and through the theoretical framework of the iron triangle. As our analysis demonstrates, stakeholders are aligned in their belief that higher-quality scholarship is likely to occur when international students receive greater academic and non-academic support, enhancing program quality.

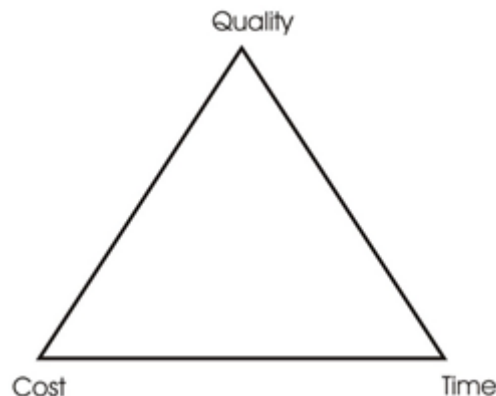
### **Theoretical Framework: The Iron Triangle**

Findings from the literature examined in this study are underpinned by the theoretical framework of the iron triangle (also called the project management triangle), a concept initially proposed by Gordon Adams in 1981 for use in political analysis and subsequently modified to suit the context of education and higher learning (e.g., Blach & Wise, 2018; Daniel et al., 2009; Lane, 2014; West et al., 2012). The following section explains the three interconnected central concepts of international programs' length (i.e., time), quality, and cost (as shown in Figure 1) to illustrate the iron triangle's contextual validity.

The use of a triangle is significant: Although any two of the three concepts can be treated as independent variables, altering them would affect the third. We contend that the iron triangle encapsulates international postsecondary programs and helps us understand the complexities of relationships among stakeholders in such programs in Ontario.

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**Figure 1**  
*Relationship of Program Time, Quality, and Cost*



We deviate from the depiction by Daniel et al. (2009) of the iron triangle—in which the three vertices are access, cost, and quality—because access, when applied to international programs, can be seen as a function of many things:

- Access =  $f$
- Financial resources
  - Time
  - Geopolitical relations
  - Travel arrangements
  - Admission

Access encompasses students' financial resources for various expenditures; duration of time needed to earn the degree or certification; ease of obtaining travel documents from the home country and permission (often in the form of a student visa) from the host country; and fulfillment of admission requirements. In short, access is negotiated almost exclusively from the students' perspective. In the case of international students, access centrally rests on the cost of the program they enroll in. More broadly, the cost can be examined from student, faculty, and administrative perspectives and focuses our analysis. Cost can be conceptualized as follows:

- Cost =  $f$
- Delivery of the program
  - Cost of acquiring credential
  - Cost of teaching and learning supports

The costs are those borne by administrators, students, and faculty members, respectively. Often access to the programs is determined by the associated costs for the international students. Time can be represented as follows:

- Time =  $f$
- Duration of the program
  - Duration of supports
  - Length of faculty commitment (workload)

Time represents both the duration of the program and also when it begins and ends. For instance, a student undertaking a four-term program in fall/winter terms will finish the program in two academic calendar years but can accomplish the same degree in one year in consecutive terms—a critical detail in attracting students. The distribution of yearly workload and the longevity of commitment to the program also must be factored in, however subtly, in the development of the academic programs and affect faculty and administrator considerations.

Quality is often referenced by various stakeholders but is difficult to operationalize, hence the proportional sign in the following equation:

Quality $\alpha$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Academic background</li> <li>- Reputation</li> <li>- Knowledge and skills acquired</li> <li>- Prospects</li> <li>- Internal processes</li> </ul>
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Within the context of international educational programs and this paper's scope, we define the quality of programs based on five components listed in the equation above. The academic background of incoming students determines what can be taught and what previous knowledge base can be relied upon and leveraged. An institution's reputation attracts students of a certain calibre, and that contributes to the ongoing program quality. The competencies acquired by the graduates further enhance the reputation of the program and are a direct indication of its quality. The evidence of quality is also indicated by the graduates' economic success or prospects of future studies. Within the program's management, various internal processes of self-study, accreditation, senate oversight, multiple forms of assessment of students, preservation of academic integrity, and length of the program (among other things) are meant to enhance the program quality.

In the international programs, the issues of cost, time, and quality are discussed holistically across all stakeholders. However, there are three chief and distinct stakeholders in the mix: students, faculty, and administrators. Much like cost, time, and quality are interlinked in the iron triangle, so, too, are these chief stakeholders. Their interests, goals, and aspirations sometimes align with each other and sometimes not. Figure 2 illustrates the heterogeneity of stakeholder members' mindsets, agendas, and goals. The many fractures within the stakeholder orbs represent a frequent lack of consensus between members in specific stakeholder groups; that is, there are noticeable differences within each group on any single issue, and those must be acknowledged.

Using program quality, we examine the interrelationship among the three stakeholder groups related to cost, time, and quality of the international programs.

### **Program Quality**

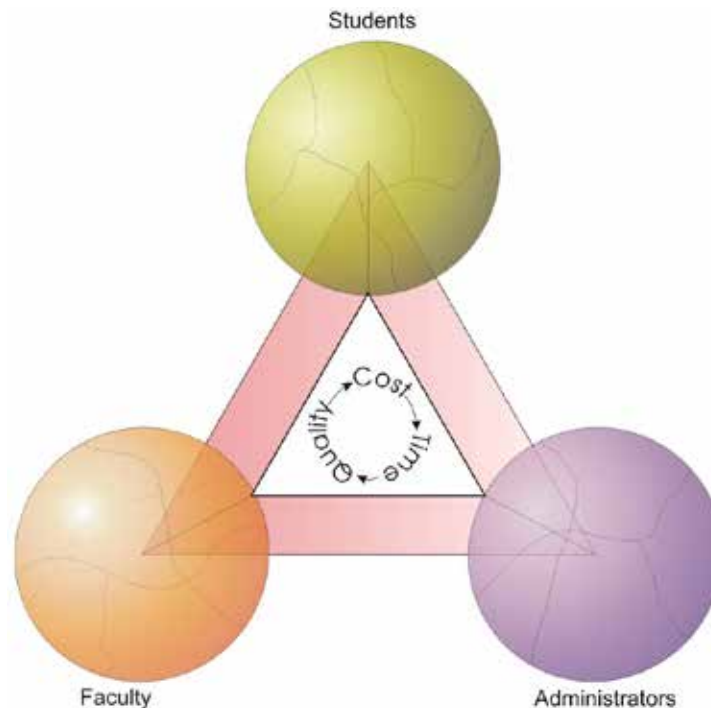
Although program quality influences prospective students' choice of programs (Chaguluka et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2018), it is difficult to pinpoint quality accurately and objectively. Measures used to assess quality include institutional, program, and faculty reputations as well as media reports—issues or variables that shape people's perceptions of a program.

### Length of Program

A longer program helps international students acquire greater academic, social/cultural, and employment skills, as well as language fluency (Alqarni, 2017; Bodycott, 2009), which is particularly useful if students choose to stay in the host country post-graduation. Yet Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) found that some international students opt for shorter duration programs, primarily to reduce expenses. McFadden et al. (2012) similarly identified time-to-degree as an instrumental program characteristic (ranked second only to student-faculty ratio) influencing international students' choice of program.

In Li and Tierney's (2013) study of one international Master of Education (MEd) program (listed as a 14-month program but most often completed in 12 months), students and administrators alike preferred a shorter-duration program. Administrators favoured shorter-duration international programs because it lowered operational costs and made the programs less complicated, especially when bracketed within one

**Figure 2**  
**Stakeholder Groups in Relation to Time, Quality, and Cost**



academic year cycle. International students preferred shorter duration programs because it meant that students could potentially enter the workforce in Canada (or in their home country) sooner (Li & Tierney, 2013). Bista and Dagley (2015) also identified employment opportunities in the host country and permanent residency as equally essential considerations among international students' choice of program. Yet its direct impact on the quality of the program delivered cannot be ignored.

The Canadian government requires full-time international students to be registered for a minimum of one year to meet immigration eligibility criteria (Government of Ontario, 2020). In Ontario, students who graduate from an accredited master's program can apply for permanent residency through the Masters Graduate Stream under the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (Government of Ontario, 2020). Fast-tracking to permanent residency through the shorter program is an attractive characteristic of the international MEd program.

Yet, a shortened program could have a detrimental effect on program quality, as it reduces students' time to master (or indeed acquire) the academic content and sociocultural skills that may improve their prospects for employment or further studies. Moreover, when the congruence between the earned degree and the matching skills is compromised, the awarded degree fails to convey the degree holder's knowledge or skills, thus undermining the degree's quality—and hence the international program.

A university should ensure its student candidates possess the requisite skills before awarding the certification/degree to preserve the program's quality. Doing so requires methodical repetition and students' prolonged exposure to concepts, ideas, and practices, requiring adequate time for teaching, learning, and assessment. When the pressure to reduce the duration of time within which one acquires the degree becomes a critical factor, program quality can be diminished.

Postsecondary institutions' increasing reliance on international student tuition and related fees to offset funding shortfalls puts them in a business transaction with students. In return, the international students demand the acquisition of their degrees in minimal time, which compromises quality as it limits what can be covered during the program. Unless the calibre of students entering the program is relatively high, some content is omitted or not covered in sufficient depth to merit the granting of a degree or certification in the given subject. We can infer that the desire to shorten international programs is also a consideration for university administrators under pressure to shepherd students quickly through programs to reduce the amount of time

and money spent on them. In terms of the iron triangle, we, therefore, have competing objectives:

short time + minimal expenses = possibly compromised quality  
short time + minimal expenses = possibly larger profit margins

### **Academic Awards**

Although an inexact measure of a program's quality, academic awards are indicators of comparatively higher achievement amongst recipients than their peers, thus conferring prestige to the individual and the program. Academic honours, like bursaries and scholarships, also motivate students. In a survey of international students, Wu and Myhill (2017) found that scholarship availability was the second biggest influence for international students selecting an institution (low tuition was the first). Because international students pay a substantial (not subsidized) amount for their education, academic awards become a means to subsidize their total expenditures.

Faculty members, too, perceive academic awards positively (Bista & Dagley, 2015). Awards are a mechanism to recognize students' scholarly achievements and a variable used in institutions' international and national ranking systems (van der Wende & Marginson, 2007). In turn, faculty members reap the benefits of working in highly ranked institutions. The challenge for faculty members is to balance the criteria of award and ability of students. If standards are too stringent for students to achieve, then the award fails to deliver positive effects; too lax measures create many eligible candidates, reducing the award's monetary value and its impact and significance. The adverse effects of awards also can compromise the quality. Exline et al. (2004) state that unhealthy competition amongst students vying for prizes can create a climate not conducive to high-quality performance.

The administrative position is somewhat aligned with other stakeholders on student awards. On the one hand, student awards help advertise the program and attract students, yet on the other hand, they can be perceived as a superfluous expenditure that supports only a few select students. Ultimately, administrators proceed with caution regarding student financial awards, as they may also reduce programs' profit margins. The pros and cons can be summarized as follows:

Student awards = recognition of quality  
+ augmenting student program cost

Student awards = increased competition  
+ higher administrative program costs



**Diversification**

Diversification refers to the student body's cultural and national diversity in international programs and is linked to program quality. Li and Tierney (2013) noted a consensus among students, faculty, and administrators with regards to having greater cultural and national diversity in the classrooms: When a particular cultural, ethnic, or linguistic group is overly represented in a program, the in-class (and hence program) dynamics are adversely affected. All stakeholder groups consider this negative outcome as a factor affecting the overall educational experience.

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory suggests that students' prejudices and negative attitudes are reduced if they have sustained interactions with people of other groups. When diversity in groups does not exist, there is dissatisfaction amongst students and faculty (Belkin & Jordan, 2016; Li & Tierney, 2013), and the potential benefit of diversification is unrealized. Allport's approach precludes sporadic interactions between the groups because, in that scenario, each group attempts to establish dominance over the other. Schweisfurth and Gu's (2009) study of international students raised serious concerns about whether the duration of a series of classes in a program was sufficient to achieve the positive outcomes identified by Allport; they questioned whether such strategies reproduced the stereotypes and divisiveness they were designed to challenge.

Overall, students' cultural diversification within a program holds the promise of achieving the goal of internationalization and the potential for creativity in problem-solving contemporary issues. These positive outcomes are summarized as follows:

*diversification* → *better learning*  
*better learning* → *better quality*  
*positive effects of diversification* → *more time*

**Segregated Versus Integrated International Cohorts**

There are two distinct and popular ways to deliver programs to international students: The first is alongside their native counterparts (i.e., the integrated model), and the second is separated from their native peers into parallel sections (i.e., the segregated model). In the segregated model, the instruction is given at a reduced pace and sometimes even using a different (or differentiated) curriculum, tailored resources, and revised pedagogical practices (de Jong & Howard, 2009). It is also a common practice that international students receive additional academic support from tutors. The segregated

model is quite similar to Knight's (2018) IPPM model of internationalization.

Li and Tierney (2013) found that some international students expressed frustration for being segregated from their native peers, and this separation also produces tensions across faculty and support staff groups. Sometimes, however, students want segregated programs, as do some faculty members. Some faculty members perceive that most international non-native English speakers (NNES) students are ill-equipped to study alongside their domestic counterparts without modifications to course content, pace, rigour, pedagogy, assessment, and learning outcomes. Sometimes, international students, too, admit their shortcomings when placed the same classes as their domestic peers. Worthington et al.'s (2019) and van Onselen's (2019) findings also suggest this happens in many other universities.

Academic accommodations owing to deficits in English language fluency result in a different delivery of the program. Skyrme and McGee (2016) note that different curricula and pedagogical practices lead to different student learning outcomes and disparities in student learning and employment prospects create tensions between stakeholder groups. Concerns arise over the perceived lack of rigour and low quality associated with programs targeting international NNES students (Chiose, 2016; Todd, 2017). Still, some international students are satisfied with a segregated model that leads to the acquisition of the same degree because they feel vulnerable in classrooms with English-speaking domestic students (Su & Harrison, 2016; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013; Washburn & Hargis, 2017). International NNES students identify the fast pace of delivery and the inclusion of culturally dependent and local cultural references into teaching as primary reasons they struggle to understand the content, do not actively participate in the classroom, and feel isolated (Belkin & Jordan, 2016). While some domestic students desire opportunities to interact with their international counterparts, others find it taxing to interact with international students and engage with their cultural idiosyncrasies (Redden, 2013).

Administratively, the segregated model is beneficial because it reduces the number of potential complaints by faculty and students corresponding to academic support and program delivery. International NNES students also require extensive academic support to meet the degree's high standards. This demand for additional supports is not different from what other students might need too. But expenditure spanning across the entire student body for all programs is regarded as excessively expensive and unnecessary, and hence supports are only

offered to international NNES students. One way to achieve this is by restricting the course-bank offered to international NNES students. Understandably, according to Li and Tierney (2013), this imposed separation displeases some international students because it reduces their course options and ability to interact with native or domestic students.

Administrators estimate costs and revenues of program delivery well in advance of their commencement. This planning determines and targets the number of students to be admitted. A tension emerges between meeting the admission quotas and adherence to the admission standards. If admission quotas are not fulfilled, programs close; if admission standards are compromised, quality suffers. Such a focus leads to the following relationship:

affects  
segregated & integrated programs ↔ program quality

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity underpins any educational system, but sometimes there is a disjunction between faculty and international students regarding its importance and meaning (Isbell et al., 2018; Skyrme & McGee, 2016; Su & Harrison, 2016; van Onselen, 2019). Todd (2017) reports that faculty members at a university in British Columbia “feel pressure to wave through the full-fee-paying foreign students” (para. 6); that is, they feel pressured to pass the high tuition-paying students regardless of their performance. Cook (2019) highlights similar concerns among university faculty members in Australia who admit they issue passing grades to students’ work that previously would have been considered inadequate and unacceptable. Likewise, Worthington et al. (2019) assert that some administrators relax (if not at times ignore) institutional admission criteria for international students to meet enrollment targets and sustain both tuition revenues and a substantial application pool for subsequent years. The perceived pressure to pass substandard work could lead to practices that contravene general academic principles associated with high standards, which in turn can compromise program quality for international and domestic students alike (Todd, 2017; van Onselen, 2019).

Isbell et al. (2018) maintain that different academic integrity perceptions may lead to increased infractions in students’ work. Such violations may include unreferenced sources, copying, translating the text into English (e.g., through various translation programs), recycling papers from past students, and acquiring documents from online commercial sources (Bradshaw & Baluja, 2011). All of these

undermine teaching and learning and, by extension, program quality, which can be expressed in the following equation:

$$\text{academic integrity} \propto \text{program quality}$$

In sum, program quality remains a concern amongst all stakeholders, with administrative support staff caught between faculty concerns and student frustrations. Even potential employers eager to employ newly minted graduates express dissatisfaction with the skill-set of graduates from programs in which program quality has been compromised, and academic integrity sacrificed in favour of shortened program (Baird & Parayitam, 2017). The perennial problems in our systems laid bare by an increased number of international students—and now by pandemic models of education—have no easy solutions. Kumar (2020) states, “The solutions that are to emerge in the higher education space have to balance propositions from the ardent supporters and the vehement critics of new, burgeoning forms of teaching, learning, and assessing in the COVID-19 shaped world” (p. 40). Preservation of quality is not only needed for the sustainability of the existing programs, it is imperative for the success of ISSMs. According to Schulte and Choudaha (2014), to preserve program quality and retain or elevate institutional prestige and reputation, more significant academic supports have been demanded by international students and deemed necessary by administrators to support students through the programs.

## **Discussion**

Blaich and Wise (2018) noted that a maximum of two components out of cost, time, and quality could be treated as independent variables in the iron triangle. If one or two of these independent variables are altered, the remaining component(s) act as dependent variables and change to preserve the triangular shape (i.e., retain a sustainable configuration). Table 1 represents the relationship amongst cost, time, and quality to show which configurations are sustainable and which are not. We acknowledge differences in expectations, approaches, and general views on international programs within the three stakeholder groups.

Suppose we assume low-quality programs are non-starters and not a viable goal. In that case, we can eliminate that configuration between quality, time, and cost and ignore the lower half of the table. Table 1 also demonstrates that various configurations of quality, time, and cost are perceived differently by different stakeholders and affect their impressions of sustainability. The only constellation that remains sustainable for all three groups is when a high-quality pro-

gram is delivered at a reasonable pace and cost. Student costs include those expenses that their university can regulate and control (such as tuition fees, ancillary fees, textbook fees, on-campus meal plans, and residence costs if applicable) and those that they cannot control directly (lodging and transportation fee, health-related expenses, clothes, entertainment, inter alia). It is true that, from a student's perspective, they need to spend money on all aspect—those within the control of the universities and those that are not. Ultimately, it is the total cost that bears into students' decision-making, but within the context of this discussion, we are concerned with costs that universities can control. The faculty's cost is to be understood as the investments in educating international students (e.g., language support, writing support, additional tutorials, inter alia), often viewed as the effort required by faculty members. For administrators, cost means the resources they must allocate to deliver the program as advertised.

Our discussion and variations presented in the paper's body demonstrate where and how the three primary stakeholder groups' perceptions differ, and we want the reader to consider these variations. Intuitive solutions to attend to the problems that might emerge by ignoring the intricacies are likely to miss the mark. For instance, some students are motivated to earn a degree with no intention of pursuing a career in the field and may primarily view a graduate degree as a viable pathway to permanent residency (Bista & Dagley, 2015; Esses et al., 2018). Other students may aspire to continue in the field and pursue doctoral studies. Programs that ignore one kind of student's aspirations are unlikely to remain successful and sustainable in the long run, especially under their current configuration. Likewise, there

**Table I**  
**Various Permutations of Cost, Time, and Quality, and the Relationship to Sustainability**

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Sustainability</i>		
			<i>Student</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Administrator</i>
High	More	High	NS	S	NS
High	More	Low	S	S	S
High	Less	High	NS	S	NS
High	Less	Low	S	NS	S
Low	More	High	-	-	-
Low	More	Low	-	-	-
Low	Less	High	-	-	-
Low	Less	Low	-	-	-

Note. S = Sustainable; NS = Not Sustainable

may be considerable differences in program administrators' and faculty members' outlooks. Some may perceive themselves as shepherding students to succeed, while others may believe their responsibilities end after a class, course, or program and are unencumbered by non-academic issues affecting international students. We contend that in these times of uncertainty and new modalities of catering to students, this is an opportunity for all three stakeholder groups to come together and creatively re-envision international programs to ameliorate these and other issues.

### **Recommendations**

There are misalignments between and within stakeholder groups regarding what an appropriate student support model should look like, and consensus remains a challenge. A possible solution is to increase incoming English language proficiency qualifying scores for students. The consequences of raising the language scores most directly affect the NNES international students; however, administrators too would be disconcerted by the concomitant reduction in the pool of qualified applicants. Of course, administrators may be appeased by such a change if the elevation of language scores translated into a reduction in program operating costs.

The iron triangle model sheds light on possible configurations to offer a high-quality, sustainable academic experience to NNES international students. If an academic program is to remain viable, it needs to maintain a high level of quality among its instructional faculty, administrative support staff, and the students it admits. Admitting students who may be unprepared due to academic or non-academic issues is not a good position—pedagogically or bottom line. Said another way, admitting underqualified students into an academic program can be an economic boon to a specific unit or faculty; however, such a decision is unethical and unsustainable. The equation for our recommended model is as follows:

- increased student English language competencies  
→ higher quality scholarship
- increased student English competencies  
→ lower program operational costs
- increased student English language competencies  
→ potential for minimal program duration

### **Conclusion**

Our underlying assumption with international programs, or any programs for that matter, is that they exhibit high quality to remain viable; if the quality is not sufficiently high, the programs will not be sustainable. We have established that quality means different things to different people, and there may not be a consensus amongst people within the same stakeholder groups. But one thing that is less controversial is that the quality of the program gives the program its prestige. In turn, prestige is socially recognized, and therefore, quality becomes a critical component for sustainability.

A program's quality is preserved by attention to its internal processes. That is, the curricula, the faculty members involved in the program, the contact hours, the assessment, and the grading criteria, amongst other aspects, are used to establish and preserve the high quality of the programs delivered. Periodically, these internal processes are examined either internally or through external agencies, depending on the program and its accreditation process. Unlike external factors (such as prestige) that are shaped by many elements beyond the purview of the university, internal processes allow for control over aspects of the program that govern quality. For this reason, most analyses of international programs focus prominently on the internal processes related to quality control. One revelation for us has been that different programs—indeed, various institutions—have adopted different models of program delivery to bolster quality. In other words, there is no singular way to deliver a high-quality program.

There is a nuanced difference in the perceived value attributed to academic support intensity amongst stakeholders. Some faculty members caution that excessive support given to students may obfuscate the authenticity of students' academic work. Nevertheless, for the most part, students and faculty are aligned to provide educational support to international students. More academic supports translate into the potential for generating higher-quality scholarship from international students. Therefore, academic support is considered an important, if not essential, component of a viable and sustainable quality academic program for international students. Ultimately, stakeholders align in their belief that the potential for high-quality scholarship is more likely to occur when international NNES students receive extensive academic and non-academic supports.

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