



Addressing Racism and Religious Discrimination

Consultation Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a student-led, provincial advocacy organization representing the interests of undergraduate students across Ontario. OUSA is run by a Steering Committee made up of elected student representatives from each member association, including the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA). These student representatives advocate to improve the accessibility, affordability, accountability, and quality of the post-secondary experience by engaging with decision makers to influence provincial legislation and policy. This advocacy relies on the creation of substantive, student-driven, and evidence-based policy recommendations on a given issue.

Twice a year, representatives from OUSA's member schools come together to debate and approve the policies that will guide the organization for the coming years. The policies are created by students, for students, and form the basis for all the work that OUSA does. OUSA is currently updating their policy stance on Addressing Racism and Religious Discrimination.

Community engagement and consultation is an important part of policy development as it ensures that policies reflect the concerns and needs of all students. This allows OUSA to present provincial decision makers with comprehensive and evidence-based recommendations on complex issues.



Methodology

From November 2023 to January 2024, WUSA engaged in various consultation activities to learn more about the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of University of Waterloo students on how to address racism and religious discrimination. Undergraduate students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey that included open-ended questions inquiring about their experiences around racism and religious discrimination on campus and in the Waterloo Region. Students were also invited to participate in a 1.5-hour online focus group session on the topic of addressing religious discrimination and separately on the topic of addressing racism.

Additionally, WUSA reached out to on campus partners, services, and offices that regularly work with students around issues of racism and religious discrimination, including the Racial Advocacy for Inclusion Solidarity and Equity (RAISE) student-run service, the Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism (EDI-R), Campus Wellness, and on-campus chaplains to conduct stakeholder interviews.

List of Activities

Online anonymous consultation form

- November 1-24, 2023
- 4 respondents

Stakeholder Interview

- Goldi Gill, Executive Director Campus Wellness – November 6, 2023
- University Chaplains Meeting – November 21, 2023
- Adria Joel, Campus Wellness Counsellor – January 3, 2024
- Sarah Menzies, EDI-R Anti-Racism Specialist – Interview scheduled but not completed due to unforeseen circumstances

Focus Group

- Addressing Religious Discrimination – November 23, 2023 [9 participants]
- Addressing Racism – January 24, 2024 [16 participants]

Biases and Limitations

The following summary is a combination of opinions and experiences gathered from all consultation activities. Our approach involved direct engagement with students through online consultation forms and focus groups. We also consulted with staff in on-campus support units that provide services related to racism and religious discrimination to provide a broader lens than an individual student's experience, and to understand wider systemic issues that the unit might encounter in providing support to students. Our analysis and recommendations are limited by the engagement from students and staff that we received and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to reflect the experiences of all students who identify as racialized or as religious.

Our promotional materials for the consultation form and focus groups used the term 'religious discrimination' and this may have discouraged students who identify as spiritual but who are not members of organized religions from participating. Furthermore, it is possible that we did not engage with students from religious or racial backgrounds that are less represented within the University of Waterloo community.

Key Recommendations

- 1** The University should have staff members and an office that focuses on the responsibility of ensuring spiritual wellness on campus
- 2** The University should have a clear process for students to report hate speech, hate crimes, and religious discrimination that provides students with the opportunity for resolution
- 3** The University should have mandatory education around diverse identities on campus. This should apply to students as well as staff in all faculties and co-op employers on WaterlooWorks
- 4** The University should consult with religious and racialized students in its upcoming Freedom of Expression and Respectful Engagement Task Force as it develops principles for free expression on campus
- 5** The University should continue efforts to diversify the staff complement within support service departments and create or expand roles that cater to specific identity support
- 6** The University should create or continue of a holistic campus-wide strategy to access prayer space
- 7** The University should create a policy or best practices guideline that define how the University responds to geopolitical issues and provides support for the campus community

Identified Themes



University Policy and Structure



Community



Housing and Dietary Needs



Response to emerging and on-going geopolitical issues

University Policies and Structure

The University of Waterloo has recently acknowledged the historical oversight in supporting spiritual wellness on campus. Consequently, Campus Wellness has initiated efforts to expand its services to address this need. Previously, this has been left up to student-led clubs, the chaplains at the University Colleges (UCs) (who do not represent the faith diversity of the student population), and the religious community outside of the University.

Continued efforts to increase international student enrolment have further diversified the campus community and many of these students come from countries where religion is strongly embedded in culture and daily life. Moreover, the University of Waterloo has recently begun increasing support for racialized students through offices like EDI-R and the Office of Indigenous Relations.

However, we know that students with intersecting identities require a comprehensive approach to support, rather than one that is siloed in nature. In addition, it is important that the burden for supporting religious and racialized students is not placed solely on one department, but that it is embedded into all aspects of a student's experience, including through the faculties.

Concerns

- The University relies on the UCs to support spiritual wellness on campus and the spiritual wellness supports provided by the UCs are primarily focused on western religions
- There is limited university funding to support spiritual wellness for students
- There is no formal vetting or training for religious leaders from the community who wish to engage with students on campus
- The current structure of student supports on campus does not consider intersectionality or offer a comprehensive approach to support
- STEM faculties are less inclusive for racialized students (E.g., black women in the Engineering faculty have the pressure of being a spokesperson for their entire race)

Recommendations

1. The University should establish a specialized office with dedicated staff members focused on spiritual wellness on campus
 - While Campus Wellness has begun assuming the responsibility for spiritual wellness, the University should consider if Campus Wellness is the best place for this support to exist
 - This new office should receive adequate funding to run events and programming to support spiritual wellness
 - This office should be responsible for approving and guiding community religious groups engagement on campus
 - This office should create clear guidelines on religious practices on campus (E.g., smudging, the use of musical instruments in prayer and religious services)
 - This office should establish a formal vetting and training process for religious leaders who wish to engage with students on campus

Religious and Cultural Accommodations

Under the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#), post-secondary institutions have a duty to maintain an environment that is free from discrimination and harassment based on creed. However, current students encounter difficulties in requesting and receiving academic accommodations for religious needs. The University currently schedules classes, exams, and assignments in a way that recognizes some western religious observances, but does not consider other religious holidays, despite there being significant populations of students who practice those religions on campus. Additionally, students may not be aware that they are eligible for reasonable accommodations for their religious needs as there are no centralized resources on this process.

Concerns

- The University and instructors do not consistently consider all religious observances in how course requirements are scheduled
- Approval of religious or cultural accommodations is at the discretion of individual instructors
- Instructors are not well-educated on cultural and religious needs and what are appropriate accommodations
 - Students report the outcome of some accommodation requests result in a penalty
 - Students report instructors choosing not to grant religious accommodations or being very dismissive in their interactions with students
 - Students report issues with needing to leave longer lectures/labs to pray
- Student awareness around religious and cultural accommodations is not widespread
- Students on co-op enter environments off-campus as a requirement of their program that may not provide appropriate religious and cultural accommodations

Recommendations

1. The University should consider all major religious holidays in planning of course requirements and should observe these dates equally (i.e., not showing preference towards western religion holidays)
2. The University should create guidelines for how instructors should manage religious accommodation requests and provide mandatory training to instruction staff
3. Co-operative Education should provide training to employers on religious accommodations and ensure students are aware of pathways to report issues with religious accommodations in the workplace
4. The University should consider creating awareness and educational campaigns to enhance student knowledge about their eligibility for religious accommodations.

Representation, Discrimination, and Education

The student population at the University of Waterloo is diverse and multi-faceted. A supportive and inclusive campus community cannot allow discrimination and bias. Racialized and religious students report experiencing various forms of discrimination and bias on campus. It is essential that members of all identities receive well-rounded education about the diverse range of identities present on campus, as well as clear guidelines on how values and policies should be implemented. This will ensure that all members on campus can freely express themselves and their values while maintaining respect for members of other identities.

Concerns

- The staff, faculty, and leadership members of the University do not reflect the diversity of the student population
- All campus community members are not adequately educated about the various racial and religious identities present in the University community
- Some religious values may conflict with the inclusive values of the institution and its students, staff and faculty, specifically values around gender and sexual identity)
- As an intentionally secular space, religious students feel they cannot fully be themselves on campus
- Students report many experiences of discrimination and bias from peers, staff, and faculty (e.g., racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Asian hate)
- The institution does not have a clear process or pathway for students to bring concerns around spiritual wellness or religious discrimination to the institution
- Racialized students experience discrimination during the co-op employment process (e.g., name-based discrimination during the resume application process, employers unfairly underestimating abilities based on racially identifying factors)
- Classes that are taught by white instructors and primarily composed of white students may influence the type of content and class discussions available that restricts and makes racialized students feel uncomfortable participating in class

Recommendations

1. The University should implement a clear process for students to report hate speech, hate crimes, and religious discrimination that provides students with the opportunity for resolution
2. The University should require mandatory education around diverse identities on campus
 - a. This should apply to students as well as staff in all faculties and co-op employers on WaterlooWorks
3. The University should consult with religious students in its upcoming Freedom of Expression and Respectful Engagement Task Force as it develops principles for free expression on campus
4. The University should continue their commitment to EDI-R informed hiring practices
5. The University should create clear guidelines for religious groups on campus around the expectations and values of the campus community
6. The University should review its scholarships and co-op policy to ensure that current policies employ inclusive practices that are not discriminatory or negatively impact racialized students

Spiritually and Culturally Appropriate Supports

All students should be able to access support services on campus that are appropriate for their spiritual and cultural identity. The intersection of race and religion with mental health and wellness is significant and support services need to be able to provide support to these students in a way that considers their intersectional identity. Students balancing intersectionality including race, identity, and other factors require support beyond mental health services alone. Racialized students in particular require tailored support that requires collaboration between existing services.

Concerns

- Racialized and religious students do not always receive religious and/or culturally appropriate response when seeking support on campus
 - Campus Wellness was identified by students as not understanding the intersection between religion and mental health
 - Students who practice religion often come to their spiritual community for mental health support because they don't feel understood and supported in traditional counselling
 - Wellness support informed by religious and cultural practices does not exist on campus (E.g., Ayurvedic medicine, Indigenous wellness practices and plant-based medicines)
- Support services do not always have staff with lived experience as a racialized or religious individuals
 - Students report having a hard time connecting with these staff members or feel they must educate them on their experience
- Racialized students are often aware of services offered through the University but are unable to reach out due to cultural barriers and the feeling of needing to be strong and successful for their family and community

Recommendations

1. The University should continue efforts to diversify the staff complement within support service departments and create or expand roles that cater to specific identity support
2. The University should continue implementing spiritual and faith-based wellness practices within Campus Wellness, ensuring that the intersection between religion and mental health is included in required training for staff
3. The University should implement an intersectional approach to support services offered on campus
 - a. For example, orientation activities should include optional knowledge sessions on how to access faith spaces on campus, how to connect with their religious community on campus

Access to Prayer Space

Prayer is an integral part of faith for members of many religions and access to appropriate space for prayer is a requirement under the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#).

Concerns

- There are some buildings and areas on campus that do not have a designated multi-faith space
- The prayer spaces that exist on campus are not centrally managed
- There are no clear guidelines for use of the multi-faith spaces and this is being negotiated amongst users and the units responsible for operating the various faith spaces on campus

Recommendations

1. The University should create or continue to implement a holistic, campus-wide strategy to access prayer spaces
2. The University should ensure that prayer spaces should be centrally managed by the unit tasked with overseeing spiritual wellness
3. The University should create guidelines on prayer space use that applies to all prayer spaces on campus
4. The University should consider the religious needs of building users in the planning and design phase of new building projects on campus

Community

Community can play an important role in wellness and success and students of all identities should be able to feel included in the on-campus community.

Concerns

- Students who identify as members of a racial, religious, or cultural group that is not well represented on campus do not have a community of support
- Students report barriers in accessing religious communities off-campus
- The primary source of religious support on campus comes from other students through student-run religious clubs
- The University does not acknowledge religious holidays (e.g., provide events and programming for holidays such as Holi, Diwali, Gurupurab, Rosh Hashanah)
- Students who choose to openly express and advocate for their race and identity are experiencing microaggressions, microinsults, and bullying from the student population, resulting in mental health challenges and coping difficulties

Recommendations

1. The University should have staff members and an office that focuses on the responsibility of ensuring spiritual wellness on campus, specifically to underrepresented groups that need inclusive spaces
 - a. This office can serve as a central resource to connect students to on- and off-campus communities
 - b. This office can provide funding and support to student run services and clubs that serve spiritual wellness goals
 - c. This office can provide programming for religious holidays

Housing and Dietary Needs

All students should be able to access appropriate housing and food to allow them to focus on their education.

Concerns

- Religious students have experienced discriminatory practices by off-campus landlords
- Racialized students are experiencing a lack of investigation for reported issues that have occurred in campus housing
- Religious students are not consistently and appropriately accommodated in on-campus residences
 - Many residence options are not appropriate for religious students' needs (e.g., no access to private space for prayer/religious observance)
 - There are no intentional residence communities for students who observe specific religious lifestyles (single gender living, no alcohol, halal or kosher diets)
 - Students marginalized on an intersectional basis express the need for more inclusive housing options, such as queer-friendly housing options, to be an available option
- Religious students face discrimination and lack of education from roommates (both on- and off-campus)
- Racialized students feel unsafe walking from campus to both on- and off-campus housing
- International students experience financial difficulties in supporting their housing and food needs in the face of limited community supports available
- Not all religious dietary needs are accommodated on campus (e.g., students who keep a kosher diet and live on campus cannot use the cafeterias so they need to be in a residence suite with a kitchen and they cannot share a kitchen with roommates who are not keeping kosher)

Recommendations

1. WUSA should continue to provide legal housing support for students and diversify its educational offerings to address racial and religious discrimination practices by landlords
2. New campus residence projects should consider the needs of religious students in the planning and design phase
3. Campus Housing should implement a process whereby roommates are educated about religious and racial diversity and how this manifests in a shared living environment
4. Campus Housing should implement a clear and consistent accommodation process for students who would like to request specific living accommodations due to religious, and intersectional race and identity reasons
5. The University should look into a Walksafe programing and increasing the amount of shuttle bus options on campus
6. The University should establish a clearly delineated path for international students to receive support from the University in securing affordable living accommodations and increasing awareness and use of existing food supports on campus
 - a. Implementing an easily accessible program for international students to connect with local host families
7. UW Food Services should investigate how to better support Kosher diets on campus

Response to Emerging and On-Going Geopolitical Issues

An issue that has become more important in recent years is how post-secondary institutions respond to emerging and on-going geopolitical issues. Institutions need to have a consistent practice for how they respond to these situations and provide appropriate supports to affected members of the community.

Concerns

- The University's responsibility to care for students from home countries where violence is occurring is not well-defined
- There have been noticeable differences in the University's statements and response to different geopolitical events, depending on the areas of the world affected and the presence of religious conflict
- Students from home countries where violence is occurring may need supports beyond the generalized on-campus support service offerings

Recommendations

1. The University should create a policy or best practice guidelines that define how the University responds to geopolitical issues and provides support for the campus community



WATERLOO UNDERGRADUATE

WUSA

STUDENT ASSOCIATION