



International Students and International Education

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, members of OUSA from all its 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. Currently, OUSA is updating their policy stance on international students and International Education.

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

Throughout the month of November, WUSA engaged in various consultation activities to learn more about the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of UW students on this issue. Undergraduate students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey that had open ended questions inquiring about their experience on campus and in the Waterloo region around racism and religious discrimination. Students were also invited to participate in a 1.5-hour online focus group session on the topic.

Additionally, WUSA reached out to on campus partners, services, and offices that regularly work with international students including the Student Success Office, Waterloo International, and ICSN (International Canadian Student Network).

List of Activities

Online anonymous consultation form

- November 1-24, 2023
- 17 respondents

Stakeholder Interview

- November 8, 2023
- Candace Brown (International Student Experience Manager)
- Edita Gatchene (International Student Programs Specialist)
- Cyntia Bratan (International Student Supports Specialist) from the International Student Experience team

Focus Group

- November 23, 2023
- 13 participants

Biases and Limitations

The following summary is a combination of the opinions and experiences that were shared in all of the different consultation activities. We consulted with students directly through the online consultation form and the focus group. We also consulted with staff in on-campus support units that provide services relevant to international students to provide a broader lens than an individual student's experience and to understand wider systemic issues that the support 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 the experiences of all international students.

Identified Themes



Application Process



Financial Barriers



Connection and
Community



Study Permit and Permanent
Residency Process



Housing



Academic Success

Key Recommendations

1

The University needs to clearly communicate what study permit process support is provided for applicants and students who receive admission offers and what components students need to look externally for.

2

Incoming students should be given clarity with their initial acceptance around tuition fees and how they will increase year to year.

3

Scholarship, grant, and bursary opportunities for international students should be easily accessible in a centralized place and the number of opportunities should be expanded.

4

Co-operative Education should have supports specific for international students and should work with employers to generate more opportunities for international students.

5

The University should dedicate resources to supporting food insecure students on campus to ensure no one goes without a meal.

6

The University should ensure that cost of living projections are clear and easy to find on the prospective student website.

7

Campus Housing should consider prioritizing upper year international students housing applications over domestic students (in lieu of not being able to accommodate more students overall).

8

First year transition support programming should continue for international students throughout their entire first year.

University Application Process

Concerns

- University of Waterloo offers come later than other schools which makes it hard for students to make decisions and get a study permit in time
- Increased financial burden of application process when applying Internationally
- University information on the whole application process (start to finish) is not meeting student's needs
 - This may be because the information does not exist, or that students are unable to access it

Recommendations

1. The University should consult with international students and international recruiters to develop an internal guideline for when offers should be made to allow international applicants time to acquire a study permit

Study Permit and Permanent Residency Process

The study permit application process is time consuming and resource intensive and in recent years the slow processing times have resulted in significant delays for students.

Concerns

- University support for students navigating the study permit process is not meeting student's needs
- Significant delays in study permit processing have resulted in students arriving late to begin their studies or needing to defer their studies and Universities should be prepared to support students in this scenario
- Study permit applications can be a barrier for prospective students
 - Medical examination and biometrics process can only be completed in certain recognized centers which may be inaccessible to applicants in certain regions
- Study permit and post graduation work permit (PGWP) requirements prevent students from having the flexibility to change programs or to take a gap term for personal need
- Students with disabilities that require reduced course loads need to renew their study permit which comes with risk and is an increased cost

Recommendations

1. The University needs to clearly communicate what study permit process support is provided for applicants and students who receive admission offers and what components students need to look externally for
2. The University should have contingency plans and support for students who experience significant delays in receiving their study permit
3. Further research in to how the study permit renewal process affects students with disabilities who take longer to complete their degrees

Financial Barriers

While all undergraduate students face financial pressure, there are increased financial barriers for international students that create added stress and can prevent them from being able to finish their program.

Concerns

- Tuition fee increases for current international students are not transparent and prevent students from being able to effectively financially plan
- There are limited funding opportunities for international students
- Many co-op opportunities exclude international students which creates financial barriers and barriers to completing required co-op components
- International students are limited to the number of hours they can work per week which limits their ability to generate income while in school
- Many international students experience food insecurity
- International students are not aware of the full cost of living prior to arriving
- Student Awards and Financial Aid Office identified as not being supportive when international students reach out

Recommendations

1. Incoming students should be given clarity with their initial acceptance around tuition fees and how they will increase year to year
2. Scholarship, grant, and bursary opportunities for international students should be expanded
3. Co-operative Education should have supports specific for international students and should work with employers to generate more opportunities for international students
4. The University should dedicate resources to supporting food insecure students on campus to ensure no one goes without a meal
5. The University should ensure that cost of living projections are clear and easy to find on the prospective student website

Housing

Securing affordable housing has become harder in recent years and international students face increased barriers to securing housing.

Concerns

- International students face barriers when attempting to secure off-campus housing due to not having a credit score or local references
 - Landlords require large up-front deposits instead which is a significant financial barrier
- Looking for housing from another country prevents students from being able to visit potential places to rent and puts them at an increased risk of being scammed
- On-campus housing is guaranteed for first year students but the demand for upper year on campus housing surpasses the number of rooms available forcing many international students off-campus (where they face increased barriers to securing housing)

Recommendations

1. Campus Housing should consider prioritizing upper year international students housing applications over domestic students (in lieu of not being able to accommodate more students overall)
2. On-going education campaigns to ensure international students are aware of landlord red flags and what resources are available to support them



Mental Wellness

Supporting the mental wellness of all students is vital to their success and especially important for international students as they face additional challenges.

Concerns

- International students undergo a massive transition when they start undergraduate which puts them at a disadvantage to succeed
- Isolation, homesickness, and culture shock can occur during the transition
- This is a time (first 4-8 months) when there should be additional support provided
- Barriers to accessing culturally appropriate foods can increase feelings of homesickness
- Emerging and on-going geopolitical issues can add extra stress
- Co-op students do not get long enough breaks to return home to visit in between school and work terms
- High tuition cost increases pressure on international students to succeed
- International students may not be able to take a gap term needed for mental health reasons due to study permit and PGWP requirements

Recommendations

1. First year transition support programming should continue for international students throughout their entire first year
2. The University should develop and support programming for international students in between terms when they may be unable to travel home
 - a. Could perhaps work with the local municipalities to connect students with home families in the region to celebrate holidays with

Connection and Community

Concerns

- Academic, work, and transition demands make it hard for international students to get involved in clubs and other extracurricular activities on campus
- International students can struggle to develop meaningful friendships with domestic students
- International students from countries that do not have many students on campus do not have an existing community or support on campus

Recommendations

1. Continue to engage international students in events and programming designed to build connections with other students
2. Spread awareness of ICSN to support community building
3. Consider partnering with regional cultural groups to connect students to pre-existing local communities

Academic Success

Concerns

- International students are underrepresented users of on-campus accommodation services (AccessAbility Services)
- Lack of awareness of general and specialized supports on campus
- Visa requirements make it hard to change programs/majors

Recommendations

1. Continue and expand International Orientation offerings and include education on AccessAbility services that destigmatizes academic accommodations





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