



**UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO  
GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION**

Research Report for Council

International Graduate Students – Issues and Resources

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## Table of Contents

1. Purpose .....	3
2. Issue .....	3
3. Background .....	3
4. Key Considerations.....	5
5. Conclusions and Recommendations .....	6
6. Bibliography .....	7

## 1. Purpose

International education is something that can offer such an elevating and gratifying opportunity that it can stay with one, for the rest of life, where one can learn different knowledge, encounter new cultures and expand our eyes to the world we live in. The number of students seeking to study in Canadian universities are increasing dramatically every year. Applicants choose Canadian universities for many reasons, including specific programs, affordability, and the perception of Canada as safe. Canadian universities are known for their high quality and excellence in academic standards and are consistently ranked among the top universities internationally. Many universities such as University of Waterloo expands every year focusing on the quality of education and is well-known for its welcoming attitude when it comes to foreigners, immigrants, and international students. Universities recruit international students to enhance their profiles and contacts, improve the quality of students, respond to international students' needs, and, in developed countries, provide a revenue source as domestic enrolment decline. Although there are many benefits of being here, international students still face a number of challenges. These students face unique challenges as compared with domestic students, but no published studies or reports exist on this issue. The purpose of this report is to improve the quality of international student welfare and education by discussing various problems faced by international students and its resources and research on international students' experience can help to inform the internationalization of post-secondary institutions.

## 2. Issue

Several thousand international students hope to have life in Canadian universities seeing their exposure they will be obtaining along with the high quality of education and opportunities that come with it. Coping up with a new culture and environment often leads to obstacles in student's life while staying over here. With a mind set of better settlement, students try to be open-minded, curious and experience a lot of anxiety and stress once they land here. Many international students are surprised by how complex life can be in Canada. The study deals with rising problems encountered by international students in Canada such as employment, tuition cost, accommodation, and discrimination issues and how to cope up with them.

## 3. Background

Students choose Canadian universities for several factors such as unique programs, affordability and perception of protection and career development. Universities hire these students to boost their profiles and connections, increase student satisfaction and respond to student needs. Such students also support local economy by financial investment and tax contributions which urge universities even to have an interest in students' progress and tailored programs which can help them favouring universities to stand out in dynamic global marketplace. Many problems have been unique to foreign students and a few among them are concentrated in the following sections below:

### a) ACCOMMODATION AND LIVING COST

University residences and places close to the university are pricey which force students to live a bit away from those areas or to share an apartment with other people to hold monthly rent down. Some students even have rented basement areas which are cold, without proper heating units. The risk factor lies in getting a low rent location with commonly available alternative for public transit and accessible grocery stores. All international students are affected by housing issues in terms of appropriateness, affordability and suitability. Also, many "agents" are also involved in international student housing issues, including nongovernment organizations working on housing issues, university administrators, faculty members, international students themselves, and student organizations. Through interactions and relationships, these agents take different roles in making changes in existing systems, which are "reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practices". It represents a significant proportion of living cost and impacts expenses which may affect the planned budgets in student's life. An adequate housing should be in terms of anonymity, campus proximity, accommodation utilities and climatic

adjustments. These situations such as residence and living conditions, economy and managing expenses while transiting to a foreign place create problems in lifestyle and even education. This can even create emotional and mental stress along with pressure of being away from home.

#### **b) TUTION COST**

International students end up paying very high amount of tuition fees with very less options of getting a teaching assistantship or research assistantship. The scholarships, grants, awards, or bursaries offered demarcate the eligibility of being a permanent resident or Canadian citizen which excludes international students from receiving them. Especially students pursuing course-work programs are worse hit, as they are paying the highest amount and have very less possibility of getting TAs or any other funding from the university. Apart the high fees, the students are imposed with an increase in the fees every year. Especially, during the global pandemic situation of COVID – 19, and the classes being fully online, there was approximately 12% increase in the tuition fees for the graduate students at the University of Waterloo, which was a huge burden for the international students especially, as many of the sources of the students lots employment in the home country. University should have considered about this and should have looked into this issue to provide some kind of relation for the students. The situation was very stressful and demotivating at this point of time.

For several students, financial burden is a key concern now and the funding plan the university has, is not equivalent to a working salary where the students can manage all their preliminary expenses including education rates, excessive curriculum cost, students loans, meeting travel cost, accommodation costs, additional preparation rates and medical expenditures. This even pose students, a difficulty in paying bills along with family commitments and marginal benefits from work.

#### **c) DISCRIMINATION**

International students at time find it challenging in being part of the culture of Canada as they differ in culture, dialect, ethnicity and more. The number one thing that students feel when studying abroad is the culture shock. In academics, most students work actively to ensure that they get most out of the expanded effort. However, when striving diligently, progress cannot always be assured. This can be due to the language barrier as well as the perspective or existing knowledge they have on the content. International students find it difficult to follow those contexts when professors take classes with Canadian aspects and standpoint which makes it difficulty for them to follow. The language problem even makes it harder for students to make contact and socialise with the local people around them. The accent can also be part of this issue as people start making fun of them and they become self conscious of their language. This not only affects their self-esteem but also diminishes their desire to study. Adjusting and adapting to new cultural environment along with language differences apart from financial restrictions and homesickness make things challenging. Students face discrimination even in finding employment as most of the job opportunities, research positions and student vacancies are not given to international students but preferred to local people.

#### **d) EMPLOYMENT**

International students experience the pressure of getting a job (part-time) once they land in the country, to manage expenses and in an intuition to get a job as there is a lot of competition for the opportunities that exists, with the mind set, “the sooner, the better”. The number of employment opportunities must be increased. The limitation in working hours of 20 hours per week due to the study permit creates an additional stress of earning proper income. Students are bound to pursue a part-time employment in ill-matched roles of pubs, gas stations, snow removing operations and other locations to hold up their finances. Even students face difficulty in jobs due to the different Canadian work selection procedure where certain companies refuse to accept international students owing to local laws. This takes long time duration for students to become acquainted with the Canadian labour market and business standards before initiating a job hunt which requires

patience. Having a part-time job is essential as they need to have some earnings to manage the expense of housing, travel, internet and much more. Even though Canada is well established for employment offers, securing an employment position as a student in Canada can be quite challenging due to the large immigrant inflow every year. There are less opportunities to work as teaching assistant or research assistant for an international student. The rate of employment obtained by international students on campus is way less, as most of them are secured through connections. For those who are employed in places such as cafe have fewer working hours with low earnings. Present scenario of COVID-19 made situations even worst as so many people are laid-off from their part time jobs without a provision of doing work from home and universities are closed which even shut down opportunities for many students. The global pandemic situation with less option, such as depending home for financial assistance, less funding and income students are bound to pay same university fees. Even there is no change in university residence fee which creates high economic burden on students.

### e) Support Systems

International students need resources as well as information. Institutions provide some, but students are often unaware of them and turn for information and support to their personal networks, including family, friends, faculty colleagues, and, through the larger university, organizations such as student associations.

- **Social Support** - International students often had to separate from families. Bringing the family meant increased living costs and higher rent or a move farther from campus, but it also meant having someone familiar to share accommodations.

Raising the awareness of international student's unique challenges seems to be an important step to initiate support from university faculty and staff members, who have a longer connection with the university and, by extension, provincial and federal structures than do international students and so might be better positioned to make changes that influence policies and practices. All these issues need to be considered to provide better and comfortable environment for international students which even motivates more students to be a part of this diverse culture. Universities need to give attention and strive well to make the resources accessible to foreign students.

## 4. Key Considerations

There is a general shortage of assistance resources and other tools that may assist foreign students to have an improved life over here in Canada which ultimately indicates the low power of international students. Some of the main reflections from the above-mentioned issues faced by graduate international students are:

- Lack of clarity and proper preparation which create imbalance funds in managing expenses
- Cultural and academic discomfort that students observe facing difficulties in learning and responding to the society around them in an appropriate way.
- Language shortfall which often creates an issue in proper communications and inadequacy of obtaining accurate information needed.
- Housing insecurities even when students leave for their breaks. Graduate students need comfortable accommodation areas as majority of the students are working with individual professor and requires ways to communicate with each other.

- High amount of tuition fee paid by international graduate students always leave them emotionally distressed in managing finances. Some considerations should be made in reducing the hituition fees.
- Financial concerns due to few restricted grants or funds available for international students and variance in available of funds within departments create less option of funding. Varied support level from supervisors/advisors affect graduate students bringing about challenges in compromising between family and study.
- Unavailability of proper employment opportunities such as fewer TA/RA opportunities to manage cashflows of students' budgets. Students have different levels of access to internal and external job opportunities.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

International student enrolment in Canadian post-secondary institutions is expected to increase over the next decade, and international education will be an economic driver in both the near and the long-term future. Higher numbers of students will result in pressure to expand financial and personal services for these students, something institutions have not traditionally. Similarly, more students will seek information and resources. For successful outcomes in meeting student needs and expectations, as well as addressing institutional challenges as voiced by various participants, change processes will need to involve students but also faculty members and university administrators, who have a longer connection to power structures than students do but are informed through interactions with many students. Overseas graduate students face severe hurdles in their journey of international life such as cultural differences, language barriers, financial issues, work and study schedules. Proper outreach to international graduate student issues must be considered to retain current graduates and sustain larger number of incoming foreign students in near future. The aforementioned problems are the major ones faced by most graduate international students although issues may vary from individual to individual. Some of the recommendations that can be suggested to remediate these issues are:

- Raising volunteer or community groups where international students can join where issues like cultural shock and community development is focused.
- Language barrier and academic coordination issues can be addressed for program provisions and circulating information on developing a favourable circumstance for students, where they can cope up, without over academic pressure. This contributes to proper preparation of foreign students to international study experience bringing a clarity about the city and price level. Integration of language support programs, networking, informative and collaborative events can develop linkages among professionals, academicians, international and domestic students.
- Support in terms of financial and emotional basis leading to manage shortage of money and tension of separation might help married graduate students.
- Developing information sources where international graduate students can look for part-time jobs especially for those students who doesn't have co-op program. Platforms where international graduate students can connect with specific recruiting agencies to get part-time job opportunities must be created.
- Offering more options of financial and study assistance like scholarships, bursaries and funds are needed to support international graduate students ensuring fair and equitable funding.

- Providing more internal employment opportunities, TA/RA/GA and other teaching or grading opportunities. Training on job shadowing, research options, professional development initiatives, paid and unpaid internship can be provided for promoting connections between students and professionals benefiting students for further opportunities.
- Enhancing financial services such as counselor available to graduate international students regarding proper guidance to plan and create their budgets, develop academic, social and financial support for study and living costs to mitigate situations of currency fluctuations through constant and simple knowledge delivery.
- Integration of networking programs and social inclusion are needed for overcoming housing problems of foreign students. Flexible and reduced rental contacts must be considered in university residences helping international graduate students.
- Evolution of an accessible active body and data collection is essential to track/monitor and assist international graduate students on the issues they face.

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