

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

International students are often seen as future model citizens based on the assumption that they can integrate into Canadian society faster than other immigrants. Canada is making efforts to attract more international students and to make immigration processes easier for them. However, a variety of factors are create challenges in the settlement process for international students, affecting their ability to integrate into Canadian society.

Peel stakeholders have recognized that the needs of international students in the region are not well understood, particularly by the social services sector. The purpose of the International Students Needs Assessment project is to identify gaps and barriers in services and resources to enhance support systems for international students in Peel Region.

The findings and recommendations of this report are limited to an extent by the scope of the project, and it is clear that more work is needed to fully identify the needs of international students in the region.

Nevertheless, the research has produced some useful findings about the gaps in services for international students and how this affects their social and economic integration; the findings may help guide the communities in supporting this population.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROJECT

International students are actively recruited as “ideal immigrants” due to their level of education, financial resources, and multilingual proficiency, but they are not often well resourced through their adjustment process. The lack of academic, social, and emotional support can be traumatic for international students, who are expected to navigate several socio-political systems, such as finding housing and applying for study/work visas, largely on their own.

Working with a grant from the regional government, Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) set out to examine the challenges international students face and identify service gaps and needs to adequately address those challenges.

The research phase of the project consisted of four components:

1. Literature review;
2. Interviews with key researchers (orientation informants);
3. Interviews with key informants; and
4. A focus group with international students.

A Working Group representing a broad cross-section of stakeholders including service providers and public and educational institutions in Peel oversaw the research. The Working Group reviewed and modified the work plan and research strategy, reviewed and supported interpretation of research results, and provided general oversight.

The project revealed significant discrepancies between the Government of Canada’s promotion of International Students as an immigrant group that will easily transition into Canadian citizens and the lived experience of both international students themselves. International students and their advocates often stated that current policies do not adequately support them in fully settling into Canadian culture, citing the lack of information pre-departure, lack of services throughout their academic careers, and lack of employment opportunities upon graduation.

RESEARCH RESULTS

ACCULTURATION

Most of the literature reviewed uses Gibson’s definition of acculturation: “changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences.” (2001) Immigrants who can successfully settle into their host country’s culture, particularly younger immigrants, experience greater psychosocial well-being, including higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression. A more successful process of acculturation can translate to lower levels of stress, and impact long-term physical and mental health (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Several factors affect the acculturation process, including confidence and fluency in language, educational stressors, economic hardships, sociocultural stressors, access to mental health support, and exposure to

racism and discrimination. The literature recommends:

- pre-departure emotional preparation;
- establishing strong social support systems; and
- cultivating positive on-campus relationships with international student support systems and programs.

Key informants and students somewhat reinforced the recommendations in the literature . Both groups stressed the importance of pre-departure preparations, although most focus group participants were familiar with Peel Region and had already established social supports amongst family and friends before departure. While the key informants did not speak specifically to cultivating positive on-campus relationships, students expressed both the desire to create positive relationships and uncertainty about whether they are accepted by domestic students.

While international students can access a full array of services from their on-campus international student centre, the literature indicates that these centres do not always provide culturally-sensitive programs, especially in regard mental well-being. In particular, mental health services tend to focus on interventions for students in crisis, rather than providing preventative services intermittently throughout the semester. Although these findings may not speak specifically to Peel institutions, there is a general need for awareness and training for individuals who work with international students.

Key informants spoke of the challenges faced by international students, including socio-cultural, immigration, employment, academic, and economic barriers. International students also have difficulty finding housing, establishing social supports, accessing health services, navigating public transportation systems, and obtaining financial aid.

The focus group findings often differed from the literature and both sets of interviews, and added the dimension of lived experience in Peel. Many participants were frustrated about the lack of economic opportunities available to them both as students and upon graduation. While most students had immigrated and often found themselves in cultural enclaves, they struggled to balance remaining rooted in their home culture and adapting to Canadian culture. Focus group participants were vocal about the power of recruiters and their influence over the admissions and visa process. Most felt very strongly that the “business” of recruiting requires more regulation and oversight.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The support needs of international students are incorporated throughout the report, but in summary they focus on the following recommendations:

1. Develop a better understanding of international students, who remain a sub-population of the immigrant population that has limited access to resources, through further research.
2. Formal and informal resources and supports should meet the diverse needs of international students at critical points of their acculturation process, starting before their arrival.
3. Higher Education Institutions should play a greater role in supporting and informing international students, and should collaborate with community partners, particularly the settlement and employment sectors, to do so.

4. Different levels of government, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions should coordinate resources and services to serve international students.
5. Employers in Peel should be offered training and information to enable them to identify when international student applicants meet their needs and to recognize their benefit.

NEXT STEPS

In the near future, PNSG will host an event to share the finding of this report with stakeholders in Peel and create a platform for non-profit advocacy and collaboration.

PEEL CONTEXT

Peel Region is home to one of the most diverse populations in Canada, with large communities of new Canadians. Between 2001 and 2006, half of residents of Peel immigrated to Canada, with 650,530 immigrants living in Peel in 2011. Of that population, 100,910 were recent immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2006 and 2011.

There is one public university and two public college campuses in Peel Region, as well as other private colleges. These institutions, coupled with the cultural diversity of the region, make Peel an attractive destination for international students coming to Canada and looking for a place to study.

Immigrant populations have been increasing in Peel Region, as they have in Toronto and the rest of the Greater Toronto Area. According to a 2015 search of 211.ca, however, the number of agencies providing services for newcomers in Peel Region is low, particularly when compared to the neighbouring City of Toronto. Search results in 2015 for both the City of Toronto and the Region of Peel using the search terms “immigrant” yielded seventy results in Peel, and 263 in Toronto, a ratio of 3.8 to 1. National Household Survey results in 2011 indicated that Toronto’s newcomer population was almost exactly double that of the Region of Peel.

International students, however, usually do not have access to the services of settlement agencies, which are often limited by funding provisions and requirements. In theory, most of their support and services are provided by on-campus providers, and paid for through their student fees. This segregated approach to service delivery runs counter to community integration as one of the primary goals of international student recruitment.

PROJECT DESIGN

PROJECT VALUES

Recognizing that international students are not well understood, the project team developed an approach to identify their needs to improve service delivery on- and off- campus. No prior research of this nature specific to international students in Peel, as distinct from newcomers generally, has been identified. The project was designed to respect and document the lived experience of international students in Peel Region, and frank and honest dialogue was encouraged.

The project drew from academic and grey literature, information from researchers, field experts, and international students. The goal was to document international student realities, presenting both the challenges and the resiliency of the international student community, and recognizing their vulnerabilities as well as their assets. It was also to highlight the work already happening in both formal and informal organizations to support the international student community.

WORKING GROUP

Public Interest was supported by a group of interested stakeholders who provided insight and direction throughout the project. The Working Group included representatives from the Peel Newcomer Strategy Group and post-secondary schools in Peel Region. A complete list of Working Group members can be found in Appendix 8.

The group provided input into all components of the project. They helped shape the literature review, provided feedback and guidance on project design, and connected Public Interest to key informants. Following each stage of the work, they also reviewed the data and provided feedback on its interpretation.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

In collaboration with PNSG and the Working Group, Public Interest completed the following project activities:

- Literature review.
- Orientation interviews with researchers and others with research expertise and knowledge to help guide the direction of the project.
- Key informant interviews with service providers and agencies.
- One focus group with students.
- Final report.

There were several struggles during the completion of this project. It was impossible to do population analysis because relevant data was not collected by, or available from either the Ministry of Trades, Colleges, and Universities or Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, particularly in a disaggregated manner that would allow analysis specific to Peel. Furthermore, the project team was unable to conduct service inventory because community and settlement agencies and other service providers do not generally serve international students. In fact, many of them are prohibited from doing so and could jeopardize funding. As a result, even if services were provided informally, they would not be reported.

METHODOLOGY

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Interest conducted iterative searches of both academic and non-academic sources to gather peer-reviewed literature based on the following search terms:

- “International students”
- “International students” AND/OR
- “Housing”
- “Income”
- “Poverty”
- “Employment”
- “Health”

Search results were filtered and assessed by how relevant they were to this project. The list of references from the initial scan was tailored further by Public Interest and members of the Working Group. The Working Group was updated by email and at regular meetings, and submitted their suggestions for relevant literature to be reviewed as well. Papers were also collected through the process of orientation interviews and key informant interviews.

Sixty-two sources were evaluated according to relevance. Articles were then organized into groups based on the scope of evidence they provided, as follows:

- Structural articles that provided an overview of the research topics.
- Literature that examined best practice compares practices and findings from various contexts, or both.
- Articles that examined factors that impact international students.

While the literature includes papers from the United States of America, England, New Zealand, and Australia, considerable weight has been given to those from Canada. These countries were chosen with guidance from the project Working Group in large part because of their similarities with Canada in terms of post-secondary educational systems, linguistic, and cultural similarities.

ORIENTATION INTERVIEWS

Orientation interviews were conducted to help focus the scope of the research and help Public Interest identify credible sources of literature on the topic of international students. Orientation interviewees were selected to include people who met some combination of the following criteria:

- Established academic or grey researchers in the field of international students
- Knowledge of the Peel context
- Connection to other researchers in the field

A list of researchers was comprised from Working Group recommendations. A total of 9 orientations

interviewees were interviewed from a broad scope of academic and institutional partners. Interviewees had knowledge of the international student issues and had written at least one research or public policy paper on the issue. Some interviewees also self-identified as being international students at some point of their lives, and drew their responses from both lived and professional experience.

Interviewees were asked to provide insight into the lives of international students and some of the challenges they face. They were asked about the nuances of international student population as a sub-population of newcomers. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

To track the conversations, detailed notes were taken during each interview. The notes were compiled into a spreadsheet and coded for recurring themes and patterns. They were also analyzed for best practices and recommendations.

Orientation interview questions were developed by Public Interest and reviewed by the Working Group. The Orientation Interview Guide can be found in Appendix 2.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Possible key informants were selected to include people who met the following criteria:

- Experience in the field with considered opinions on international student issues
- Able to provide in-depth analysis on international student realities
- Able to speak openly about the service needs of international students

A key informant interview guide was developed and reviewed by Peel Newcomer Strategy Group. The questions were designed to elicit information on international student experiences, service provision, and gaps.

A total of 9 key informants were individually interviewed from a broad scope of Peel's non-profit and academic sectors. Interviews conducted with a cross-section of staff, including executive directors, managers, and frontline workers. Informants had mostly long histories of working with international students, ranging from two years to over ten years. Some informants also self-identified as having been international students themselves, and drew their responses from both personal and professional experience.

In comparison to orientation interviewees, key informants were asked to provide insight into both the lived realities of international students as well as in-depth analysis of barriers faced by international students. They also talked about the resources currently available to international students, and how these resources fit into a broader understanding of immigrant needs. All interviews were conducted in English, and lasted approximately sixty minutes.

Detailed notes were taken during the each interview. The notes were compiled into a spreadsheet, which was then reviewed for recurring themes, patterns, and comparison. The notes were also analyzed for best practices, recommendations, and possible strategies for this report.

FOCUS GROUPS

Public Interest conducted one focus group with international students with experience studying and living in Peel Region.

A focus group discussion guide (Appendix 4) was developed and revised in collaboration with the Working Group. The focus group guide contained distinct sets of questions aimed at eliciting information about international students' academic, employment, and personal experiences.

The focus group was conducted during May 2017. Recruitment was done primarily through Peel Multicultural Council (PMC). The flyer developed and used for outreach can be found in Appendix 5.

The focus group consisted of twelve international students. The small group size facilitated discussion and encouraged a diversity of opinions.

Consent forms were explained, reviewed, and signed prior to the focus group facilitation (Appendix 6). Participants had the option of ceasing their participation at any point, or not participating in some portion of the discussion. Prior to group discussions, participants were asked to fill out an optional demographic survey (Appendix 7).

The focus group was conducted at a community centre in Brampton and lasted approximately two hours.

Focus group participants were given an honorarium of fifteen dollars. Refreshments were also provided. The focus group was recorded and notes were taken during the focus group.

Responses were grouped and organized by interview question. Patterns in the responses were identified, including:

- Responses that were repeated.
- Responses that deviated from the literature review findings.
- Responses that pointed to specific trends.

Findings from the focus group were summarized and key themes were compared to those found in the literature review.

FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the twelve participants, eleven submitted surveys. The responses are outlined below.

The focus group had seven male participants and four female participants. All informants arrived in Canada between 2011 and 2017, with a majority (7) arriving in 2015. All but one student spoke Hindi and Punjabi. Other languages spoken by the participants included Spanish, Portuguese, French, Pahari and Dogri. Almost all informants (9) were born in India, with 1 respondent from Brazil, and 1 from Mauritius. Most informants (9) are currently living in Brampton; a small number of informants (2) live in Mississauga. Respondent ages ranged from 19 to 36 years old.

Areas of study included:

- Information Technology (4),
- Business Accounting (1),
- Early Childcare Assistant (1),
- Electrical and Computer Engineering (1),
- Interior Design (1),
- Mechanical Engineering (1), and
- Web development and Wireless communication (1).

All informants were enrolled in college at the time of the focus group. Six (6) students are currently enrolled in either their first or second year, one (1) student is his/her final year, and two (2) students are pursuing post-secondary education. Four (4) students are currently working part-time, three (3) work full-time, and three (3) are not currently working.

All of the participants lived off-campus, and the travel times to their academic institutions are equally distributed between 10 to 15 minutes, 15 to 30 minutes, and 30 minutes or more. Only one respondent pays market rent, while most pay around \$300 to \$400 for monthly rent. Only one respondent reported living with their relatives.

Eight informants indicated how they have used their on-campus international student centre; most (4) obtained support for their work or study permit, extension, and immigration assistance. Two (2) individuals used the centre for employment support, one (1) for social activities, and one (1) for health.

Most informants (4) have never used off-campus support services. Of those who did, most (3) used employment services. Two (2) informants each also used off-campus housing, health, and immigration supports. One (1) respondent each used off-campus academic and financial support services.

Throughout the focus groups, international students were articulate, open, and honest about their experiences. The participants shared their experiences while contextually explaining why certain experiences were problematic and connecting their experiences to broader systemic issues. They were consistently vocal about the barriers they face and how to resolve them.

FOCUS GROUP LIMITATIONS

The initial work plan called for six focus groups: 2 in universities, 2 in colleges, 1 for graduate students and 1 for women. The project faced considerable challenges in recruiting international students, despite support from individuals within academic institutions and other service providers. It was also difficult to navigate ethics requirements from certain academic institutions, which was not originally considered. Additional barriers included scheduling challenges with student academic calendars, managing on-campus recruitment, and coordinating recruitment efforts with several partners.

Because it was only possible to schedule one focus group, participants were not separated by institution or year of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW - KEY FINDINGS

International students are often recruited as future resources for the region and Canada. Although there is some encouragement for them to consider staying beyond their period of study, few resources are allocated for assisting in the transition and integration into Canadian citizens. The community services sector, in particular, would be well suited to provide such services and resources while they are students. The support they receive may be critical to their decision to stay in Canada and continue to contribute to Canadian society.

Ontario is well positioned to investigate international student needs and strategies to support students throughout their academic and professional careers. In 2015, there were 353,000 international students in Canada at all levels of study. 143,328, or 43 per cent of those students were in Ontario (Canadian Bureau for International Education).

International students are critical to the provincial economy, providing \$102 million annually in direct revenue and spending over \$2.1 billion in Ontario (OUSA, 2011). Additionally, international students enhance the educational and cultural environment on campus, benefitting domestic students, educational institutions, and the overall community.

Despite the two public college campuses and one university campus located in Peel, as well as private colleges throughout the Region, little is known about these students and their needs. As a result, the community and settlement sectors have little data to inform what services they provide, and how they reach out to international students.

There is little literature available specifically about international students in Peel Region. This literature illustrates some of the experiences and promising practices from selected regions elsewhere, to determine broad commonalities amongst international students related to acculturation and integration that may be applied locally.

International students generally do not qualify for services provided by the social service sector, and consequently face potential rejection when they do attempt obtaining off-campus supports. Findings from the literature review demonstrate the complexity of meeting their needs and explores how they can be better served.

These factors provide a reason to understand the international student experience, considering global research on international students and applying those lessons to Ontario.

There are several key themes that emerged from the literature:

- Acculturation challenges include language, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors (including discrimination and mental health stigma) and other practical stressors.
- The experience of acculturation is dependent on whether the country of origin is more individualistic or collectivist in nature; international students from collectivist cultures have more difficulties adjusting to the host culture.
- There is limited research on international students, with few or no longitudinal studies that map international students' experiences pre-departure, as an international student, and after graduation.

There is also little to no research on educators' and domestic students' attitudes towards international students.

- Despite the existing research on international students, few interventions have been empirically tested and shown to be effective in decreasing acculturative stress and supporting cultural adaptation.
- “International students” refers to a large and diverse body of the immigrant population. Strategies to best support them must be tailored to a variety of factors which include country of origin, but also consider socioeconomic status, pre-departure preparations, familial connections to host country, and previous exposure to other cultures.

The full literature review can be found in Appendix 8 of this document

ORIENTATION AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PEEL

WHY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COME TO CANADA

Informants listed several reasons why international students decide to come to Canada. These include Canada's good reputation, strong currency, and open immigration policies. Canada is believed to be an affordable country, with political stability and security. In addition, there is international recognition of a Canadian degree.

International students want a chance at a better life, including the ability to pursue their dreams, freedoms that they may not have found in their country of origin, access to free and high-quality healthcare, and to experience the rich Canadian multicultural diversity.

Informants also stated that international students chose Canada because of the employment opportunities available to them post-graduation. They would be able to make money and send it back to their families, build their professional networks, and avail themselves of high levels of scientific research.

Most international students come to Canada with the intention of staying, because it gives them a chance at citizenship and many already have family connections in Canada. Some students may have chosen Canada after a previous visit. They enjoy the quality of life that Canada has to offer.

Specific to Peel, students tend to gravitate towards Peel because the cost of living is thought to be lower in Peel than in Toronto, and students find established ethno-cultural communities there.

Some informants compared Canada to other countries, noting that while US may be a more popular choice, it is more expensive and is not viewed currently as being politically stable. England is another possibility, but current policies limit the number of international students permitted. Australia is seen as being more competitive and there is some fear over racial tensions.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO CANADIAN SOCIETY

Interviewees were very animated about the contributions of international students to broader Canadian society.

Amongst their many contributions, international students make considerable economic contributions. They not only pay towards higher education costs, their living expenses and other financial contributions are critical to Ontario's economic well-being.

International students also bring diversity of thought to academic institutions as well as general society. Their linguistic skills make them valuable to employers. They also bring a diversity of skill sets, including cultural competence. They have also proven to be very good researchers in the academic world.

Generally speaking, international students are thought of as hard-working individuals who bring their own resources to Canada and who are eager to contribute. Through their education process, they are integrated

into Canadian society and do not require the same supports as newcomers.

As one interviewee elegantly stated: “All our IQs are higher because we have to think about our assumptions; [international students] force us to think more broadly...and [make] us more interested in other parts of the world.”

TRENDS IN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POPULATION

International students are coming from all over the world, with increasing numbers of students coming from Asia, particularly India and China, East and West Africa, particularly Nigeria, and the Middle East. There are students from Latin and South America and the Caribbean. While North India has traditionally sent students to Canada to study, recent recruitment efforts have increased the number of applicants from Central and South India. There are not a lot of students coming from the United States.

Key informant interviewees remarked that as more students arrive from the Middle East, China, and India, they are facing more discrimination.

Key informants were split on the family wealth of international students. Two informants stated that most international students come from upper class families with considerable assets, while most informants noted that international students often come from middle-class families, who take considerable loans or sell their properties to generate funds. One informant also stated that while the families may have access to wealth, the students themselves might not. Another interviewee stated that some parents are funding their children’s education by selling property and other assets since it is seen as a financial investment that will be repaid.

Interviewees also mentioned that while the numbers of international students are increasing, the supports for international students, both on-campus and off-campus, have not changed to keep up with service demands.

Key informants stated that international students studied a variety of subjects, but that there were demographic trends within various areas of study. Those from countries with more “traditional values” are encouraged to study business as there is more family pride in programs that lead directly to jobs, such as engineering, the sciences, or computer-based studies. There is an increase in performing arts majors.

In terms of gender, there is increasingly balance between male and female students, with more females coming from India than before.

Several interviewees questioned the reliability and availability of Citizenship and Immigration Canada data, and whether it accounts for shifts in immigration patterns and immigration policy change.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

HOUSING

Housing was identified as a major issue for international students. Affordability was a key issue as well as knowing how to access affordably housing by applying to off-campus housing. They may also experience poor health associated with living in poor housing conditions.

Informants reported that racism and discrimination plays a huge role in determining whether an international student gets into housing, and if they do, they have often experienced racism from landlords. It was shared that international students may not get replies from landlords based on their last name.

Informants indicated that international students have been abused financially by landlords, in ways such as by being overcharged on rent and security deposits. International students often have limited knowledge of their rights as tenants, and as a result get mistreated by the landlords when it comes to property maintenance, and paperwork with lease agreements.

International students face challenges in securing off-campus housing due to their lack of knowledge of what housing is available and where housing can be found, especially within reasonable distance from their schools. Additionally, most international students do not have a credit history, which is often a requirement for banking and housing agencies, as this information about one's credit rating is used to determine likelihood of being able to make payments.

IMMIGRATION

With immigration, international students may find the Permanent Residence process to be very difficult. They lack information and the resources to navigate the immigration system. One interviewee also noted that their challenges in finding employment might influence their capacity to obtain citizenship.

ACCESS TO SOCIAL SUPPORTS

International students have reported they have difficulty accessing social supports because they often do not know they exist. This is in part due to their lack of networks with individuals and groups who may have used social supports. Some international students have reported they will not use any social supports provided, as they fear being stigmatized in their community.

Recommendations:

- Data on available services should be more readily available to international students.
- Municipalities should consider their role in service provision to international students.
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be better informed about community and settlement services sectors and what they offer.
- Outreach should be done directly to international students to build awareness of services available and rights.
- HEIs should facilitate more links between domestic students and international students.
- International students should be recognized by the provincial government as clients so they can go beyond campus services for services, especially as the Ontario immigration strategy recognizes them as the ideal immigrants.
- Conduct grassroots outreach, where will the students actually be, and where we can easily reach them (places of worship, cultural groups, etc.)
- Need better connection to International students with settlement agencies at airports.
- Talk to International Student Offices.

EMPLOYMENT

Interviewees highlighted barriers to employment, stating that it is often difficult for international students to find work in their respective fields while they are studying and afterwards.

International students face a myriad of challenges in finding employment, including lack of recognition of

their previous employment, especially if it is not Canadian, lack of clarity on “soft skills” which can range from personal grooming to not being able to convey their accomplishments. A lack of confidence was seen as a major challenge that international students face when seeking employment. International students reported difficulty in talking about details during an interview.

Informants pointed out that approaches to networking can be very different in other cultures, and may be less collaborative and more competitive in their countries of origin. Participants also mentioned that it is difficult for international students to develop professional networks.

According to both sets of interviews, there is a strong desire amongst international students to become entrepreneurs, but there are several barriers to entrepreneurship. Barriers included lack of professional networks and mentors, and the lack of funding for business start-ups, particularly for immigrants.

The process of obtaining permanent residency includes being employed full-time (or its equivalent in part-time) for at least a year in specific positions (management, positions utilizing professional degree, or technical and skilled trades). These requirements do not leave post-graduate students with the time or capacity to experiment with entrepreneurship.

On a positive note, it was reported that international students excel at resume writing and using their interview skills.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen and support people working with international students in collaborative activity.
- Provide more resources to support individuals in integrating into the workplace, especially for those who want to stay in Canada
- Provide more information to international students about the Labour Market Survey.
- Create awareness and educate on what international students contribute to Canadian society; immigrants support social and economic progress in Peel.
- Create a direct link between economic opportunities and the diversity that is attracted.
- Connect international students to local community/local government.
- Invite the students to City Hall to meet counselors, mayors, local administrative; helps them decide how they contribute to local economy.
- Address barriers to entrepreneurship related to visa limitations.
- Make it easier for agents to bring in the expertise of international students

MENTAL HEALTH

International students often experience issues related to isolation and loneliness. This can be triggered by a worry that they will not meet their parents’ expectations so they concentrate on their academics. This can aggravate feelings of isolation and loneliness, and make it harder to make friends. All of these things can have consequences for their mental health, sometimes resulting in depression and anxiety, even suicidal ideation. Part of the challenge is that they may find it difficult to connect to both domestic students and even students from their country of origin that have grown up in Canada. Without old friends and shared history, international students have difficulty placing themselves in a community.

The lack or slow process of adjustment may result in loneliness, or feeling like they do not belong. There is

also a growing concern about "microaggressions" faced by international students both on and off-campus, and that they are often targeted as a racialized group. Racial microaggression was used by Columbia professor Derald Sue to refer to "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color." These can range from comments or questions about an international students' heritage, culture, or language. Microaggressions experienced by international students often resulted in certain coping strategies: engaging with own cultural and social groups, withdrawing from the academic atmosphere, and seeking comfort in on or off-campus cultural diversity (Houshmand et al., 2014). The discrimination international students face can exacerbate their loneliness and isolation.

Recommendations:

- Provide more outreach to international students who are isolated.
- Provide mental health services in languages that reflect the international student population.

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

International students have reported it is difficult to access health services due to their limitation on accessing and using OHIP. Health care services prove to be very expensive for international students, especially if they do not have coverage from their home countries. It was also reported that most international students would not seek out mental health supports and services unless they are having severe problems.

Recommendation:

- The Ontario government should provide a health insurance plan.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

International students reported navigating the transportation in Peel during the first couple of months could be a challenge and found it to be extremely expensive. Some felt this may be limiting their employment possibilities. However, international students felt more comfortable with the Peel transportation system once they used it a few times.

FINANCIAL AID

International students noted financial aid is of very little help to them as they are often not eligible to receive it, although bursaries are sometimes available. OSAP is also inaccessible for international students, as they would have to have access to work/study to receive it. A lack of provincial financial support was also mentioned as a barrier to economic security.

Recommendation:

- The government should provide financial aid for international students

IMMIGRATION

When it came to immigration issues, participants noted that government policies change quite frequently, and having to extend visas can be very complicated. International students often do not have easy access to information, such as policy changes to the immigration process, municipal policies or employment rights. It was also reported that the immigration support on campus is not as helpful as settlement agencies, and that understanding the visa application process, acquiring correct information through informal networks, or not having the funds to apply for permanent residency are difficult to navigate.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND OTHER IMMIGRANT GROUPS

Many differences between international students and non-international students were reported. Racism was reported, specifically with Muslims facing Islamophobia. Women experienced more vulnerability and lack of safety. Language was a significant barrier reported among many international students. There was also a perception of Asian students being wealthier and that they don't face similar barriers as other international students. Another difference reported was that of the immigration status and the barriers it presents for international students obtaining work and other opportunities.

CULTURAL ISSUES

Key informants stated that students often face a strong cultural clash between their countries of origin and Canada. Navigating through the Canadian cultural context is part of their adjustment process. Adjusting to local customs, which can include seemingly simple practices like shaking hands or making eye contact, may be more difficult for some students, and can pose a barrier.

International students also experience language barriers, which can be related to their accents or their lack of confidence in their speaking abilities. While international students can access free conversation circles, they are often unaware of these resources.

BARRIERS SPECIFIC TO PEEL REGION

Interviewees reported that international students not living in Peel faced similar barriers to those living in Peel. Across the board it was reported that in both Peel and Toronto, it is easier to build social networks due to the density of cities. However, if students were living outside of Peel but had to attend school in Peel, transportation was a challenge. It was also reported that Peel had less entertainment for international students compared to Toronto.

FORMAL SUPPORTS

On-campus formal supports mentioned that available were of little help to international students specifically in regard to immigration, as the workers were not registered immigration advisors, and could not verify accurate immigration information. International students felt they had to do most of the work when using on-campus informal supports. On-campus international student centres were reported to be not fully equipped to deal with difficult situations that international students may be facing.

Additionally, there were other formal supports recognized by international students, which include COSTI, Dixie Bloor, United Way of Peel, Indus Community Services, Peel Immigration Portal, and Newcomer Centre of Peel. Various settlement agencies were also listed as a formal support but international students found them to be not very helpful.

Recommendation:

- Collect and list best practices.

INFORMAL SUPPORTS

International students listed several informal supports that help them during their transition in Canada. Some of the informal supports located on campus include university departments, peer leadership groups, frosh week activities, culture-specific clubs, and student groups. Other informal supports mentioned were faith groups, peer support, social media, network of family/friends, and community centres. Informants

mentioned that international students use these specific informal supports because many of them offer an array of services in a supportive environment.

However, participants also noted that international students can have limited social capital, and tend to gravitate towards their own ethno-cultural communities. Without any social connection to Peel, interviewees said that students tend to leave for other places in Canada once they graduate.

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Academically, international students may have difficulty adapting to a different academic setting, including understanding academic honesty, expectations in the classroom around self-directed learning versus directed teaching, and learning and communicating in academic English. They may not be acknowledged for their foreign credentials. International students may have difficulty getting into their program of choice, or switching their majors.

Interviewees noted the lack of regulation of tuition fees, as it can vastly fluctuate between institutions. There is also a lack of transparency on how the increased tuition fees are being used to provide necessary international student services.

Recommendations:

- Include different perspectives in research, including other languages and community-based research.
- Improve communication between international students and Higher Educational Institutions (HEI), international students and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, employers and international students.
- HEI must be engaged and invited to collaborate, as they have direct access to international students.

GAPS IN SERVICE PROVISION

Many service gaps were reported for international students, which included housing and financial aid, immigration support services that are inexpensive, and employment support. Other areas lacking for international students were connections to community and corporate involvement. There could be more room for improvement for more frequent transportation, more childcare services, and increased mental health support services.

Lastly, one informant stated that they felt very strongly that international students are brought into Canada on a false premise; educational institutions make promises to international students about their future that they cannot keep. While international students may have complaints about their experience, there is no formal grievance process for them.

Recommendations:

- Increase transparency and communication between sectors and between different levels of government.
- Bring different policy actors together; there are a lot of people working on international student issues, but they may not know each other or the work already being done.
- Different agencies, different levels of government have programs for international students; there is duplication; need to collaborate and know each other programs and to be more impactful

- All levels must work together to support students resolve challenges particularly housing; helping with careers
- More collaboration is needed among service providers to ensure the needs of the international students are met.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Key informants made several recommendations. These are organized and presented below:

- International students are not a homogenous group, so beware of generalizations.
- Recruiting agents are valuable, and perform necessary services, mediating between parents and international students.
- Recommendations should be based on demographic location of country of origin
- Talk directly to international students
- Students need ready access to information about services/programs outside of school
- Future research should include looking at gender, socioeconomic status
- Longitudinal study on what happens to international students over time are needed
- Consider the whole spectrum of immigration experience
- The government sees international students principally through an economic lens. Viewing people as economic commodities demeans them; they should be seen as people first, and government language should reflect this recognition.
- Programs should not be “one size fits all” but should build capacity in house to cater to intersectional identities.

FOCUS GROUP

MAJOR THEMES FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Most participants had pre-existing connections to Peel Region, which strengthened their resolve to study in Peel. They also liked the cultural resources local to Brampton and Mississauga; being able to find their community and easy access to food and ingredients that remind them of home were among the many reasons students decided to move to Peel.

International student expectations varied from the physical landscape of Peel to values and norms. Expectations included skyscrapers, lack of cracked roads, and extreme weather. They also expected to create a better life for themselves, better opportunities, and a lack of corruption. They were disappointed to find that jobs ask for references and that being hired is dependent on who you know.

After moving to Peel Region, they were disappointed by the transportation system. One student pointed out that he could travel the length of India by train; the whole country is linked somewhat seamlessly, while the transition from GO to TTC is more difficult to navigate and not as well linked.

EDUCATION

Finding a university/college in Peel was easy for most of the participants, as they were directly recruited. International students' relationship with recruiters was a major and recurring theme throughout the focus group. Participants were clear about the power held by recruiters, stating that they rely on them heavily throughout the admissions process. They also felt that recruiters are motivated by commission; one student stated that international students felt "looted" by agents, as they are already paying higher tuition costs than domestic students.

Some participants also had spoken to family members and got recommendations from them for their post-secondary education.

One student stated that he made a mistake in applying to his college, and thought he could correct it after arriving in Canada. He felt that he was not guided through the process, and could not switch into the program/academic institution of his choosing. He expressed his disappointment at the lack of support he received from the recruiting agent and the academic institutions.

When asked about what would have made their overall experience of applying to university/college better, students once again spoke to their relationships with agents and how critical they are to the entire application and admissions process. One student even stated that recruiters had the power to block the visa application and demand more money. Another was disappointed by the lack of options offered to her by the recruiter; she did not know that there were other institutions that she could apply to. Lastly, the students all agreed that more flexibility is required for throughout the process of applying for a study visa.

LIVING SITUATION

All the participants live off-campus. Participants found their housing through online classified listing site, Kijiji, as well as through family and friends. Some international students get together and rent out a whole

house. They also all agreed that their housing is both affordable and safe. One participant recounted that it did take some time to get used to a basement apartment.

Living quarters are centrally located, close to school and groceries, and most participants see their family members often, either in person or over Facetime.

The benefits of their living conditions include that they are close to facilities, including parks. Good landlords were also named.

There were minimal challenges associated with their living situation. These challenges include lack of parking and being in dark basement apartments.

The conversation also brought out a short discussion on the social striations of international students; some international students arrive in Canada with more money and resources than others, and can afford better lifestyles.

When asked about their primary mode of transportation, most students reported that they drive to their destinations. Public transportation is also used, but requires some time and skill to navigate.

OBTAINING/RETAINING EMPLOYMENT

The participants were evenly split between being currently employed and currently unemployed with the intention of working.

Participants reported having a difficult time with finding employment, sharing stories of being exploited by employers both within and outside their own communities. Stories of not being paid for vacation time, training, and other violations of their rights led international students to strongly recommend educating new international students on their employment rights. There was also some dissatisfaction with the requirement to have references; some associated this to the same system of corruption, bribery, and nepotism that they experienced in their home countries.

Those who had jobs found them through their family and friends' connections. Some found them through employment agencies. None of the participants found international student centres on campus to offer support in finding employment.

Those who have work permits expressed some frustrations with the process, often paying immigration lawyers to help them obtain the work permit. Some said that they regretted paying for the lawyer as they could have easily done it themselves. Participants also reported that the process of applying for and obtaining work permits can be long and bureaucratic. They recommended that information be provided through their academic institutions' websites.

None of the currently employed participants are working in their fields. Participants reported that working in their field is nearly impossible, and most are doing "survival" jobs. They expressed their frustration at obtaining employment without "Canadian" experience; one student shared how maddening it was to not be hired by Tim Hortons, despite having experience as a server in his country of origin.

According to the participants, having a work permit can limit employability since employers view the work permit as temporary, and it affects both the students' capacity to find employment and employers' motivations to hire, train, and support international students who are viewed as temporary residents. Additionally, lack of references presented a significant barrier to employment, with some students resorting to asking family members to be their "references." Participants reported being advised by their peers to

embellish their resumes in response to the barriers they faced in finding employment.

Those who did work stated that their income allowed them to pay their living expenses and save a little money.

Participants recommended that government jobs should be made available to international students. However, this recommendation may simply reflect lack of awareness of opportunities or misinformation about eligibility for government employment.

OBTAINING VISA

Participants described the process of obtaining their visas as being stressful. Students experienced additional stress from gathering all necessary documents, such as bank statements, and having to pay the recruiting agents. Participants from larger cities had more access to information about the visa process and had greater choice of academic institutions (and could “shop” among the recruiters) in comparison to those living in small cities or villages.

When asked what advice they would give to someone coming to study in Brampton or Mississauga, participants agreed that they would not recommend moving to either city. Participants cited the difficulties with obtaining permanent residence in Ontario, the high cost of car insurance, and increasing cost of living, as reasons why international students should explore other provinces.

Other advice included not using a recruiting agent in the process of obtaining a visa, as they can do it themselves without incurring extra costs. Again, participants mentioned how they felt that for recruiting agents (and by association, the academic institutions) “it’s just a money game.”

SERVICE PROVISION

Participants reported mostly relying on their friends when they needed support. Some also mentioned Peel Multicultural Centre as a source of support. Some participants have tried to access support from community services, only to be turned away because they are not permanent residents. Most do not go to on-campus services, and do not feel like they get the help they need when they do go. Some participants have tried to obtain employment support from community agencies, and have been disappointed.

Some students did not even know about on-campus supports, and those who did, named services associated with employment as helpful/useful.

Participants also did not know or access several off-campus supports, naming the library as the one service that they utilize. They also stated that they spend most of their time off-campus.

When asked about interacting with domestic students, participants reported that the two communities do not traditionally mix or integrate, and come together mostly for graduation. Even amongst the South Asian community, there are divides between students who have been raised in Canada and international students. There are also divides between South Asian students from different regions of India.

Additionally, participants reported being busy with their academic load, and for some, work as well. They felt that they led different lives in comparison to domestic students; domestic students, for example, have weekends, while they themselves do not feel like they have that luxury.

Participants also noted the difference in cultural mores between their countries of origin and Canada. For example, one participant shared his confusion around “boundaries” and his perception that calling someone

more than a few times is considered violation of personal space. They also wondered why the burden of connection rests on them, stating that domestic students can approach and choose to speak to them as well.

There was a brief discussion about the differences in the style of education between their country of origin and Canada. Participants stated that they did not feel like their professors treated them differently. Teachers in India, in particular, demand a type of social respect that is not reflected in Canadian culture. Participants felt that their Canadian professors are fairer and more helpful. Participants also laughed as they compared the education system in India, which they considered to be more difficult, to that of their Canadian education.

THE FUTURE

When discussing their future in the region of Peel, most participants were pessimistic. They would be willing to stay if they can obtain employment and permanent residency. Otherwise, they would consider exploring other provinces. Participants agreed that employment prospects determine whether they remain in Ontario or move to another province.

Participants offered the following recommendations to support international students:

- International students should receive some form of health card, as health insurance is an added expense on top of their higher tuition costs.
- There should be information sessions on employment rights and obtaining health care.
- There is a need for more scholarships and financial aid.
- Canada should only accept as many international students as they can “digest”.

Participants also noted the lack of employment opportunities for students majoring in information technology.

Lastly, participants were asked if they felt like they “belonged” in Peel Region. Overall, participants reported that they did feel like they belonged, but they did not always feel comfortable. They acknowledged that they achieved more in Canada in comparison to their country of origin. They also acknowledge facing discrimination and being seen differently since they are international students, even in their own communities.

FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

Overall, the focus group findings often differed from the literature review. Some of the difference may be attributed to the homogeneity of the group; almost all participants were from the same region of India and all attended college, which may have influenced some of the findings.

FACTORS AFFECTING ACCULTURATION

The focus group findings associated with acculturation deviate from the literature review findings. No participant spoke to challenges associated with language; most participants spoke fluent English with little to no hesitation. It is possible that the recruitment strategy attracted better English speakers since the outreach flyer was not translated, or that those with poorer English participated minimally.

Participants held a high regard for their academic institutions and their professors, but none recounted struggling academically. In fact, some participants stated that the education system was more challenging in India, and that they found it easier to obtain higher grades in Canada. It is, however, possible that some

students might be reluctant to discuss their insecurities about academic stress in front of their peers, as suggested by the literature review.

The literature review provided a description of the challenges international students face in interacting with domestic students. Participants spoke openly about leading a very different life from their domestic peers, and questioned why the act of connection was seemingly one-sided, noting that their peers could also choose to connect to them but generally did not.

Participants spoke to discrimination throughout the focus group, often with frustration and disappointment. Certain cultural mores, such as having a legal last name or developing references for employment, were broadly lumped under discriminatory social practices. Their disappointment with these social practices repeatedly stemmed from their expectation that Canada was a more just and fair society, without the corrupt practices from their countries of origin. Their frustration, similarly, was a reflection of their mismatched expectations that they would have more avenues to develop professional and personal relationships.

In contrast to the literature, most of the focus group participants were well informed pre-departure, with many having family or friends who resided in Peel. They were guided through the process by their recruiting agents, and felt comfortable with their decision to live or study in Peel Region. While the literature review did not explore factors on why international students settle where they do, participants were clear that living in Peel gives them access to their cultural community, family/friends, and eateries/groceries that carry their home cuisine. Leaving home while settling in a community that reminds them of home was very important to the participants.

Overall, the participants displayed some knowledge of their on-campus supports and few off-campus supports, but did not frequent these services. When they did, they often felt discouraged. One participant articulated his disappointment, stating that he felt, given the recruiting process, that there would be more “hand-holding” to support him through his academic career.

Participants echoed the supports identified in the literature, placing weight on the need for more information and perhaps sessions on employment rights and navigating complex immigration challenges such as support in obtaining work visas and applying for health care.

While the literature reviewed did not explore the relationship between international students and recruiting agents, it was prevalent throughout the focus group. Recruiting agents are perceived to hold a lot of power over the admissions and applications process while being misleading and deliberately keeping vital information from potential applicants. Participants were openly skeptical of the role of recruiting agents, who are thought to take additional fees for certain activities. They were also skeptical of the higher tuition costs in addition to the fees that they pay for their visas and other associated costs of studying abroad.

A major source of the skepticism is that focus group participants felt that they had been recruited under false pretenses; they expected the process to obtain their permanent residence and meaningful employment to be easier. The literature review validates this incongruity between the positing of international students as model immigrants and Ontario’s actual capacity to accommodate skilled workers and economic growth. A complex web of policies, ranging from immigration and education to business development, poses challenges to international students and their ability to remain in Ontario after graduation.

There were no articles identified in the literature that compared international student experiences or tracked international student ease of employment and obtaining permanent residency across provinces. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the validity of the participants’ perception that employment and permanent residency are easier in other provinces.

KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The reality of the international student experience often does not match their initial expectations of finding academic and economic opportunities. In Canada, the public narrative of international students as “ideal immigrants” counters their challenges to integrate into Canadian society. This narrative also subtly characterizes international students as financially secure and English-speaking upper-middle-class prospective citizens who have the financial and linguistic wherewithal to find appropriate services both on- and off-campus. The narrative ignores the reality that international students are often young, vulnerable, and susceptible to exploitation.

All data sources indicated the challenges faced by international students during their adjustment process: students face barriers in meeting their daily needs (financial/transportation/employment) as well as their socio-psychological needs (mental health resources/cultural exchange/social support systems). The lack of dedicated resources, particularly off campus, to support international students contributes to their isolation and lack of awareness of existing services.

The varied responses from key informants and orientation informants on demographic trends for international students, as well as the inability to secure data for demographic analysis in this project are causes for concern. While there is consensus and general data that celebrates the influx of international students into Ontario, there is little knowledge outside of the academic institutions of the particular demographic breakdown of this population. International students remain a sub-population of the immigrant population whose needs are difficult to identify.

The consequences of this loss, however, are striking. The literature and interviews set out the labyrinth of systemic and social barriers that international students face, either on their own or with their peers. Their stories, in contrast to other immigrant voices, are often absent in designing services and in conversation with decision-makers. As a group, the visibility of international students and their needs is limited, and may contribute to the perception and fear - particularly by employers - that these students are sojourners set on returning to their country of origin.

The non-profit and community organizations are left trying to meet the needs of international students, but with limited funding to do so. Some of the preliminary research indicated that while some not-for-profits continue to support international students, their inability to report their activities is limited out of fear over losing funding, constraints both their data collection and being able to fully advocate for the international student population.

Discrimination faced by international students, represented across data sources, underscores the distinction between the public narrative and employers’ perspectives. While there is considerable financial incentive and prestige for academic institutions associated with international students, there appear to be few or no incentives for hiring, training, and retaining international students as employees. The different perception of international students between the academic and employment sectors suggests that there is still much work to be done.

The interviews, literature review, and focus group, made clear the need for better-coordinated policy and services between all levels of government, academic institutions, employers, and the not-for-profit sectors.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been informed by the findings across all project activities and broken down by actor: All, Service Providers, the Provincial Government, and Educational Institutions.

FOR ALL ACTORS

1. All stakeholders must work together to combat institutional racism.

Certain challenges faced by international students, such as racism are related to social issues. Racism faced or perceived by international students requires intervention from various stakeholders, as academic environments alone cannot combat institutional racism (Brown & Jones, 2013).

2. All stakeholders must increase international student access to formalized off-campus employment in their associated fields.

International students also face substantial challenges in obtaining and retaining employment, both pre- and post-graduation. Supporting international students in their employment efforts serves to increase individual confidence, provide exposure to the Canadian workplace, and enhance their resumes. Employers also benefit from the linguistic and cultural diversity that international students offer. Such support also mitigates some of the perceptions of discrimination reported by international students, and celebrates Canadian multiculturalism (Scott et al., 2015).

3. Create an environment of both formal and informal learning and cross-cultural information sharing.

While most of the literature focuses on pre-departure preparation, effectively placing the onus of gathering information on the international student, few articles mention the need for academic institutions to prepare themselves for the student's arrival. For example, professors and administrators may need some training on how to interact with, and accommodate international students, some of which may be accomplished in collaboration with the community and not-for-profit sectors. Creating an environment of both formal and informal learning and cross-cultural information sharing can potentially enhance the international student experience for both international students and their host communities, supporting international students through the integration process.

4. Use available research to better understand the international student population.

All actors should learn from best practices, ensuring data is more readily available and broadly disseminated, and funding new research.

5. Strengthen and support people working with international students in collaborative activity.

The challenges faced by international students require intervention from all levels of government, the not-for-profit sector, academic institutions, and employers. Certain challenges, such as housing and lack of economic opportunities, require systemic and policy review and change. The direct link between economic opportunities and the diversity they attract must be recognized.

6. The public narrative about international students should expand to consider the whole

spectrum of the immigration experience and recognize international student contributions to Canadian society.

The public narrative about international students recognizes their capacity to be “ideal immigrants” but the racism and discrimination faced by international students complicates the matter. In both policy and discourse, international student experiences and contributions as immigrants are insufficiently recognized when they are characterized first and foremost as human capital.

7. Recruiting agents are valuable, and perform necessary services, mediating between parents and international students.

Recruiters are potentially underused resources, and they may require training to better support international students in pre-departure preparations and accessing services upon arrival.

8. Reduce duplication of agency and government programs.

Different agencies and different levels of government have programs for international students. There is duplication and a need to collaborate and know each other's programs, which make them more impactful.

FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

9. Non-profit agencies, particularly settlement services, should connect with students from the very beginning of their arrival in Canada.

Establishing a relationship with international students from the beginning, such as when they arrive at the airport, broadens student options for the services that they require.

Upon their arrival to Canada, students should have ready access to information about services/programs outside of their academic institution. Services, especially those associated with mental health, should be available in several languages and be culturally appropriate. Students may also require more information on what is “normal” as part of their adjustment process (e.g. loneliness) and what may require more professional intervention (e.g. depression). It is also critical that counsellors themselves are cross-culturally competent and develop creative (and culturally appropriate) ways to reach out to international students (Lewthwaite, 1997).

Non-profits (or academic institutions) may consider offering international students information on employment rights and obtaining health care as possible follow-up to initial connection.

Non-profits may also consider grassroots outreaching directly to international students in spaces they currently frequent, such as places of worship, cultural groups, etc.

10. More outreach is required to reach international students who are socially isolated.

Some students come to Peel Region with pre-existing relationships, such as family, but others do not, and may require more targeted outreach.

11. More resources are needed to support individuals in integrating into the workplace, especially for those who want to stay in Canada.

In particular, international students need more information about Labour Market Survey. This will

provide them with critical information on which industries are hiring and create realistic expectations.

- 12. Service provider programs should not be “one size fits all”; staff should be trained to meet international students’ nuanced needs.**
- 13. Increase transparency and communication between sectors and between different levels of government.**

HEIs should be better informed about community and settlement services and what they offer.

FOR GOVERNMENT

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Association report offers a substantial recommendations specific to the provincial government. Those recommendations are supported by the findings of this literature review.

Additional recommendations from the literature include:

- 14. Support international students in connecting to their host communities, and particularly to professional networks.**

Supporting international students in connecting to their host communities, and particularly to professional networks may be key to their post-graduation retention (Scott et al., 2015).

- 15. Municipalities should consider their role in service provision to international students.**

Connect international students to local community/local government.

Invite international students to City Hall to meet councillors, mayors, local administrators; doing so helps them decide how they contribute to local economy.

- 16. The provincial government should recognize its responsibility to international students.**

Recognition of international students, and permission to access services off campus would recognize them as ideal citizens.

- 17. Make visas easier to access.**

Many students would like to become entrepreneurs, but face visa limitations.

- 18. The Ontario government should provide a health insurance plan.**

International students should receive some form of health card, as health insurance is an added expense on top of their higher tuition costs.

- 19. Treat international students as people first, not commodities.**

The government sees international students principally through an economic lens. Viewing people as economic commodities demeans them; they should be seen as people first, and government language should reflect this recognition.

- 20. Canada should match resources to the number of international students it accepts.**

One of the major frustrations expressed by international students was that they were recruited to a country that did not always have the social and policy infrastructure to support their transition from student to meaningfully engaged and employed citizen. With limitations on economic opportunities, various levels of Canadian government may want to re-evaluate their employment and entrepreneurial offerings. In particular, students majoring in information technology stated that they require more employment opportunities to remain in Canada.

FOR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

21. Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) must be engaged and invited to collaborate, as they have direct access to international students.

The efforts of non-profit and other sectors would be significantly improved if academic institutions were invited to the service provision tables. This would require a re-thinking of community partnerships, and may require both outreach and exploration to understand how universities can be better integrated with other sectors.

22. Support “brokers of the host culture” with training and links to resources.

The research indicates that international students spend a majority of their time on campus, and their on-campus interactions, ranging from educators and students to on-campus facilities, are of particular importance. Lewthwaite’s 1997 report notes the importance of the “hostel supervisor” described as “a more mature post-graduate student” serve as important “brokers of the host culture” second to their academic advisor (p. 176). Supporting these key individuals through training and perhaps links to both on- and off-campus resources may, in turn, allow them to better guide international students through the acculturation process.

23. Offer orientation sessions throughout the year.

Offering student orientation sessions throughout the year, as opposed to only once at the beginning of the year, can allow small group discussions exploration on a variety of topics of interest, such as cultural mores and acculturation stressors (Lewthwaite, 1997).

24. Provide international students with more informal opportunities to practice language and social etiquette associated with Canadian culture.

Students also need opportunities to practice their newly developed language and social skills. (Lewthwaite, 1997) Given the amount of time students are already spending on-campus, providing them with space and informal structure to ask questions, explore, and practice some of the social etiquette associated with Canadian culture may increase their confidence in their language proficiencies, allowing them to more fully participate in both academic and social settings.

25. Use social media accounts to inform international students of community resources and upcoming events, and to create virtual communities.

Educational institutions are also uniquely positioned to provide international students with information through social media. According to one US-based study, fifty-six percent of international students followed social media accounts managed by US colleges or universities before deciding which institutions they would apply to, and an additional thirty-seven percent followed the institutional account before accepting admissions offers (Choudaha et al., 2012). Academic

institutions can utilize their social media accounts to inform international students of community resources and upcoming events, and may assist in creating virtual communities for isolated international students in forming informal peer support networks.

26. There is a great need for scholarships and financial aid, which presents the biggest challenge for international students.

International students face economic challenges and are often limited in their access to financial aid. Available financial aid is often merit-based and not need-based. This can be a considerable barrier to international students and their families. Additionally, financial aid needs may be time-sensitive, and may jeopardize the academic future of an international student. The process of finding information and applying for financial assistance is intimidating and may require guidance.

27. HEIs should facilitate more links between domestic students and international students.

Academic institutions are well placed to create opportunities for informal and continued interactions between domestic and international students. These opportunities could benefit both groups of students; social interactions would decrease loneliness and social isolation for international students and domestic students could potentially benefit from the cultural exchange.

The interactions should be commonplace, and occur throughout the year.

FOR RESEARCHERS

28. Research should include different perspectives in research about international students, including other languages and community-based research.

29. International students are not a homogenous group, so beware of generalizations about them.

International students are often described in the research by their ethnic group, which does not allow for more nuanced understanding of international students needs by other demographic categories, such as gender, socio-economic status, and age. This lack of nuance also makes it difficult to understand how changing political conditions in their country of origin may impact their needs.

30. Recommendations should include consideration of demographic location of country of origin.

While international students should not be described as a homogenous group, certain cultural awareness and sensitivities should be considered in developing and implementing recommendations.

31. Future research should address research gaps, such as exploring the impact of gender and socioeconomic status, and funding longitudinal studies to determine changing needs and experiences as international students transition into citizenship.

ADDENDUM: FOCUS GROUPS & INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

PURPOSE

The key objective of this project is to understand the lived experiences of international students (IS) in Peel Region by conducting focus groups and individual interviews. Previous data collection efforts encountered challenges in recruiting students for focus group discussions, and this addendum fills this gap in data collection. Additional data increases sample size and captures diverse voices, ensuring that the qualitative data is statistically significant and reflects the varied needs of IS living in Peel.

METHODOLOGY

Three focus groups and six individual interviews were conducted with 22 IS from Sheridan College and University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Participants were recruited through collaboration with community partners, international student offices and informal connections. The following chart summarizes participants’ profiles:

Sessions	Country of Origin	Field of Study	Degree type	Other Info
Sheridan College: • 2 focus groups with 5 participants in each session • 6 individual Interviews. UTM: • 1 focus group with 6 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argentina • Brazil • China • Columbia • Ecuador • Guyana • India • Lebanon • Philippines • Tanzania 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounting • Applied Statistics • Business Administration • Computer System Software • Economics • Electro-Mechanical Engineering • Finance • Life Science • Marketing • Paralegal • Sociology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diploma • Advanced Diploma • Bachelor’s • Master’s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 students graduated between 2016 and 2017 • 18 are currently enrolled • 7 male students • 15 female students • 4 students have children • 3 students are married and came to Canada with their children and spouses

Focus group and interview questions were based on a shorter updated version (Appendix X) of the original discussion guide (Appendix 4). Each focus group lasted approximately 2 hours, and individual interviews lasted about 1 hour each. Participant answers were categorized and analyzed based on key emerging themes. It is important to note that nonverbal communication, gestures and behavioural responses were also considered for analysis, such as frustration, sadness and anger.

KEY THEMES

STUDYING IN PEEL

Most students choose Peel as a result of recommendations from family, friends or immigration consultants. They reported having very limited information available to them, and they selected Sheridan or UTM based on these few resources.

Students felt that they did not receive enough information about different school and program options. Although most are happy in their respective fields of study, they preferred having access to more information about programs in Canadian colleges and universities so they can make informed decisions about their studies and future.

OBTAINING VISA

The visa application process is faster and more cost effective in some countries. For example, students from India and China received their study visa within 1-2 months, whereas students from Brazil waited longer. Immigration consultants and agencies in certain parts of the world were less regulated and cost more to engage. For example, all three IS from Brazil complained that their immigration consultants were unprofessional, uninformed and charged extremely high fees compare to other countries, like India.

EXPECTATIONS

Students suggested that mentally preparing oneself is vital before arriving because life is very different in Canada than they imagined with respect to living and studying alone in a foreign country. Most students shared that they had difficulties completing simple tasks, such as cooking or laundry while attending school. They were used to getting help from their parents and other family members, and the sudden shift in household responsibilities made it difficult for them to cope.

LIVING SITUATION

Students stayed with their families, in rented off-campus apartments or in school residences. School residence was expensive, but convenient, clean, safe and preferred by most students. It was not challenging for students to rent a place, but they felt that fees were expensive. One student from Brazil shared that her agent cancelled her homestay arrangement at the last minute because she complained about her agent's lack of professionalism. She had no choice but to live in a school residence, and the residence fee was over her planned budget.

In general, students liked living in Peel because of its diversity, and they felt comfortable and less homesick living in ethno-cultural hubs across Peel.

INTERACTION WITH DOMESTIC STUDENTS

IS did not feel very comfortable participating in extracurricular activities at school alongside domestic students because they were self-conscious of their accents and felt that they did not understand Canadian

culture adequately to interact. A few students sensed discrimination among their classmates because their academic capability was questioned by domestic students during group projects.

Participants leaned on their own coping mechanisms to overcome these challenges. One student shared that he watched popular Netflix shows and Canadian sports to foster communication and connections with his Canadian classmates, and he believes this approach has worked well for him. Another student found on-campus counselling services helpful in learning how to interact with domestic students.

SERVICE PROVISION

None of the participants were aware of settlement organizations that provided assistance to international students. Some students paid a fee to immigration consultants in their country to renew their student permits.

Most students did not use on-campus services available to international students because they found that international student offices were not helpful. Several students had unpleasant experiences with these resources.

One student was visibly upset by the fact that she was not allowed to community programs and services that help other newcomers with integration, sharing the following statement:

When I applied for my student visa at Canadian embassy, I told them that my ultimate aim is to get the permanent residency. I feel like a Canadian long before I came to Canada because we chose this country. We chose to love it before we came here. We chose to leave our jobs and everything we had to come here, and we didn't know we would face this much hardships.

EMPLOYMENT

The majority of IS either have part-time jobs, internships, co-op placements or full-time employment. Four students currently have meaningful full-time employments, 10 students have part-time jobs on- or off-campus, 4 students are interning or in co-op placements, and 4 students are unemployed and actively searching for part-time employment.

More than half of the students mentioned, particularly in individual interviews, that they know someone who is compensated in cash because of the 20-hour per week limit under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, Article 186(V). For example, a friend of a respondent worked in a restaurant for six months with no pay. His employer initially promised \$8/hr pay on a cash, basis but insisted that the student needed to finish his training, which lasted for 6 months. The student was not aware of whom to report the employer and felt scared to report at all because he knew that cash-based employment is illegal. What's more, he wanted to keep a clean criminal record to obtain Permanent Residency status in the future.

Furthermore, recent policy change regarding post-graduate work permits made many private college students ineligible for the permit. One student shared frustrations that she was required to change schools, extend her study period and suffer a significant financial loss because of the policy change.

International students who arrived with their spouse and children described challenges with expensive childcare. Their spouses often cannot obtain employment because of lack of and high costs for childcare.

HEALTH

All students expressed that they avoid going to the healthcare clinics or hospitals unless it is an absolute emergency because of high medical costs. Although they are covered through their school's medical insurance, they often have to pay upfront and get reimbursed later. The majority of participants shared that they cannot pay significant, upfront costs for medical bills, so they avoid assessing healthcare as often as necessary. Several participants also stated that their school insurance was not activated until early October, even though they paid for the month of September.

One student shared that she has diabetes and requires a planned diet; however, she found it difficult and expensive to see a dietician. As a result, she decided to visit a dietician when she returns home during holidays. Another student shared the following statement expressing similar concerns:

My international student friends and I, when we get sick, we think twice about going to the hospital. We usually just get pain killers from drug stores and wait to see if the condition gets worse, then decide if we should really go to a clinic, because some places ask you to pay upfront, and sometimes it can be so expensive.

Students also mentioned other jurisdictions provide provincial health care coverage for international students, such as Alberta and Manitoba, and expressed how helpful it would be if Ontario implemented a similar plan.

Students who experienced mental health challenges did not seek help from on-campus counselling services. Participants shared that they sometimes struggle to cope with stressful situations, but feel uncomfortable seeking counselling. This is because mental health is stigmatized in their respective ethno-cultural communities, and they do not want to be associated with mental health challenges for fear of isolation from their community.

FUTURE PLAN

All students expressed that they want to stay in Canada after graduation and obtain permanent residence status. They also expressed their desire to be more involved in the community and learn more about Peel Region, especially with respect to the local labour market.

ANALYSIS

Generally, participants indicated a strong connection to Peel, they considered Peel home and expressed their desire to settle down in the region. However, the students presented as detached from the Peel community, demonstrated by their lack of knowledge about the region and its programs. They expressed that they often feel disengaged because there are few community programs available to them.

There is a significant resource awareness, reflected in participants' astonishment and excitement to learn about settlement organizations that provide free assistance for international students. Some students were also not aware of on-campus supports provided for them, such as study/work permit renewals and information sessions targeting them.

IS also felt disconnected from domestic students for reasons, and this may affect future integration into Canadian society. Schools and community organizations could facilitate joint activities in promote cultural exchange between domestic and IS.

The majority of students also wished they had someone to talk to informally – someone to share their experience, so they can learn about employment, immigration and other matters. This points to a need for a program or a safe platform through which IS in Peel could connect and share insights and information.

Students that chose to work for cash are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. The 20-hour per week restriction left students effectively drove the need among IS to seek cash-employment. Increasing this restrictive limit could provide students with safer work environments and more legitimate means of supporting themselves, as well as other potential benefits, such as workplace insurance.

Participants from Sheridan College described more instances of employment rights violations than UTM students. University students showed more financial stability, and they were also less likely to take on part-time survival jobs. They seem to be more involved in school activities, but also detached from their domestic classmates and the Peel community.

Moreover, there is a general hesitation in accessing healthcare because the requirement to pay upfront is too burdensome. Schools and insurance companies could work together to create a solution, increasing IS access to health care and mitigate future medical issues.

Students often refrained from using counselling services on campus for cultural reasons, even though they admitted requiring help. Students can be informed about the importance of mental health through informal gatherings and be encouraged to attend counselling sessions. Professors also play a significant role in conveying such messages through their daily interaction with IS.

International students who arrived to Canada with their spouse and children require more supports, especially with respect to childcare and employment. They feel more isolated and anxious because their children are unable to attend community activities that foster healthy development and integration. Community organizations could play a significant role in assisting families of international students with settlement and integration opportunities in this respect.

Throughout these conversations, it became apparent that the core issue underpinning the main struggles experienced by international students in Peel is the lack of awareness of local programs and services. There

is a significant number of settlement agencies in Peel that provide various services for IS and their families. These services, if utilized, could facilitate better integration. The challenge for post-secondary institutions and community organizations in Peel is to enhance strategic collaboration and maximize support to IS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Design a comprehensive orientation session as a guideline for educational institutions in Peel, aimed at:
 - Introducing students to settlement and social service organizations in the community with IS programming, including a list of services they offer.
 - Clearly outlining their employment rights using scenarios to help them identify employment rights violations.
 - Raising awareness about mental health and highlighting the importance of counselling services; using peer education approaches and asking IS who previously benefitted from counselling services to share their experiences; encouraging IS to attend counselling sessions to talk about any problems they are encountering in student and personal lives.
 - Continuing to use workshops, webinars, online videos or apps to provide information throughout the year.
2. Enhance integration by:
 - Encouraging IS involvement in school and community activities, such as programs that facilitate IS volunteer opportunities in local community service projects, enabling them to experience diverse aspects of Peel Region, including working in soup kitchens, shelters and nursing homes.
 - Bridging relationships between international and domestic students through mentorships and buddy programs, cultural competency training and cross-cultural workshops.
3. Improve IS access to healthcare:
 - Schools can work with insurance companies and neighbouring clinics to reduce IS requirements instances to pay upfront for medical care; ensure IS can access their insurance from the first day of classes.
4. Facilitate networking among international students create a Peel International Students Network
 - Create a networking group for international students in Peel and provide them with opportunities to network with fellow international students; use this as a medium for information exchange on employment, immigration and other aspects of living and working in Peel Region.
5. Legislative Change
 - Advocate for increasing the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, article 186 subsection (V)(iii) limit of 20-hours of paid work per week to 40-hours per week.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Public Interest and Peel Newcomer Strategy Group would like to acknowledge and thank all the Working Group members for their continued guidance and wisdom throughout the project.

We would like to thank all the Key informant interviewees, Orientation informant interviewees for their honesty, hard work, and dedication to improving the lives of international students.

We would especially like to thank all the focus group participants; we hope we have centred your narratives in this report.

A special thank you to Peel Multicultural Council for their incredible outreach and support in gathering focus group participants.

APPENDIX 1: WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Aamna Ashraf	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group	aashraf@unitedwaypeel.org
Cameron Moser	Sheridan College	cameron.moser@sheridancollege.ca
Cindy Ou	Masters Student, York University	cindyou1989@gmail.com
Dipna Singh	IRCC	Dipna.Singh@cic.gc.ca
Geoff McIlroy	Region of Peel	geoff.mcilroy@peelregion.ca
Ingrid Nugent	COSTI	Nugent@Costi.org
Jagdeep Kailey	Peel Multicultural Council	jagdeep@peelmc.com
Kevin Beaulieu	Public Interest	kevin@publicinterest.ca
Kisa Ehigiator	Public Interest	kisa@publicinterest.ca
Louay Eskandar	Region of Peel	louay.eskandar@peelregion.ca
Marise Hopkins	University of Toronto, Mississauga	vpexternal@utmsu.ca
Nadia Jamil	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group	njamil@unitedwaypeel.org
Neemarie Alam	Public Interest	neemarie@publicinterest.ca
Praveen Kalra	Dixie Bloor	pkalra@dixiebloor.org
Rahila Mushtaq	COSTI	Mushtaq@Costi.org
Roopa Desai Trilokekar	York University	RDesaiTrilokekar@edu.yorku.ca
Sandeep Rane	Sheridan College	sandeep.rane@sheridancollege.ca
Sita Jayaraman	India Rainbow	sjayaraman@indiarainbow.org
Subhi Tarim	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group	starim@peelnewcomer.org
Trisha Scantlebury	Peel Newcomer Strategy Group	tscantlebury@unitedwaypeel.org
Yasmine Dossal	COSTI	dossal@costi.org

APPENDIX 2: ORIENTATION INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello, my name is _____. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with us today! I am hoping to learn more about your thoughts and insights on the topic of international students. Our goal is to support Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) in conducting a needs assessment study, allowing PNSG and its partners to gather information and data to highlight barriers and gaps in creating support systems for international students. PNSG's role is to help the Peel community strategize on how collaborations can be created or resourced to strengthen existing services to better meet immigrant and newcomer needs.

Just a reminder that anything you tell me will not be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this interview. All of the reports will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person. We can also send you these questions so you can answer them via e-mail or to add any additional thoughts on this topic.

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Are you currently doing any research on international students? Have you done research in your past?
2. Can you summarize the research that you have done?
 - Research question/hypothesis
 - Review methodology (if more than one research project, indicate project)
 - Sources of data (focus on where they are obtaining data, whether it is open-source/shareable, what sources they find to be reliable)
 - Key findings
 - Applications of research
3. Would it be possible to obtain a copy of your research (if published)? Would you like a copy of our report once our research is complete?
4. What are the gaps in existing research about international students?
5. Are you noticing any trends in the international student population? (*i.e.: Where are these international students coming from? Are they of the same gender/socioeconomic status? Are they studying the same things?*)
6. What are the specific barriers that international students face? (*Responses can be for both on-campus and off-campus experiences*) Spend most time on this question; try to obtain thorough list of barriers, prompt for academic, personal, and professional life.
7. How do international students contribute to Canadian society?
8. We are looking for recommendations of other projects, research, or work on international students, particularly Ontario-focused. Do you have any suggestions/thoughts?
9. Do you know of any projects, research, or other works with international students that are Peel-focused? If so, can you provide an overview? Or connect us to them?

10. What are some strategies and best practices you would like included in our final report?
11. Who else in the research community should we be talking to? (*Follow-up: would you feel comfortable with doing an e-introduction to us?*)
12. Anything else you would like to add.
13. Do you have any questions/comments for us?

End by thanking the informant again for his/her time!

APPENDIX 3: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello, my name is _____. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with us today! I am hoping to learn more about your thoughts and insights on the topic of international students. Our goal is to support Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) in conducting a needs assessment study, allowing PNSG and its partners to gather information and data to highlight barriers and gaps in creating support systems for international students. PNSG's role is to help the Peel community strategize on how collaborations can be created or resourced to strengthen existing services to better meet immigrant and newcomer needs.

Just a reminder that anything you tell me will not be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this interview. All of the reports will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person. We can also send you these questions so you can answer them via e-mail or to add any additional thoughts on this topic.

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. What is your position at your agency? How long have you been doing this work? What drew you to this work?
2. Can you provide a brief overview of your work or your agencies' work with international students?
3. Have you ever had to turn students away because your program or agency did not have the capacity to work with this population?
4. Based on your experience, why do international students come to Canada? How many of these students choose to stay in Canada?
5. Are you noticing any trends in the international student population? (*i.e.: Where are these international students coming from? Are they of the same gender/ socioeconomic status? Are they studying the same things?*)
6. What are the specific barriers that international students face? (*Responses can be for both on-campus and off-campus experiences*) *Spend most time on this question; try to obtain thorough list of barriers, prompt for academic, personal, and professional life. Also prompt for whether knowing where services are, or how to navigate them is part of challenge.*
7. *This question is dependent on the answers to the question above, and can be used as a prompt as necessary.* Can you speak to what, if any, barriers international students face in the following areas:
 - a) Finding housing
 - b) Obtaining necessary social supports (including recreation)
 - c) Obtaining/retaining employment
 - d) Access to health services, including mental health
 - e) Accessing and navigating public transportation
 - f) Obtaining financial aid
 - g) Accessing and navigation through immigration processes

8. Do international students face different barriers based on their demographic profile? (*i.e. Is there differences in barriers based on race, gender, religion, etc.*) If so, can you tell me more about these barriers?
9. Based on your experience, would these barriers be the same for international students not living in Peel? What would be the difference?
10. What are the existing formal supports for international students? (*Prompt: on-campus centres, non-profit organizations*)
11. What are the some informal supports for international students? (*Prompt: places of worship, social media platforms, etc.*)
12. In your opinion, are there gaps in these existing services and supports? If so, can you tell me more about them?
13. How do international students contribute to Canadian society?
14. We are looking for recommendations of other projects, research, or work on international students, particularly Peel-focused. Do you have any suggestions/thoughts?
15. What are some strategies and recommendations you would like included in our final report?
16. Who else in the community should we be talking to? (*Follow-up: would you feel comfortable with doing an e-introduction to us?*)
17. Anything else you would like to add.
18. Do you have any questions/comments for us?

End by thanking the informant again for his/her time!

APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND: 10 MINUTES

Hi everyone, my name is _____. I'll be the facilitator of our group discussion today. I am working with Peel Newcomer Strategy Group to better understand your needs as International Students living and studying either in Mississauga or Brampton. This project will allow PNSG and its partners to gather information and data to identify barriers and gaps in the system, and how to create better systems for international students.

Our discussion today will take about two hours and ten minutes. I understand that everyone is busy, and I will try to get everyone out in time.

Firstly, I want to thank you all for your time and participation. The most important thing to remember is that every opinion is valuable and that we're not here to make judgments, but to hear everyone's opinion and voice.

There is no right or wrong answer. I'm not here to find out how much you know but to hear your opinion and experience - what you think and why you believe what you believe. And you can't be wrong about what your opinion is. Does this make sense? **(Check group for head nodding/signs of consent)**

In discussion groups like this, some people have a lot to say and others are more shy. I'm here to make sure that we hear from everyone. I might call on you if you aren't speaking or I might not call on you right away so that we make sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and share their opinions. Is that okay?

I also want to ask everyone to be respectful of each other. Even if you hear things that you disagree with, it is really important that we do not disrespect other peoples' opinions. Feel free to give a different opinion, but if we do not let everyone share their thoughts, we will be missing key information for our report.

I'm going to be audio recording this discussion to help me remember what everyone has said. Please try and speak up and one at a time so that your voices can be captured clearly on tape.

This tape will not be shared with anyone outside of our project team, and no one individual will be identified in our report. I will also ask that what is said in this room stays in this room; we would like to respect everyone's privacy and confidentiality.

Does everyone understand our rules?

(Prompt if necessary)

Before we start, I would like to know each of you a little better. Please introduce yourself by sharing your name, your country of origin, and your field of study. We'll go around the table so everyone can have a turn. I'll go first; as I said, I'm _____, my country of origin is _____ and I studied _____.

Time: 0:15

EXPECTATIONS: 15 MINUTES

*In this section, you are trying to create a **bond** with the participants, help them open up, and talk about their **expectations** as a newcomer to Peel.*

1. Can you tell me more about why you chose to study in Mississauga/Brampton?
2. Based on information you found about Mississauga/Brampton, what were your expectations before your arrival?
3. Did your expectations change after moving to Mississauga/Brampton? How? What matched your expectations? What was different?

Time: 0:30 minutes

EDUCATION: 20 MINUTES

*In this section, you are trying to get the participants to **describe** the steps they took finding schools, and their **experience** with their educational path.*

4. What steps did you take to look for universities/colleges in Canada? (*Possible prompt: agencies, Internet, word of mouth*) What was the first step?
5. Why were your reasons for choosing a school in Mississauga or Brampton?
6. Which tools (recruitment agency, Internet, friends) were most helpful in choosing where to study? Why? (*Prompt: what made this support helpful?*)
7. What tool or source of information did you find frustrating or difficult to understand?
8. What would have made your experience better? (*Prompts/Follow-up questions: what kind of information do you wish you had?*)

Time: 45 minutes

LIVING SITUATION: 25 MINUTES

*In this section, you are getting the participants to **describe** their day-to-day realities and challenges.*

9. For those of you living off-campus, how did you find your housing?
10. Do you feel your current housing is affordable? Safe? (*Prompt: We know that safety can mean a whole host of things, and these range from racism to personal safety. We are trying to understand if you feel comfortable or satisfied with your current housing situation.*)
11. Are you close to school, groceries, and your friends/family? How often do you see your family? Your friends?
12. Are health and recreation resources available to you close to home?
13. What are some benefits to where you live? What are some challenges? Is your housing close to your family or community?
14. How well does the transportation system meet your needs? (*Prompt: encourage comparison between Peel/Toronto, and Peel/country of origin*)
 - What is your primary method of transportation? (Walking, public transit, cycling, car, ride

- with friends or family, other)
- For getting to and from school
- For other purposes, such as socializing, shopping, etc.

OBTAINING/RETAINING EMPLOYMENT: 25 MINUTES

*In this section, you are getting the participants to **describe** their employment experience.*

15. How many of you are currently working or planning on working while enrolled in school? (*Count hands.*)
16. For those of you who work or are planning to work while studying, how did or would you find a job? Did or would you use any on- or off-campus resources (i.e. agencies, websites, word of mouth)? What resources did or would you use to find your jobs?
 - Possible prompt for third or fourth year students: Are you in the process of obtaining your work permit?
17. Is the work that you are doing or hoping to do in your field of study?
18. What did you have to do to be qualified for the job? Did you take additional classes/courses to upgrade your skills?
19. How did you prepare for working in Canada? Did anyone help you? If so, who?
20. Are there other factors that made it possible to find and keep your job? (*This question is seeking to understand access barriers to employment. Prompts: For example, the hours of the day that your employer needed you to be at work, transportation to your job site?*)
21. Do you see yourself holding your position as you advance in your studies? Why or why not?
22. Is your job income necessary for getting by day-to-day? How does it support you (housing, food, leisure activity, savings, transportation, send money home, etc.)?
23. If you are not working but would like to work, what might help you obtain the job that you want?

Time: 1:10

OBTAINING VISA: 15 MINUTES

In this section, you are trying to get participants to describe their immigration process to come and study in Canada.

24. Can you describe your experience of the process to come and study in Brampton/Mississauga? (*Was it difficult? Straightforward? Confusing?*)
25. Was there any particular source of information that was especially useful?
26. Was there any part of your experience that was difficult or changing to understand? What made it difficult?
27. What advice would you give to someone coming to study in Brampton or Mississauga?

SERVICE PROVISION: 30 MINUTES

In this section, you are trying to get participants to describe their ability to access community services.

28. If you need help with something, whether it has to do with school or your personal life, where do you go? Who do you ask? *(Prompt: cultural spaces, prayer/religious spaces, relatives, social media, etc.)*
29. Are there opportunities outside of your classroom to interact with domestic/Canadian students? Do you engage in these opportunities? Why or why not?
30. Do you know about on-campus offices or services for international students to use? *(Count yes and nos.)*
31. What services do you use or find useful?
32. Was there a service that you used on-campus that you found difficult or challenging? Can you tell me more about the service and what made it a difficult experience?
33. Have you accessed programs or services off-campus? *(Count yes and nos.)*
34. Why did you decide to access off-campus supports instead of on-campus supports?
35. Are there any challenges with accessing off-campus supports? *(Transportation, hours, etc.)*
36. Are there any supports or services you need that aren't available to you either on-campus or off-campus?

Time: 1:40

THE FUTURE: 20 MINUTES

In this section, you are trying to get the participants to think about their future and what they would need to be successful in Peel.

37. What are your future plans for your stay in Mississauga or Brampton? *(Would you like to stay in Peel? Work? Go back? Travel? Bring family to Peel?)*
 - If you choose not to stay in Mississauga or Brampton, do you intend to stay in Canada? What influences that decision?
38. What challenges do you think might stop you from completing this plan?
39. What changes should the government make to make things better for international students?
40. Do you feel like you belong in Mississauga or Brampton? What would make it easier to feel like you belong here? *(Prompt: Does it feel like home? What makes it feel like home? What would make it feel more like home?)*

Time: 2:00

CLOSING: 10 MINUTES

Is there anything else you think is important for us to know?

Thanks so much for participating. We'll be gathering all of this information together and bringing it back to you and the rest of the community as part of the project.

APPENDIX 5: FOCUS GROUP FLYER



Attention: International Students!

Peel Newcomer Strategy Group, Public Interest & Peel Multicultural Council would love to hear from you



Join the focus group to tell us:

- Problems that international students face
- How Government and Non-Government organizations can help
- What Colleges/Universities/Local community can do to assist students better
- Any other valuable knowledge you may want to share



Date: Saturday, *May 2017 **Time:** 3:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.



Venue: South Fletcher's Sportsplex 500 Ray Lawson Blvd, Brampton, ON L6Y 5B3



Register at ukhjit@peelmc.com or 905-819-1144x235



*Refreshment available

*Each participant will receive \$15.00 honorarium

APPENDIX 6: FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) is conducting a needs assessment to better understand the needs of International Students. This project will help PNSG and its partners understand and develop strategies to support international students in shaping Peel. We are asking you to participate in this project and to provide your opinion on these challenges.

PNSG is requesting your participation in this project because you self-identify as an international student, who is currently residing and in an accredited post-secondary educational program in Peel.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, this will not have any impact on programs and services you receive now or in the future from any of the agencies associated with PNSG.

The focus group will take approximately 2 hours of your time and will be audiotaped so that our partner, Public Interest can review the discussion after it is complete. The facilitator will also be taking detailed notes during the discussion.

You will be asked to complete a short survey about yourself at the beginning of the focus group so that we can know a little bit about the residents who participated. You do not have to answer this survey if you do not want to.

Risks and Benefits: There are no risks in your participation; however, benefit may come to you and many international students with the outcome of the final report by PNSG in identifying the barriers, gaps, challenges and needs of international students in Peel.

Confidentiality: Focus group discussion will remain confidential between you, PNSG, and Public Interest. We are asking that you respect the confidentiality of the other participants and do not discuss what they said outside of the group.

Security: The focus group materials (written discussion notes, audio-tapes etc.) will be kept locked at Public Interest including computer files. Only members of the project team will have access to these materials. They will provide PNSG with written summaries of the project and these reports. This report will not identify any of the participants and once the report is completed any or all material written, taped or on computer will be destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns about this focus group, please contact:

Subhi Tarim

Specialist, Research and Policy
Peel Newcomer Strategy Group
Tel: 905- 276-0008 ext.113

OR

Neemarie Alam

Team Lead
Public Interest
Tel: 416-531-4250

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I, _____, have read the above information about the Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) project being conducted by Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG) and their consultant, Public Interest. I also understand that my participation is voluntary. I understand that I can choose not to answer any of the questions and that I can choose to leave the focus group at any time.

I agree to participate in the PNSG International Students Needs Assessment focus group.

Participant's Signature

Date: _____

Date

Signature of Public Interest moderator

APPENDIX 7: FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please fill out this brief survey about yourself. This information will help us understand who participated in the focus group. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions below.

1) **How old are you?** _____

2) **Gender:**

- Male
- Female
- Transgendered
- Non-binary
- Intersex
- Other: _____
- Prefer not to say

3) **Where were you born?** _____

4) **What year did you arrive to Canada?** _____

5) **What languages do you speak or understand outside of English?** _____

6) **Where do you live?**

- Mississauga
- Brampton

7) **What is your major/area of study?**

8) **Are you currently enrolled in:**

- University
- College
- Post-graduate studies

9) **What year of your program are you currently in:**

- First (1)
- Second (2)
- Third (3)
- Fourth (4)

8) What is your best estimate of your total income, before taxes and deductions, during the year ending on December 31, 2017?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to less than \$30,000
- \$30,000 to less than \$40,000
- \$40,000 to less than \$50,000
- \$50,000 to less than \$60,000
- \$60,000 to less than \$70,000
- \$70,000 to less than \$80,000
- \$80,000 or more
- I don't know
- I do not want to answer this question

9) Are you currently...

- Employed part-time
- Employed full time
- Self-employed
- Out of work
- Unable to work (including on disability)
- Other: _____
- I don't know
- I do not want to answer this question

10) If you are employed, are you working the maximum hours permitted by your visa?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

11) Would you like to work more hours?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

12) Are you currently:

- Living on-campus
- Living off-campus

13) What is your approximate monthly expense for housing? \$_____

14) Do you currently need to travel to get to school?

- Yes
- No

15) If you answered "yes" to the question above, about how long does it take you to get to school?

- Less than 5 minutes
- 5 to 10 minutes
- 10 to 15 minutes
- 15 to 30 minutes
- More than 30 minutes

16) Are you familiar with your on-campus centre for international students?

- Yes
- No

17) Have you attended any of their programs/services?

- Yes
- No

18) What services/programs do they provide?

- Employment support, including obtaining a Social Insurance Number (SIN) card
- Work/Study permit, extension, and immigration assistance
- Scholarship/Bursary application support
- Social activities
- Peer mentoring
- Other supports: _____

19) Have you accessed programs or services off-campus?

- Yes
- No

20) What services have you accessed off-campus?

- Housing
- Health
- Immigration
- Academic support
- Employment
- Financial support

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!

APPENDIX 8: LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the two public college campuses and one university campus located in Peel, as well as private colleges throughout the Region, little is known about these students and their needs. As a result, the community and settlement organizations have little data to inform what services they provide, and how they reach out to international students.

There is little literature available specifically about international students in Peel Region. This literature illustrates some of the experiences and promising practices from selected regions elsewhere, to determine broad commonalities amongst international students related to acculturation and integration that may be applied locally.

International students generally do not qualify for services provided by the social service agencies, and consequently face potential rejection when they do attempt obtaining off-campus supports. This literature review is intended to depict the complexity of meeting their needs and explores how they can be better served.

International students are often recruited as future resources for the region and Canada. Although there is some encouragement for them to consider staying beyond their period of study, few resources are allocated for assisting in the transition and integration into Canadian citizens. The community services sector, in particular, would be well suited to provide such services and resources while they are students. The support they receive may be critical to their decision to stay in Canada and continue to contribute to Canadian society.

Ontario is well positioned to investigate international student needs and strategies to support students throughout their academic and professional careers. In 2015, there were 353,000 international students in Canada at all levels of study. 143,328, or 43 per cent of those students were in Ontario (Canadian Bureau for International Education).

International students are critical to the provincial economy, providing \$102 million annually in direct revenue and spending over \$2.1 billion in Ontario (OUSA, 2011). Additionally, international students enhance the educational and cultural environment on campus, benefitting domestic students, educational institutions, and the overall community.

These factors provide a reason to understand the international student experience, considering global research on international students and applying those lessons to Ontario.

There are several key themes that emerged from the literature:

- Acculturation challenges include language, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors (including discrimination and mental health stigma) and other practical stressors.
- The experience of acculturation is dependent on whether the country of origin is more individualistic or collectivist in nature; international students from collectivist cultures have more difficulties adjusting to the host culture.
- There is limited research on international students, with few or no longitudinal studies that map international students' experiences pre-departure, as an international student, and after graduation. There is also little to no research on educators' and domestic students' attitudes

towards international students.

- Despite the existing research on international students, few interventions have been empirically tested and shown to be effective in decreasing acculturative stress and supporting cultural adaptation.
- “International students” refers to a large and diverse body of the immigrant population. Strategies to best support them must be tailored to a variety of factors which include country of origin, but also consider socioeconomic status, pre-departure preparations, familial connections to host country, and previous exposure to other cultures.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PROFILE

Several factors influence an international student’s adjustment process, including age, homesickness, finances, housing, cultural background, and exposure to discrimination. Researchers found that international students from Western countries adjusted more easily as international students in other Western countries than International students from the Eastern Hemisphere (Senyshyn et al., 2000).

Based on the 2015 Canadian Bureau for International Education report, the numbers of international students are increasing overall. Canada receives higher numbers of male students than female. China and India are the leading two source countries for international students. Canada also receives large numbers of students from South Korea, France, and Saudi Arabia. Most of the international students come from upper-middle and high-income backgrounds, and both the numbers of, and opportunities for lower-income families are declining (OUSA, 2011). It is important to note, however, that international students may remain vulnerable regardless of their families’ level of income.

BENEFITS OF RECRUITING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The Canadian Government, through their aggressive recruitment of international students, assumes that these students are “ideal” immigrants. With their Canadian postsecondary education, multilingual proficiency, Canadian work experience, and previous adjustment to Canadian society and culture, international students are thought to integrate seamlessly into the Canadian labour market (Scott et al., 2015). International students also help address the shortages of skilled labour, reduce the “innovation gap” and increase the capacity for long-term research. They replace the aging and retiring working population as highly qualified professionals in the skilled trades (Government of Canada, 2014).

Recruiting international students provides significant economic benefit. According to the 2011 Ontario Undergraduate Students Association report, “the provincial government derives \$102 million annually in direct revenue from all 66,000 international students studying in Ontario, and these students spend over \$2.1 billion in Ontario.”

There are social benefits as well. International students are thought to bring diversity of thought and learning to academic environments. Integration with domestic students encourages knowledge exchange and intercultural competence, increasing the domestic student populations’ capacity to compete in the global workforce. The institution also benefits, as their reputation improves both domestically and internationally (Playford & Safdar, 2007).

THEMES

FACTORS AFFECTING ACCULTURATION

Adjustment periods for international students vary according to a number of different factors, including age, cultural background, homesickness, finances, and housing. Women also encountered more challenges in acculturation than men (Senyshyn & Warford, 2000).

The process of acculturation adds additional stress for international students, who may also face difficulties as a result of differences in language, cultural expectations, physical appearances, and environment. The stress experienced by incoming visa students may be presumed to increase relative to cultural difference between host country and country of origin (Chataway & Berry, 1989).

Several reports also examine the challenges faced by students who come from more collectivistic cultures and immigrate to more individualistic cultures (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Mori, 2000; Guo & Chase, 2011). These students are suddenly tasked with navigating an entirely different social structure, comprehending societal mores and observing social etiquette that are unfamiliar to them, and some of which may even be at odds with their home culture.

Many international students do not avail themselves of the supports provided in adjusting to their cultural context, which can have an impact on the acculturation process and result in poorer mental health (Scott et al., 2015)

Stress factors experienced by international students are explored below.

STRESS FACTORS EXPERIENCED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Language

Consistently, throughout the literature, students cited language as their primary concern (Mori, 2000; Scott et al., 2015) to adjusting to academic life in English-speaking countries. For many international students, English is their second or third language. While they are often admitted into university or college based on their linguistic skills, they struggle in both academic and sociocultural domains (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Scott et al., 2015; Lewthwaite, 1997).

Academically, international students struggle with managing their workload in English. Most are unaware of, or have insufficient access to on-campus support programs and services; even when they do access them during their early academic career, they continue to struggle with specialized vocabulary in their later years (Scott et al., 2015).

International students are also challenged with language comprehension and understanding communication patterns, which are different from simple proficiency (Scott et al., 2015). Simple proficiency, or being able to understand and limitedly express oneself in English, is a different skill from linking disparate thoughts, applying a level of analysis to thoughts (critical thinking), and then expressing them. In countries where students learn by rote memorization, international students face the additional challenge of understanding the expectations of the academic environment; they have to incorporate classroom lessons with their readings, generate and report their own thoughts, and fulfill academic tasks such as writing (Lewthwaite, 1997).

Language also presents sociocultural barriers to students. It affects their ability to communicate with fellow students, their confidence both academically and socially, and how quickly they adjust to life

on campus. It also limits their ability to independently seek supports, both on- and off-campus; for some students, language challenges result in rarely leaving their campuses for supports, resulting in limited public interactions (Smith & Khawaja; 2011; Scott et al, 2015; Lewthwaite, 1997; Guo & Chase, 2011).

Understanding implicit “rules for speaking” and “turn taking” may also impede their ability to participate both in academic lectures and seminars and in social events (Lewthwaite, 1997).

It is important to note that the focus on language does not blame the student for language deficiencies, and instead, emphasizes communication across cultures (Guo & Chase, 2011).

Educational Stressors

Overall, international students in several studies spoke positively about the caliber of their academic experience. In Canada, several international students also noted a high level of interaction between themselves and on-campus program and services directed at International students (Scott et al, 2015).

Some international students experience disappointment as they “also encounter a mismatch in expectations regarding the quality and efficiency of services provided by educational institutions” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, 703). They may also have difficulty adjusting to their host country’s teaching style. Lectures, in particular, were challenging for international students; some had difficulty following their professor’s speed and language, while others had limited English language ability (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 2006). International students also feel tension in understanding and utilizing appropriate discourse in establishing academic networks (Lewthwaite, 1997)

For some international students, expectations from their parents, broader families, sponsors, and even their countries, result in high academic pressure (Mori, 2000; Lewthwaite, 1997). Students may also under-report academic stress due to cultural stigma associated with anxiety; they may not want to be perceived as weak (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Mori, 2000).

Financial hardships

International students globally pay more than their domestic counterparts to attend university, and the burden of financing their education is increasingly difficult. The lack of regulation surrounding international student tuition and limited need-based financial assistance makes it difficult to ensure that international students are being charged fairly for their education. The 2011 study by Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) found “only 9 of 20 [emergency loans and bursaries] provide any form of up-front, need-based assistance, and usually only to a maximum of one or two thousand dollars” (p. 13). This amount is insignificant in comparison to the total annual tuition and living expenses.

Tuition, living expenses, and lack of financial supports reduce the number of qualified middle- and low-income students who are pursuing post-secondary education in Ontario (OUSA, 2011)

Sociocultural Stressors

The literature indicates that international students are concerned about their capacity to form and maintain interpersonal relationships in their host country (Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

In Lewthwaite’s 1997 study, based on twelve New Zealand post-graduate interviews, international students identified some of the challenges of trying to establish relationships with students from the

host country. Pre-departure, they did not receive much information about New Zealand or their particular institution, which limited their capacity to emotionally prepare themselves. Upon arrival, they were disappointed by the limited opportunities to interact with New Zealand residents outside of their institution. The positive experiences they had during their orientation process at the beginning of the academic year did not create genuine connections that lasted outside of that particular time frame. While they were cognizant of the potential benefits of interacting with local families, they “felt trapped by the academic workload and their perceived lack of fluent social English” (p. 175). As a result, they were often on the outskirts of their host culture and did not feel like they could properly integrate in a relaxed and continual manner.

Studies also show that international students experience anxiety when trying to establish friendships with domestic students; it requires more of their time and effort, which is constrained by their academic workload and existing relationships within their own cultural cliques. Additionally, some international students were also fearful of losing their connection to their home culture, which added social pressure on creating and maintaining friendships with people of similar cultural background (Lewthwaite, 1997).

Students who left behind their wives and children were especially lonely, frustrated, and concerned for the health of their families and themselves, which contributed to their anxiety (Lewthwaite, 1997).

Mental Health

Several reports document the cumulative impact of acculturation stressors resulting in poor mental health. International students report anxiety, depression, frustration, homesickness, loneliness, social isolation, alienation, separation, and discrimination associated with the demands of acculturation and managing their academic work. Unfortunately, no longitudinal studies were identified that follow international students through their academic and post-graduate lives, mapping the overall mental health impact.

According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), “depression has been highlighted as one of the predominant complaints for international students presenting at counselling centres.” Studies cite isolation from their communities, lack of family support, strong individualistic cultures, and difficulty navigating the cultural and academic mores as factors (Smith & Khawaja; 2011; Scott et al, 2015; Lewthwaite, 1997; Guo & Chase, 2011; Mori, 2000).

Racism/Discrimination

Several studies explored racism and discrimination, often perceived, as important to the acculturation process.

In one study, while international students cited several examples of racism, their emotional response was “a function of the conditions of their home country” (Lewthwaite, 1997, p. 174). They distance themselves from the incidents, expressing them as “not being personal” and expressing empathy with native residents who are frustrated with immigrant presence. International students who experience violence and political unrest in their home countries tend to minimize racist incidents (Lewthwaite, 1997).

International students also expressed disappointment with racist attitudes in the academic environment, anticipating that educators would be more welcoming and open. While the literature reflects the need for international students to prepare themselves for their host country’s culture,

there are few articles that recommend that educational institutions review their practices or mandate cultural awareness of its educators and administration.

Particularly relevant to Ontario, international students in one Ontario-based study also reported feeling discriminated against by potential employers, who may lack experience working with international students and may not understand the benefits of an intercultural workplace:

“...Many participants spoke of how inadequate employment opportunities in their field during their program of studies hurt their chances of finding suitable work in Canada. However, this was not students’ only perceived disadvantage. International students reporting feeling discriminated against because they believed potential employers are biased against hiring international students because employers lack experience working with international students and also do not appreciate the benefits of an intercultural workforce. Additionally, international students believed employers were biased against hiring international students because of their preconceived notions that international students would create an administrative burden due to paper work and dealing with government agencies” (Scott et al., 2015).

COPING WITH ACCULTURATION

The literature suggests three possible interventions for coping: 1) emotional preparation pre-departure; 2) established social support systems; and 3) positive on-campus relationships with international student support systems and programs. There are also supports identified in the literature that can substantially mitigate the factors explored above.

Pre-departure Preparation

Several studies cite the need for international students to prepare themselves emotionally and mentally for their host country. Recommendations include student-initiated research, information provided by educational institutions and host countries, and opportunities to practice social responses to scenarios they anticipate will occur during their stay in their host country (Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

Establishing social supports and positive on-campus relationships

The research indicates that students currently use a variety of supports to meet their needs.

The use of counselling and academic services varies throughout the research. Chataway and Berry’s study noted that Chinese students, particularly those who associate predominantly with the Chinese community, used counselling and academic services as often as domestic students. Chataway and Berry hypothesized that these students “did not experience enough social support from their friends” (p. 306) The study also showed that Asian international students used less positive thinking coping strategies and less positive methods to reduce their stress, such as drug and alcohol use.

Lewthwaite’s 1997 study, however, contradicts this finding, stating that “none had used the counselling service” (p. 180). Lewthwaite’s study found that international students, particularly those from Asian backgrounds, do not distinguish between psychological counselling, advising, and other functions performed by the international student offices. A broad range of individuals, from hostel supervisory and host families to academic supervisors and mentors, serve as informal “counsellors” providing advice and direction. They did note, however, that students in their study did not report a fear of using counselling services, even for sensitive topics such as educational, financial, and

personal issues.

Smith and Khawaja's 2011 study supports the previous two studies mentioned above, noting the cultural importance placed on emotional control. Seeking professional and/or peer support may then imply an inability to manage emotions, and result in cultural shame and embarrassment. This may lead to why some students are more comfortable using a range of informal (and impersonal) supports for advice. Unfortunately, the practice of emotional suppression leads to increased vulnerability to depression and anxiety, resulting in poor mental health.

Hands-on Support

While there are broader identified supports needed by international students, there is research that suggests that international students need hands-on support to navigate unfamiliar cultural environments. These needs are somewhat nuanced from broader newcomer needs, and speak to the particulars of the student experience in a foreign country.

Key identified support includes:

- Transportation support, including airport pick up
- Orientation programs past the first year of study
- Access to language training, particularly academic vernacular and colloquial slang
- Guided and tailored career programming
- Academic and/or Professional Counselling related to:
 - Uncertainty of the future
 - Homesickness
 - Loneliness
 - Problems from home
 - Financial challenges including work restrictions and higher tuition fees
 - Academic challenges
 - General adaptation difficulties (different food, climate)
- In-person support to understand and navigate health insurance, banking, taxes, visa and immigration, work permits, housing/ accommodation, and financial aid

IDENTIFIED PRACTICES IN THE LITERATURE

While the literature discusses some of the varied challenges experienced by international students, universities globally are simultaneously developing creative approaches to meet these challenges. Of particular interest are identified practices at Canadian Universities, outlined in the chart below.

University	Program Name	Description
McMaster University	International Mentorship Program	Matches new international students with an upper-year international or domestic student who acts as a “peer guide”
University of Western Ontario	International Student Work Opportunity	Offers international students paid part-time employment on-campus and in the community, providing them with a source of financial assistance
University of Waterloo	Emergency bursaries	Up to \$3,000 to international students
University of Toronto	English Conversation Program	Designed specifically to ensure international students who speak English as a second language are comfortable with their communication abilities
University of British Columbia	Professional Development Program for International Teaching Assistants (PDITA)	Focuses on student integration, emphasizing cross-cultural communication and effective teaching strategies

(OUSA, 2011; Ramsey et. al, 2006)

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE REVIEWED

There are significant gaps in the literature reviewed.

Despite greater weight being placed on articles that considered the Canadian context, none of these articles examined specifically international student life and supports in suburban communities.

There are no longitudinal studies of international students reviewed that examine the life of international students pre-adjustment, through the adjustment process, and post-adjustment. Most of the literatures studies the process of adjustment. Literature related to the employability of postsecondary international students reference some aspects of the post-adjustment period. While some of the international students engaged throughout the literature spoke to their lives in their countries of origin, this information was never empirically correlated to their adjustment process.

The methodology throughout literature varied from article to article. There is also broad variance in sample size. It is difficult to correct for this variance in data analysis; some of the information becomes unintentionally generalized in theming.

Adding to the complexity of understanding international students is the assumption throughout the literature that international students are a largely homogenous group. Even in ethno-specific papers, students are assumed to be similar throughout large regions of the world. For example, the nomenclature of “South Asian” students is used broadly, with articles using varied definitions of which countries constitute South Asia. Additionally, articles assume homogeneity throughout countries such as India, one of the major sources for international students in Canada. This

assumption does not account for India's rich diversity of religions, languages and cultural practices that vary from region to region, and can contribute greatly to the adjustment process.

Very few articles considered the specific challenges of female international students, or considered factors that contributed to greater numbers of male international students studying in Canada.

Of particular importance to this project is the lack of distinction in the article of on- and off-campus supports. While some articles mention on-campus supports, none of the articles reviewed specifically mention off-campus non-profit support organizations. If students are leaving campus for support from social service agencies, this phenomenon is not being tracked or studied extensively.

There are also no articles reviewed that speak to the public perception of international students. While some of the articles highlight international students' interaction with the general public, particularly related to racism and discrimination, there are no studies reviewed that mention how the general public (or even communities with large populations of international students) actually view international students specifically.

The articles mostly speak to international students as young, single individuals immigrating on their own. Only one article reviewed mentions family units, defined as students who are married or have children. Their needs, therefore, are not captured in this review.

ANALYSIS

The common themes identified in this literature review are intended to support service providers and community organizations in Peel Region in better understanding international students and their needs.

Social service organizations, higher education institutions, and the multiple levels of government play a significant role in providing information, guidance, and support in helping international students navigate unfamiliar environment.

The literature review suggests that there are several points of intervention throughout an international student's academic career that are conducive to establishing strong social supports and shortening the adjustment period. Some of these points of intervention are explored below.

International students may have functional capacity in English, but may struggle with academic language used in critical thinking, particularly if they have come from countries whose education is based on rote memorization. There may be value for institutional providers to offer resources to help students acquire these specific language skills.

Institutions and community organizations may be in a position to support students in coping with academic stress and anxiety resulting from academic expectations, as well as reluctance to share such anxiety. For example, programs that check in with students about such stresses in a way that reduces a sense of stigma about asking for help may be explored.

Once international students have arrived and received their orientation, many of their early social relationships may not persist, resulting in sociocultural stress. Academic pressures may compound this stress. Institutions and community organizations may provide some benefit through programming and resources that reduce such stress by creating social opportunities and advising students of the benefits of a healthy academic and social life balance.

International students cite isolation from their communities, lack of family support, strong individualistic cultures, and difficulty navigating the cultural and academic mores as contributors to depression and poor mental health. Programs and resources that alleviate any of these conditions may help students to perform better and integrate better, and consequently improve their overall experiences.

In the literature, international students focus on racism and discrimination particularly in relation to employment, and how it may limit opportunities for them. Programs and resources that connect students with employers through internships and coop programs could potentially break down prejudices and assure long-term integration and employment.

The research suggests an opportunity for institutions to better prepare students before their arrival with introductions to local culture, as well as opportunities to practice social interaction.

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APPENDIX 10: FOCUS GROUP & INTERVIEW GUIDE

FOCUS GROUP & INTERVIEW GUIDE USED BY PNSG FOR ADDITIONAL DATA COLLECTION

Hi everyone, my name is _____. I'll be the facilitator of our group discussion today. I am working with Peel Newcomer Strategy Group to better understand your needs as International Students living and studying either in Mississauga or Brampton. This project will allow PNSG and its partners to gather information and data to identify barriers and gaps in the system, and how to create better systems for international students.

Our discussion today will take about an hour and half. I understand that everyone is busy, and I will try to get everyone out in time.

Firstly, I want to thank you all for your time and participation. The most important thing to remember is that every opinion is valuable and that we're not here to make judgments, but to hear everyone's opinion and voice.

There is no right or wrong answer. I'm not here to find out how much you know but to hear your opinion and experience - what you think and why you believe what you believe. And you can't be wrong about what your opinion is. Does this make sense?

In discussion groups like this, some people have a lot to say and others are more shy. I'm here to make sure that we hear from everyone. I might call on you if you aren't speaking or I might not call on you right away so that we make sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and share their opinions. Is that okay?

I also want to ask everyone to be respectful of each other. Even if you hear things that you disagree with, it is really important that we do not disrespect other peoples' opinions. Feel free to give a different opinion, but if we do not let everyone share their thoughts, we will be missing key information for our report.

I'm going to be audio recording this discussion to help me remember what everyone has said. Please try and speak up and one at a time so that your voices can be captured clearly on tape.

This tape will not be shared with anyone outside of our project team, and no one individual will be identified in our report. I will also ask that what is said in this room stays in this room; we would like to respect everyone's privacy and confidentiality.

If you feel uncomfortable at any point, feel free to leave the room, put yourself together and come back or not come back.

We will provide you with a small honorarium at the end of the FG.

IMMIGRATION PROCESS

EXPECTATIONS

1. Did you know anyone in Mississauga/Brampton prior to arriving here? What were your expectation?

OBTAINING VISA

In this section, you are trying to get participants to describe their immigration process to come and study in Canada.

2. Can you describe your experience of the process to come and study in Brampton/Mississauga? Was there any part of your experience that was difficult or challenging to understand? What made it difficult?
3. What advice would you give to someone coming to study in Brampton or Mississauga?

DECIDING ON SCHOOL

*In this section, you are trying to get the participants to **describe** the steps they took finding schools, and their **experience** with their educational path.*

4. What tool or source of information did you find frustrating or difficult to understand? What would have made your experience better?

LIVING SITUATION

5. For those of you living off-campus, how did you find your housing? *And* Was it difficult to find housing? (racism, discrimination from the landlord)
6. Are you close to school, groceries, and your friends/family? How about health and recreation resources available to you close to home?
7. How well does the transportation system meet your needs?

SERVICE PROVISION

In this section, you are trying to get participants to describe their ability to access community services.

8. If you need help with something, whether it has to do with school or your personal life, where do you go? Who do you ask? (*Prompt: cultural spaces, prayer/religious spaces, relatives, social media, etc.*)
9. Do you know about on-campus offices or services for international students to use? How did you know about them? What services do you use or find useful? (such as counselling)
10. Was there a service that you used on-campus that you found difficult or challenging? Can you tell me more about the service and what made it a difficult experience?
11. Have you accessed programs or services off-campus? How did you know about these services?
12. Why did you decide to access off-campus supports instead of on-campus supports?
13. Are there any challenges with accessing off-campus supports? (*Transportation, hours, etc.*)
14. Are there any supports or services you need that aren't available to you either on-campus or off-campus? (e.g. Childcare)

OBTAINING/RETAINING EMPLOYMENT

*In this section, you are getting the participants to **describe** their employment experience.*

15. How many of you are currently working or planning on working while enrolled in school? (*Count hands.*)
16. For those of you who work or are planning to work while studying, how did or would you find a job? Did or would you use any on- or off-campus resources (i.e. agencies, websites, word of mouth)? What resources did or would you use to find your jobs?
17. Are there other factors that made it impossible to find a job? If you have/had a job, is/was it difficult to keep your job (e.g. Soft skills, distance, and transportation)? (Retaining Employment)
18. Do you see yourself holding your position as you advance in your studies? Why or why not? (Retaining Employment)
19. Do you feel your journey so far as an international student has allowed you to gain employment that meets your basic needs?

THE FUTURE

In this section, you are trying to get the participants to think about their future and what they would need to be successful in Peel.

20. What changes should the government make to make things better for international students?
21. Do you feel like you belong in Mississauga or Brampton? What would make it easier to feel like you belong here? And do you intend to stay in Mississauga or Canada after graduation?
22. Have you tried to apply for immigration and did you find the process easy to follow?

CLOSING:

Think about your journey from the initial application and admission to arrival, induction and academic and social supports along the way – how could things be done better?

Is there anything else you think is important for us to know?

Thanks so much for participating. We'll be gathering all of this information together and bringing it back to you and the rest of the community as part of the project.