



#globalvoices

ASSU's Report on the Experience of International Students at U of T

Background

In late 2014, in response to concerns about the undergraduate experience for international students, the ASSU Executive launched the Global Voices campaign. This campaign was aimed at pinpointing the exact issues facing international students and proposing solutions to these problems. In order to determine these issues, as part of the campaign, ASSU launched a survey in November of 2014. The survey closed at the end of the year and received 38 responses. This report will summarize what the respondents had to say.

Questions:

Why did you decide to come to U of T? Would you choose U of T again if you had the choice?

Many students indicated that they came to U of T mainly for its global reputation and prestige. Some considered the price of tuition (compared to higher priced UK and US schools), the opportunity to immigrate to Canada and the desire to live in a new city. Most students indicated that they would choose U of T again if given the opportunity, however still cited high tuition fees and “a cutthroat” environment as causing frustration.

Did you have any concerns before you attended U of T? Were these concerns addressed once you arrived?

Students had concerns with regards to navigating rules and academic policies like those pertaining to courses, breadth requirements, and how the college system works. They also had concerns about adapting to the city, and finding friends in a new country. Generally, the concerns about fitting-in dissipated thanks to orientation and other services. Students found friends and adapted quickly. That said, others had concerns with regards to the high fees paid. These students expressed disappointment and said that these concerns with regards to fees were not taken seriously, nor was there any financial aid in the form of scholarships or bursaries available to them.

Have you experienced any academic difficulties and have you received sufficient support and resources from the university?

Some students reported having academic difficulties while others did not. Among those who reported having difficulties, one of the main concerns relayed was that academic resources were difficult to find or had barriers preventing access to them (long wait times, etc.) Once students gained access to these resources, most reported a satisfactory experience. The writing centres in particular received good reviews.

Do you feel like the university does enough to support the mental health of international students?

Of the student who reported mental health difficulties and accessibility needs, few students had positive things to say. Student complained that resources for mental health were poorly advertised and when it came to accessing these resources, they were not very helpful. Students expressed frustration with the CAPS service, complaining of long wait times. One student explained that she had to pay for private counseling after a sexual assault incident because CAPS was so inaccessible. Other students said that the registrar was not much help in this regard either, with meetings focusing too heavily on academics. Finally, while students believe that there needs to be a focus on international students, they warn against apply a “one size fit all” model – which some feel is being applied at present.

Did you experience culture shock? If yes, how could U of T have helped?

Most students reported having little to no culture shock. If they did, they added that they quickly adjusted thanks to programs and resources run in part by the CIE – which students added should be promoted more.

Before arriving in Canada, did you think you would have universal health care coverage? Was it part of your decision making process when choosing U of T?

Almost no students said that health care coverage factored into their decision when coming to U of T. Some were not aware that they had UHIP; in some cases, one student bought expensive health insurance whereas others avoided clinics totally. Others said that UHIP at times can be restrictive and can pose issues in terms of hospital coverage. No students seemed to think that they would have universal health care (OHIP) when they arrived.

Did you have trouble finding affordable housing? Did you feel you had enough information about Toronto’s housing market to make an informed decision about housing?

Some students were in residence so this question did not apply to them. Of those who tried to look for housing, they expressed frustration with the process. Often times they did not have the right information and were exploited into giving money up front to the landlord because they were international students. Students reported housing being grossly expensive and inaccessible. They said that resources on housing need to be promoted more but those who found Housing Services at U of T generally reported having a very good experience.

Do you pay international fees? Have you faced any financial difficulties paying for U of T?

Students were almost unanimous in this response; international fees are too high. Often, students do not come from wealthy families and their families have to take out loans to pay for their education. This adds additional stress to their university experience. The way Canada's visa requirements are set up also provides a burden in the sense that students are required to show that they can pay for one year's worth of tuition before they enroll. They are also required to pay 90% of the tuition up front and this cannot be deferred. Many students reported that paying on time, especially considering the amount of money that has to be transferred internationally was a difficult process. They complain that despite not being from families of wealth and privilege, they are not given access to scholarships, awards and bursaries.

Other comments:

Some students expressed disappointment at the fact that international students are barred from running for Governing Council. Another called for changes to the CIE, complaining that it is too heavily focused on study abroad opportunities for students as opposed to concerns for international students.

Focus Groups:

After conducting a survey, two focus groups were held. Students said that there should be more academic workshops held to orient students to the way of working at U of T. They said that the orientation should be changed to reflect this. In addition to this, they pointed out the change in climate being an issue for some; students should be told what the weather will be like and not assume they know and direct them to places to get winter clothing.

In addition to that, students requested that international students be given a list of nearby medical and emergency services (pharmacies, dentists, doctors, etc.) as well as a list of what hospitals UHIP covers. Finally, they also expressed a wish to have a councilor that is freely available for international students to go see on a drop in basis.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration everything that has been said; the ASSU executive is recommending that the faculty take the following steps to make the international student experience a better one.

- Create a distinct department within the Faculty of Arts and Science that deals solely with the needs of international students. An administrative position has been created, and this is a positive first step. However, a separate division is necessary to deal with the needs of the international student community. CIE and admittedly, the Faculty itself at the moment are too focused on out going opportunities for students. Balancing this with the needs of a different, separate undergraduate population is a difficult task. That is why we are recommending the creation of this department.
- We recognize that the undertaking of creating such a department would require considerable resources. Therefore, as a first step, we recommend that a working group be created to look into these issues further, with the end goal of creating a separate department for international students.
- We also recommend that resources be promoted to students better. Specifically, we recognize that there is a currently a deficit of materials that students receive during orientation week. We recommend that concise tailored packages containing relevant information be sent to international students and that a separate orientation (which could be worked into the college orientations) be created tailoring specifically to the needs of international students. As students have pointed out, the resources may be excellent but finding them is a challenge.
- We strongly recommend that the Faculty consider creating awards and bursaries for international students and consider modifying the amount necessary to be paid for international students to be enrolled in courses.

A lot of the issues presented stem from root problems that all students have to deal with. Large class sizes, a confusing bureaucracy and limited supports for mental health, for example, all pose challenges for students. However, these challenges may manifest themselves differently based on a students' lived experience and this may be affected by their international or domestic status. Therefore, not only is it imperative that the root causes for these problems be addressed, but that the effects they have on different groups of students are monitored.

The Faculty of Arts and Science charge international students a large sum of money to be educated at the University of Toronto. ASSU, on principle, disagrees with the practice of charging domestic and international students a different rate – though we understand that budgetary constraints have created this situation. That said, since international students are paying such a large sum, it is an obligation of the Faculty to provide a high-quality education. Students recognized this when they said they came to U of T for its prestige, and indeed, U of T has courses and opportunities that students can benefit from. However, increasingly students have noticed a decline in this quality and starting to question the value of their degree.

The tough question needs to be asked, is the Faculty providing a standard of education that matches the sticker price paid by international students? If the answer to this question is no, then solutions must be formulated to tackle this issue and tackle it fast.