

*INTERNATIONAL
STUDENT
CONSULTATION
REPORT*

Windsor Essex Local Immigration Partnership

International Student Survey Report

International students play a vital role in the Canadian economy and the local communities of Windsor and Essex County. As such, it is crucial to understand their experiences. The Windsor Essex Local Immigration Partnership (WE LIP) is uniquely positioned to assess the needs of international students and make recommendations to improve their experiences.

Out of the WE LIP's desire to understand the needs of international students in Windsor and Essex County, Munroe Strategic Perspective and Creative Momentum Consulting were retained to conduct research on the situation they face. This came in the form of a survey and focus groups. Nearly three hundred students participated in the survey and fifteen more in the focus group. The results were compiled into a report dated March 31, 2021, entitled "*A more welcoming community: A look at the experience of international students in Windsor-Essex.*" The survey covered various topics, including demographics, education, housing, employment, transportation, health, finances, access to services, the COVID-19 pandemic, and social connections. The results of this survey were presented to three focus groups, comprised of business interests, former and current students at both St. Clair College and the University of Windsor, and representatives of educational institutions and organizations providing social support.

Expectations of Windsor-Essex

The primary motivation that international students expressed for choosing to come to Windsor-Essex was the availability of the program they wished to study, followed by the region's affordability. However, many students communicated that Windsor-Essex did not meet the expectations they set for it before their arrival. Most commonly, this was expressed in frustration in the employment and housing markets in the region. For example, many students found that the rental market was not as affordable as expected, and there were far fewer work opportunities.

Housing

Most international students answered positively about most aspects of their housing situation. For example, most lived close to public transit, felt safe in their neighbourhood and with their roommates, and understood their rights as a tenant. However, 67 percent had difficulty finding housing and another 59 percent found that their rent was unaffordable.

Finances

A large majority of international experienced some financial worry while studying in the Windsor-Essex region. This includes 75 percent who worried about having enough money for rent, 74 percent who worried about having enough money for tuition, and 58 percent who worried about having enough money for food. To relieve the financial burden they experienced, 34 percent of students skipped meals, and another 25 percent used a food bank.

Employment

As can be expected from the above-noticed financial burden experienced by international students, it is not surprising that finding employment was an important priority. Eighty-nine percent of international students looked for work during their time studying, but only 70 percent of those searching could find a job. Sixty-eight percent were required to look for work outside of the Windsor-Essex region.

Accessing Services

One of the most significant obstacles international students face in accessing culturally appropriate services in Windsor-Essex is access to transportation. Eighty-one percent of students responded that they typically take public transit to get around. While public transit is convenient for getting to school and running errands, it is prohibitive in pursuing recreation or employment. Students

also expressed that many services, specifically financial support and employment services, were difficult to impossible to obtain.

Building Social Connections

While 84 percent of international students felt welcome in Windsor-Essex, this did not translate to feeling connected to the community. A large majority of students felt connected to their families, other international students, and friends they had before moving to Windsor-Essex. In contrast, less than half felt connected to domestic students. This is reflected in the nearly 40 percent of international students who stated that they experienced discrimination during their time in the region.

COVID-19

As the survey was conducted in 2021, many of the responses were informed by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online schooling makes it difficult to make new social connections for anyone, not to mention those who have to deal with the added pressures of discrimination and being a newcomer. The largest concern regarding the pandemic was a lack of access to personal protective equipment, which 58 percent of respondents listed as a concern. Similarly, 44 percent of students were concerned about their ability to self-isolate properly, and 40 percent were concerned about accessing health care if they contracted the virus. Another significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students was its effect on employment. Forty-four percent of students lost work hours due to COVID-19, and 23 percent lost their job.

International Student Forum

To lend more validity to the findings of the report and the priorities identified in the focus groups, the WE LIP team decided to host a forum. At this forum, the findings of the report could be presented to international students who could provide feedback, confirm whether the results

aligned with their lived experiences, and provide recommendations for how they believe the issues could be addressed. The WE LIP hosted a virtual discussion forum via Zoom on April 6, 2022, between 6:00 and 7:00 pm. The event was advertised as an opportunity for international students living in the Windsor-Essex region to share their input and experiences on living, working, and learning in the community. Promotional material for the event was created by Ronnie Haidar and distributed to international student members of the individual WE LIP team members' networks and promoted on social media. Notably, the event was featured in the March 30, 2022, edition of the University of Windsor DailyNews. Attendance was encouraged by a draw to award one of the attendees with an Amazon gift card. As a result of this promotion, over twenty international students register to attend, including two from St. Clair College.

Questions were developed by Liam Swain from the report's findings to pose to the international students at the forum. These questions came in the form of both poll and discussion questions so that data could be collected more quickly over Zoom and students could share their specific experiences. Questions covered the topics of expectations, housing, employment, transportation, social connections, and food security and were presented by referencing the relevant findings from the survey report and asking the students whether their experience aligned its conclusions.

While over twenty international students registered for the event, only nine attended. While this number was fewer than expected, it allowed for a more intimate setting where students could speak more freely and comfortably. The event began with Ronnie Haidar introducing the event and advising all attendees that we would not record the meeting so that students could speak openly and freely.

Poll Results

The first poll question concerned the topic of expectations:

In our study, we found that only 39% of students believe that they were given an accurate picture of Windsor/Essex prior to moving here for school. In your experience, did Windsor/Essex meet the expectations that you set prior to moving here?

Four of the six respondents answered that they felt that Windsor-Essex had met their expectations, while the remaining two felt that it had not. The second poll question concerned the topic of housing:

In our study, we found that only 1% of students live in on-campus housing. What is your current housing situation?

Four of the six respondents answered that they lived off-campus with people that they did not know before moving to Windsor-Essex, one of the respondents answered that they lived off-campus with family, and the final respondent selected “other.” The third poll concerned the topic of housing:

In our study, we found that 31% of students had trouble finding housing. In your experience, was it difficult to find housing near your school?

Three of the five respondents answered that they had trouble finding housing near their school, while the remaining two had not experienced such difficulty. The fourth poll question concerned the topic of housing:

In our study, we found that 29% of students found that their housing was in a state of disrepair and did not always feel safe. In your experience, have you ever felt that your housing situation was unsafe or in a state of disrepair?

To this question, two of the six (33%) respondents answered that their housing was unsafe or in a state of disrepair, while four of the six (67%) felt that their housing was safe. This result aligns

closely with the report's findings (29% and 63%, respectively). The fifth poll question concerned the topic of employment:

In our study, we found that 89% of students looked for work while in school, but of those, only 70% found a job. Of those of you who have looked for a job, did you find it difficult to find work?

Only one of the six respondents felt that it was easy to find work. This result aligns with the report's findings, which shows that 88 percent of students disagreed with the statement that "it was easy to look for work." The sixth poll question concerned the topic of employment:

In our study, students expressed a belief that their school was not concerned about the need for students to find work. Do you share the opinion that your school is not concerned about your need to find work?

Three of the five respondents felt that their school was not concerned about their need for work, while the remaining two disagreed. The seventh poll question concerned the topic of transportation:

In our study, 81% of students indicated that they typically use public transit to get around, followed by 64% who typically walk. Which of the following would you describe as your primary means of transportation?

From a list of six options, including public transit, walking, carpooling, taking a taxi or Uber, biking, or driving their own vehicle, three of five indicated that they primarily take public transit, while the remaining two primarily walk. This response aligned with the primary means of transportation described in the report. The eighth poll question concerned the topic of social connections:

In our study, 80% of international students found that they felt connected to other international students, while only 49% felt connected to domestic students. Do you feel more connected to other international students than to domestic students?

Three of the five respondents answered that they felt more connected to international students than to domestic students, while the remainder responded in the negative. The final poll question concerned the topic of food security:

In our study, we found that 58% of students were worried about having enough money for food and 34% have skipped meals to make things easier financially. In your experience, has food security been an issue during your time as a student in Windsor/Essex?

Of the five respondents to this question, only one answered that food security had not been an issue during their time as a student in Windsor-Essex.

Discussion Questions

As the forum transitioned to a discussion, it quickly became apparent that students are primarily concerned about the lack of employment opportunities and their difficulty finding housing. These priorities aligned with the priorities identified by the stakeholder focus groups who had been presented with the findings of the survey. The discussion questions were intentionally framed in an open manner so as to allow students to bring up the issues they perceived as most pressing. The first discussion question addressed the ways that international students felt that the Windsor-Essex region had failed to reach their expectations. The majority of complaints in this regard revolved around the lack of employment opportunities in the region. International students are prohibited by law from obtaining full-time employment during their study period and are only allowed to work 20 hours per week. This prevents them from obtaining valuable work experience in their fields. Many international students are in master's degree programs but cannot find employment

in their field because most employers in those fields are looking for full-time employees. International students are further restricted by their lack of Canadian job experience, which Canadian employers often find to be necessary. Additionally, finding references in Canada is a daunting task, as previous employers from back home may be limited in their ability to provide an English reference. These factors lead to financial insecurity and international students feeling obligated to accept illegal or unsafe employment.

Finding housing was another significant factor that came up in discussion. Rent prices near the University are quite high, which may lead international students to accept substandard housing that they can afford. There was an added challenge of renting a unit sight unseen so that it would be ready to move into once the student arrived in Canada. Without a trusted partner in Canada, this could result in a rental agreement being signed for housing that had been misrepresented as being in better condition than it is. Additionally, on-campus housing does not solve the problems faced by international students. Even if cost were not a barrier, the University does not have enough housing for international students, especially international undergraduates.

Recommendations

On April 26, 2022, the WE LIP team has a meeting with Marium Tolson-Murttty, the Director of Anti-Racism Organization Change at the University of Windsor, to discuss the findings of the International Student Forum. One student mentioned that they felt that the University of Windsor felt more like a corporation than a centre for education and that international students were treated as a source of income rather than as students. The University of Windsor and St. Clair College ought to take steps to improve the situation of international students, specifically in the areas of housing and employment.

Housing

In the report, the focus groups recommended that the College and University could do more to promote a minimum standard of acceptable housing. There are several ways that this could be achieved. For one, the University and College could increase their stock of on-campus housing available to international students. However, on-campus housing may be unaffordable to many international students, so this is not the only solution. Other than cost, one of the main problems that international students had finding housing was that they had no way of knowing whether a housing unit was safe or in a state of repair without seeing it in person. The University and College should expand the assistance offered to international students seeking off-campus housing. Having someone in Canada who can be trusted to determine the appropriateness of a housing unit could alleviate their concerns. International students should not feel that they are on their own while finding housing near their school.

Employment

As noted in the report and validated by the forum, many international students feel like their College or University was not concerned about their need to find work. As finding employment is often a necessity for international students to provide themselves with a minimum standard of living, their schools should do more to ensure that they can find work, especially considering the high cost of tuition. One recommendation for achieving this is through an expansion of on-campus work opportunities. As noted in the forum, international students have unique needs in their search for employment, including the time restrictions on their work eligibility, lack of Canadian references, and lack of Canadian work experiences. The University and College should expand their career services to provide support specific to these unique needs of international students.