Students weigh in on international integration

Over the past twenty years the recruitment of international students has become a key priority for many Canadian PSE institutions. Major schools have produced multi-year plans to help make themselves more international, and these plans often give priority to increasing the proportion of international students studying on their campuses. Major figures in higher ed have also warned that the recruitment of international students and the charging of higher tuition fees to this cohort can result in ethical concerns, and have called for enhanced federal guidelines to govern the enrolment of non-Canadian students in Canadian institutions.

We asked 1,400 StudentVu panelists what they thought about the growing presence of international students on campus, the domestic student-international student relationship, the proportion of international students to domestic students, and other related issues. Our panelists reported that they believed international students had a positive impact on their postsecondary experience; many also expressed support for a school population comprised of 20-40% international students, and voiced concerns about their schools' treatment of international students.

Large majority of students either supportive or neutral toward increasing international enrolment

When asked about current strategies for increasing international student enrolment in PSE, most StudentVu panelists either agreed or felt neutral about these strategies. 40% of respondents reported that they agreed with efforts to increase the proportion of international students on campus, and another 41% felt neutral or ambivalent toward these efforts. When asked what would be an appropriate proportion of international students on an institution's campus, over half of respondents (56%) said that a student body comprised of between 20% and 40% international students was appropriate.

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Panelists gave a variety of reasons for why they supported the 20-40% ratio. One student explained that "20%-30% would be a good proportion to have at an institution. It's a Canadian university after all so it would make sense to keep the majority of students Canadian." Another student saw practical advantages: "A small percentage of international students adds diversity to campus and also fills up extra seats in programs."

These reportedly ideal proportions for international student enrolment might appear high to some, including Dr. Sheila Embleton, a Distinguished Research Professor of Linguistics at York University and widely cited expert on international education strategy. She suggests that the 20% to 40% range is a notable number coming from the students surveyed because "very few Canadian universities are currently anywhere near that." She goes on to add that these results might make one "wonder how many students actually have any idea what the current proportion [of international students on their campus] is." She cites Australia's PSE sector as a place where one might more commonly see a 20% to 30% international student population on campus, but she cautions that "criticism or resistance seems to surface at that type of proportion."

In response to Embleton's questions, StudentVu conducted a follow-up survey of the same sample of participants and asked them what they believed to be the current proportion of international students on their campuses. The results confirmed that in conjunction with their high estimates for an appropriate proportion of international students, respondents reported high numbers for what they believed to be the current percentage of international students on their campus. In this follow-up survey, 57% of respondents still believed that 20% to 40% would be an appropriate proportion of international students at their schools. Yet a full 53% of respondents also believed that 20% to 40% of their schools' enrolment was *already* made up of international students, even though such a number—as Embleton points out—has been achieved by few to no Canadian schools.

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Discrepancy in Tuition Fees

The matter of tuition fee differences for international and domestic students has been a subject of recent debate at several Canadian institutions. 54% of surveyed students argued that tuition should be equal for both groups. Some of these students commented that they did not understand why there was any difference at all, with another group expressing concern that the discrepancy seemed exploitative:

> *Charging [international students] more is universities taking advantage of a loophole in the law and is done as a cash grab. International students already face enough barriers and additional expenses without having to pay tuition fees that are often 3 times higher than domestic fees.*

— StudentVu Panelist

In contrast to the 54% who believed domestic and international students should pay the same tuition fees, 45% of panelists felt that international students should pay higher fees. Among these latter respondents, several cited the tax contributions associated with Canadian citizenship as a main reason for the discrepancy:

> *If they are not paying these taxes and domestic students and their parents are, then international students should have to pay significantly higher fees so that they can catch up to what domestic students and their families have already contributed.*

— StudentVu Panelist

Successes, barriers for integration

Among the students surveyed, 37% stated that there was a social division on their institution's campus between international and domestic students. Despite this observed division, however, 61% of respondents reported that they had introduced themselves to an international student within the last three months. Nearly the same percentage of panelists (63%) said that they had socialized with an international student.

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Responses to subsequent questions revealed that while a majority of students had engaged international students socially, less than half managed to sustain this engagement in the more routine aspects of campus life. While 78% of domestic students had shared a meal with another domestic student, only 38% reported doing the same with an international student. Similarly, 76% of domestic students had studied with another domestic student, while only 40% reported studying with an international student.

For Dr. Rod Gillett, a widely published expert on international student success and Group Education Director at EduCo, these results demonstrate that "the challenge remains to find effective ways to bring students from all backgrounds together, especially given their major common interest is as students studying at the higher education

level." While he agrees that it is possible to address some of these problems through more effective "management of communal spaces like study areas and dining areas," he adds that "there is no substitute for meaningful social interaction, and nothing quite like a social event offering food to get people to mix."

Conclusion

In addition to the insights they offer, the results of this survey point toward several questions for further study. Although the majority of our StudentVu panelists cited an appropriate proportion of 20% to 40% for international student on their campuses, this number is likely to appear high to many Canadian PSE stakeholders. When we conducted a follow-up survey, we discovered that students overestimated the proportion of international students currently enrolled at their schools. Further, the survey found that domestic-international student interactions occurred at a high rate for first-time interactions, then steadily decreased with respect to the more routine aspects of student life. This finding suggests that universities might wish to concentrate more of their resources on making domestic-international student interaction a matter of habit through meaningful social events and other new forms of programming.

While this survey has focused on our panelists' attitudes toward internationalization at their schools, our next survey will examine trends in Canadian students studying abroad. The survey and its report will build on current work in this area by adding new and valuable insight into the barriers to study abroad that have already identified by previous research in this area.

Have something you'd like to ask our StudentVU panel? Get in touch.
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