



Re: Renewing the International Student Experience Fund

Through the International Student Experience Fund (ISEF), the university has invested in a systems-level mechanism designed to shape international student support through the seeding of local/ divisional projects. The conclusion of the final competition round of the first ISEF presents an opportunity to reflect on its impact and consider how we can build on our success to date with the renewal of \$3M in funding for a reimagined/ ISEF that continues to address priority areas essential to the continued success of students.

ISEF 1.0 - Background

Launched in 2018 by the Provost's Office and the Office of the Vice President International, the \$3M fund supports curricular and co-curricular initiatives with the overarching goal of setting up international students for success. ISEF was created in response to a report on consultations conducted across the university regarding the international student experience which identified recurrent themes/ priority areas.¹ The report grouped the observations of the divisions and faculties in these conversations into recurring themes (framed as opportunities/challenges) and included suggested ideas for addressing them, along with examples of U of T good practices. These identified themes informed the Fund's priority areas as follows:

1. Programs and Services
2. Inclusive Classrooms
3. Understanding Barriers
4. Interactional Diversity
5. Reaching Students Early

ISEF was structured to encourage interdivisional collaboration for the purposes of inspiring and scaling similar initiatives across the university. The Fund supported two streams of activities (seed and impact) to provide opportunities for projects that explore, implement, and scale up promising practices at different stages of their development and implementation, and create a pathway for projects from their initial inception to their full potential.² A 12-member committee of faculty, staff, and students from across the U of T with relevant expertise and experience

¹ [International Student Experience – Key Themes for Consideration and Conversation](#) / **Programs and Services:** Improve the structure and delivery of U of T's programs and services to better serve University of Toronto students from all backgrounds.; **Inclusive Classrooms:** Create the conditions within the classroom setting through curricular and pedagogical innovations to facilitate the fuller participation of all students with the course content and with each other.; **Addressing Barriers Inside and Outside of the Classroom:** Improve international students' access to key services by addressing existing impediments for international students to receive timely and accurate information at each stage of the recruitment-to-convocation experience. Find ways to effectively provide information in order to foster integration.; **Interactional Diversity:** Enhance intergroup interaction (across domestic/international students and between international students) inside and outside the classroom for the purposes of developing global fluency, a critical 21st century skill. Empower and equip University of Toronto students with the skills and experiences to communicate confidently across cultures in both academic and informal settings.; **Reaching Students Early:** Enhance and complement existing University efforts to facilitate student integration through proactive, coordinated, and timely engagement of international students before they arrive at the U of T and at subsequent key moments during their first year of study.

² The ISEF supports two streams of activities: SEED (\$5,000-\$15,000 per year, maximum 3 years) and IMPACT (\$15,000 - \$60,000 per year, maximum 2 years). This tiered system is intended to provide opportunities for projects that explore, implement, and scale up promising practices at different stages of their development and implementation, and create a pathway for projects from their initial inception to their full potential. NOTE: The Impact Grant tier was amended in competition cycle three (2020-2021) from \$15,000 - \$100,000 per year for maximum of 3 years to optimize remaining funds.

adjudicated submissions, using a staged, two-step process (LOI and full proposal) for impact grants.

ISEF 1.0 – Impact to date

At the conclusion of its final competition round, \$2.6M in ISEF funds have been committed to 29 projects (19 Impact, 11 Seed)³ in alignment with the aforementioned priority areas, including the following illustrative examples:

- Addressing needs of multi-language learners and facilitating interactional diversity in the humanities through “labs”
- Student-driven micro grants to increase physical activity among international students
- Online pre-arrival supports for entering international students
- Global fluency programming for faculty and teaching staff
- Oral communication support for incoming graduate students focusing on academic conversation and presentation skills

Eleven ISEF projects are now complete, with 15 slated to conclude between 2023 and 2024. **Of the 11 completed projects (6 impact, 5 seed), eight will be continued by their sponsoring division beyond their funding period.** Of the three seed projects that will not continue, one served a time-limited purpose (celebration for graduating students unable to be with their families due to pandemic travel restrictions) and one will integrate new content developed with ISEF funds into core programming. Together, these 11 projects reached thousands of students, developed 13 new products/programs/platforms, and held over 400 discrete activities (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 *Summary of Impact to Date - 11 Completed Projects*

	Number of Students Impacted (to date)	Number of Products/ Programs/ Platforms Developed	Number of Discrete Events/ Sessions held	Project continuing beyond funding period? (Y/N)
GRAND TOTAL	69,910	13	426	8Y/ 3N
Completed Impact Projects (6)				
Integrated UTSC online pre-arrival platform (ISC, AA&CC, OSEW) Development of a web-based pre-arrival orientation and mentorship program designed to assist students with their transition into UTSC. Program platform will provide mechanisms to track student engagement and participation	2,742	1	19	yes

³ Of these projects, three were discontinued after 1 year of funding due to inactivity/ staffing changes

<p>International Student Experience Ambassadors (UTSG 1st Entry Divisions, CIE) <i>Establishment of a pre-arrival concierge service for incoming international students delivered by current student ambassadors. Trained e-mentors will field general queries pertaining to student experience, directing technical questions to the appropriate U of T contact</i></p>	662	1	39	yes
<p>International Student Experience Website (CIE) Development of a central landing place/ wayfinding online resource for U of T international students. Website is a starting point that identifies key needs and directs students to divisional information sources</p>	61,719	1	0	yes
<p>Integrative Sport and Recreation Programming for Increasing International Student Enrolment and Engagement (KPE) <i>Student-driven micro grant initiative to increase physical activity among international students from all divisions by raising awareness of physical activity benefits, particularly academic success, among this audience</i></p>	667	2	22	yes, with modifications
<p>Speaking with Confidence: Early Oral Communication Support for International Graduate Student (Graduate Centre for Academic Communication) <i>Oral communication support for incoming graduate students with a focus on academic conversation and presentation skills.</i></p>	2,175	1	62	yes
<p>UTM International Student Proactive Advising <i>Grounded in the GROW coaching model, the UTM International Transition Coaching Program (renamed from Proactive Advising), addresses transitional issues for new international students. The program</i></p>	89	2	178	yes

<i>helps students to think about their personal and/or professional goals in order to relate them to their academic/educational goals.</i>				
Completed Seed Projects (5)				
<p>Pre-arrival Teaching e-Orientation Program (CTSI, CIE) <i>Supporting transition of incoming 1st-year international graduate students who wish to teach at the U of T. The program is designed to help participants consider their existing strengths and experiences within an intercultural classroom environment, to better understand their own expectations around teaching and those of U of T, and connect them to resources early on to build upon their existing knowledge and skills</i></p>	811	1	28	No, but content developed with ISEF funds will be integrated into the work of project partners
<p>Joint IIS + LASP student engagement initiative (IIS, LASP) <i>Engaging students in the exploration of intersections between Latin American Studies and Islamic Studies. Organized into three annual themes - the project provides a safe, informative, and engaging space for dialogue. Intercultural competencies gained through students' engagement in the program as participants and leaders will be recognized in the Co-Curricular Record (CCR).</i></p>	350	1	7	No
<p>Targeted Support for International Students: Multilingual German Workspace to Enhance Third-Language Acquisition (FAS) <i>Building on the high-potential of international students through multilingual German workspace sessions. As supplements to first-year German language courses, these workspace sessions provide an early intervention support for international students in a risk-free environment, without the pressures of a formal</i></p>	150	1	60	Yes

<i>classroom. Workspaces will also provide leadership opportunities for more advanced international multilingual students.</i>				
Building Critical Approaches to Inclusive Classrooms (UTSC, Hart House) <i>Development of training resources for faculty, students, and staff interested in building global classrooms. This project focuses on how to reduce barriers and unequal north-south power relations in global classrooms. It will make recommendations on the inclusion of the global classroom experience into the academic work of students</i>	275	1	10	yes
Celebration for Graduating International Students(Ancillary Services, UTM, UTSC) <i>Providing an in-person delivery of a custom-made and U of T branded GradBox to a group of international students that will be graduating this spring, are currently in Canada and close to campuses, and are unable to celebrate with their families given current circumstances – as a way to contribute to celebrating and recognizing their accomplishment.</i>	270	1	1	No, time-limited and pandemic-specific intervention

Data Source: [ISEF Final reports](#) submitted by June 30, 2022

Current Context and Continued Need for ISEF

Serving all students well at this stage in our history requires a closer consideration of the changing demography of our enrolments. Between 2014-2021, the international composition of U of T’s student population (undergraduate + graduate) grew from 17% to 30%.⁴ Given that one third of U of T’s students are international—attending the university on a study permit, paying international tuition fees, and in many cases are new arrivals to Canada—we need to ensure that we are delivering on our promise of a truly global learning environment, one where the success of all students is supported. In turn, the atmosphere of support created on our campuses is one

⁴ International enrolment as a percentage of total enrolment. Data source: Historical Enrolment Count Tool, date accessed 8-July-2022

that benefits international and domestic students alike—enabling the exchange of ideas from diversity of perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and experiences. This potential only increases as we diversify our student enrolments, currently representing 165 countries and regions.

While the U of T has a robust and comprehensive network of student supports designed to serve what is arguably one of the most diverse student populations in North America, there have been gaps and inconsistencies identified in their delivery to international students across the university. The advent of a global pandemic, while temporary, brought some of these gaps into stark relief (e.g., challenges with online platforms, different time zones, and varying degrees of access to the internet).

The topic of international student welfare has gained prominence in public discourse, particularly over the past year (see Appendix A). The challenges faced by international students studying at Canadian institutions have been well documented by national, local, and student news channels, all emphasizing the common narratives of exploitation and neglect. This discourse has been amplified on social media and has accompanied related scrutiny of the U of T's supports for its international students by vocal members of University's governing bodies, namely Governing Council.

Looking Ahead: Opportunities for Further Impact with ISEF 2.0

Our international students are critical contributors to the University's success, aligned with our commitment to tackle the challenges and embrace the opportunities of an increasingly interconnected world. Their personal and academic success is similarly crucial to the University's reputation—as they become alumni who tell U of T's story throughout Canada and around the globe. It is therefore incumbent that we create a learning atmosphere on our campuses that aligns with our global mission and profile by serving all U of T students well.

ISEF has been a key intervention in this regard, setting international students up for success through the shaping of critical services and supports. The impact of ISEF to date on the student experience at U of T has been well demonstrated and is ongoing. In addition to the quantitative data above which documents the wide impact of the first iteration of ISEF, reports on the outcomes of completed ISEF projects provide further evidence that its impacts are real as illustrated by the comments below (two of many):

“The funding provided by ISEF has enabled us to extend our offerings for incoming multilingual international students in their earliest months at the U of T...There has been significant demand for such support, and we are very grateful for the funding that allowed us to explore these curricular expansions.” - Speaking with Confidence: Early Oral Communication Support for International Graduate Students

“One story that demonstrates the impact of the program: An international student was participating virtually from her home in Asia, living with her entire family in a one-bedroom apartment. She had not disclosed to her family that she was struggling with mental health concerns, but used her participation in the program to open up dialogue on mental illness and

the value of physical activity. Her whole family started to participate with her in the background –demonstrating a multi-level, family systems impact.” – Integrative Sport and Recreation Programming for Increasing International Student Enrolment and Engagement

Given this success, funding for a subsequent iteration of ISEF will allow this work to continue and will provide the momentum needed for the University to achieve a truly global learning environment.

New ISEF funding would be employed to launch ISEF 2.0. We have revised the Fund’s framework with a view to addressing the current and future needs of U of T’s international students. This work was informed by a thorough consultation process on the structure and emphasis of the Fund, engaging key tables including the International Student Experience Advisory Committee, ISEF Adjudication Committee, and the Vice- Deans on International. Feedback solicited through an ISEF stakeholder questionnaire was particularly instructive.

Updated priority areas for the purposes of shaping projects:⁵

1. Programs, Services, and Policies
2. International Student Wellbeing
3. Changing Mindset – Building inclusive community and fostering belonging
4. Interactional Diversity – Required in a learning environment at a global university
5. Listening to and encouraging the voices of international students

Explicit identification of areas of need with appropriate framing to avoid duplication and the overburdening specialized offices with requests for collaboration. These areas of need include, but are not limited to:

- Supports for international students who do not reside on campus
- Tailored health services information for international students
- Proactive communication of academic integrity support within the university (academic success, academic use of English programming, etc.)

New mechanisms to better ensure the scalability and sustainability of projects

⁵ **Programs, Services, and Policies:** Serving ALL students well through institutional and operational competence. Consideration of existing programs, policies, and practices from the lens of international students at all points of the student journey, from pre-arrival to preparing for life after U of T; **International Student Wellbeing:** Defining a baseline of support (mental, physical, financial) that international students can expect to receive at the U of T; **Changing Mindset – Building inclusive community and fostering belonging:** Shift from deficit mindset (problem to solve) to a global inclusive mentality (valuable members) amongst faculty, staff, and students; **Interactional Diversity – Required in a learning environment at a global university:** Intergroup interaction across biographies (multilingual speakers/unilingual speakers of English, Canadian/international, interaction amongst communities from various regions of the world, etc.); **Listening to and encouraging the voices of international students:** Identification and leveraging of existing forums and channels for dialogue. Addressing barriers to participation.

“Built-in” collaboration through fund framework that requires projects to engage each of U of T’s student, faculty, and staff communities (i.e., representative project leadership and/ or advisory groups)

- Requirement (vs. encouragement) to include co-collaborators across divisions, either from the start of the project, or as a means of expanding their project in its final year of funding
- Annual U of T-wide ISEF professional development showcase centring international student voices. Programming to include presentations from current and former ISEF project leads, panel discussions featuring international students, and faculty/staff/student networking opportunities. The first of these events has been planned for fall 2023 and will feature current ISEF projects.

Appendix A

Chronological Sampling of Recent Articles re International Student Welfare

Chua, Denise Alyanna (2022, July 4). <https://thevarsity.ca/2022/07/04/international-student-fees-make-up-64-per-cent-of-utsc-revenue-reports-campus-affairs-committee/>

Mohamad, Thira (2022, June 15). <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/life-in-canada-for-indian-students/>

CBC (2022, March). <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2020168259995>

Stirrett, Scott (2022, June 10). International students deserve to be treated as more than just a revenue stream. *The Globe And Mail* <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-international-students-deserve-to-be-treated-as-more-than-just-a/>

Kahlon, Balraj S. (2022, June 1). Canada's Exploitation of Punjabi International Students is History Repeating Itself. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/06/01/canadas-exploitation-of-punjabi-international-students-is-history-repeating-itself.html>

Usher, Alex (2022, May 9). The Reckoning. *One Thought to Start Your Day*. <https://higheredstrategy.com/the-reckoning%ef%bf%bc/>

Keung, N. (2022, April 3). Here's what Canada's international students wish they'd known before they got here. *Toronto Star* <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/04/03/heres-what-international-students-in-canada-wish-theyd-known-before-they-got-here.html>; <https://pressreader.com/article/281496459802580>

Rana, U. (2022, February 12) Food insecurity remains an obstacle for international students. *The Globe And Mail* <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-food-insecurity-remains-an-obstacle-for-international-students/>

Nagar, Rishi (2022, January 29). Canada Turns a Blind Eye to the Exploitation of International Students. <https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/nagar-canada-turns-a-blind-eye-to-the-exploitation-of-international-students>

Keung, N. (2021, December 4). 'No parents should have to bury their child': How a Canadian funeral home owner is trying to stop suicides among international students. *Toronto Star* <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/12/04/no-parents-should-have-to-bury-their-child-how-a-canadian-funeral-home-owner-is-trying-to-stop-suicides-among-international-students.html> ; <https://pressreader.com/article/282922388712305>

Bascaramurty, D., Bhatt, N. and Rana, U. (2021, November 4) Canada's international student recruiting machine is broken. *The Globe And Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-india-canada-international-student-recruitment/>

Hune-Brown, N. (2021, September 1). Students for Sale. *The Walrus*. September/October 2021. <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/the-walrus/20210901/281513639190501>