



## International Student Experience – Key Themes for Consideration and Conversation

### Executive Summary

It is incumbent that the University of Toronto create an atmosphere on its campuses that aligns with its global mission and profile. Towards this, the Office of the Vice-President International held a series of informal consultations on international student experience across the University over the spring and summer of 2017. The observations and feedback shared by the divisions and faculties in these conversations can be grouped into six key themes. Each theme includes a current challenge, preliminary ideas to address the issue, and examples of existing best practices already in place at U of T. The six themes are collated here for the purpose of inviting further conversation:

- 1) Problem to Opportunity (Changing mindset)
- 2) Programs and Services
- 3) Curriculum and Faculty
- 4) Understanding Barriers
- 5) Interactional Diversity
- 6) Reaching Students Early

### Themes

#### 1) Problem to Opportunity (Changing mindset)

**Opportunity:** International students have significantly changed the student body and the ways we engage within the U of T community.

**Ideas:** The change in student demographic places the institution in a privileged position to provide a truly global learning environment for all students. This requires a shift in mindset from viewing international students as a problematic segment of the University's student population to valuable participants in its mission to graduate students with global fluency and cross-cultural perspectives. A move to a focus on the reciprocal qualities of international education and the establishment of a global educator mentality among faculty and staff will benefit all students.

#### U of T Best Practices<sup>1</sup>:

- The Anti-Racism & Cultural Diversity Office's Cultural Club Network provides the opportunity for students to connect with fellow students of different backgrounds by accessing a range of cultural clubs across the University.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that these examples are not intended to be inclusive of all good practice at the University; rather a starting point for discussion.

- Rotman Commerce, like many divisions and faculties, has an Embedded International Advisor and a full time Academic Advisor to provide support and deliver specialized programming.
- The Centre for International Experience (CIE) offers on-site International Transition Advisors to partner with divisions on training of local teams and where needed local delivery of services
- CIE partners with academic, college and student life units to offer and embed Intercultural Learning Modules into programming and courses.

## 2) Programs and Services

**Opportunity:** The structure and delivery of U of T's programs and services can better reflect its diverse student body.

**Ideas:** Audit existing services and programs from an international student perspective and address deficiencies and barriers to access including: communication skills and community building, language proficiency, cultural dissonance, increase in representative staff, etc. Reduce the complexity in the presentation of U of T's programs and services to international students so that students can easily understand and access the range of resources. Consider a more "just-in-time" approach to information and programs to support newly arrived students.

### U of T Best Practices:

- UTSC's International Student Centre offers international student just-in-time service delivery and an emotional connection to the campus prior to arrival through individual Staff Advisors and Peer Mentors. This support continues throughout the first year through the Transition & Intercultural Peer Support program and Transition Advisor meetings.
- UTM offers international students opportunities for skill development and local connections through Career Centre workshops. UTM also offers international students practical immigration support, including early outreach to notify students of expiring study permits and advice on permanent residency pathways.
- CIE, in partnership with first year entry faculties and colleges, offers a four day pre-orientation for new international students and their parents. This is a chance for students to get to know the campus and the city as they prepare to engage in divisional orientations, academic life, and making the most of their time at U of T.

## 3) Curriculum and Faculty

**Opportunity:** Enable international students to engage with faculty to more meaningfully engage and actively contribute together to academic life at U of T. Faculty buy-in and curricular innovation are needed to ensure that many voices are included in the classroom.

**Ideas:** Create the conditions for faculty buy-in through professional development in intercultural understanding and active pedagogies that invite engagement from students of many backgrounds. Enlist faculty and staff trained in cross-cultural communication to facilitate domestic/ international student integration in classes by encouraging learning groups and providing resources and tools to student teams so they can learn from and with diverse peers in courses and coursework to foster global competencies. In addition to setting the stage for an integrated classroom, consider embedding intercultural learning in course content. Work with the University's teaching/ instructional development units to create resources to support further faculty development. Design modules that faculty members and teaching staff can use directly in their courses.

**U of T Best Practices:**

- Many faculty are already working to 'break the ice' to encourage the participation of non-native English speakers in class.
- Intercultural Learning Modules based out of CIE are embedded in divisionally based co-curricular sessions with students and faculty

**4) Understanding Barriers**

**Opportunity:** Access to accurate and timely information for international students at each stage of the recruitment –to- convocation continuum can be impeded by communication methods that do not fully account for their needs, interests and requirements. Examples include national firewalls that prevent access to information shared via social media and the inability of international students to access career service and immigration advice while abroad.

**Ideas:** Enlisting the assistance of affected international students to address these communication barriers serves the dual purpose of ensuring that efforts are informed by end users, and providing co-curricular leadership opportunities for students who do not access opportunities beyond the classroom to the same degree as their domestic peers. Recruitment Officers are international students' first point of contact with U of T and can help to manage expectations and assist with the acculturation and integration process. The expansion of immigration and career service offerings for international students is required. Review timelines for communication from admission to arrival; move up critical messaging on visa and health insurance; map orientation activities (international, college, residence, divisional, student) so students can easily see the options and how they connect.

**U of T Best Practices:**

- The Anti-Racism & Cultural Diversity Office offers two drop-in dialogue programs (Unfiltered Truth Talks and the Race and Faith Dialogue series) for students designed to promote understanding, build capacity and find community. The Office also offers international students confidential assistance and handling of concerns and complaints regarding discrimination or harassment.
- UTM, UTSC and UTSG's international student services regularly connect with students for feedback and to inform programming.
- UTSG's Innovation Hub works with students using the i-think school methodology to get student feedback on their needs/concerns with respect to building a global community on campus.

**5) Interactional Diversity**

**Opportunity:** For many international students, confidence in their proficiency to use English language appropriately and well is the most significant impediment to connecting with other students, faculty and staff at U of T. The inability of international students to integrate results in segregation, which is antithetical to the interactional diversity (intergroup interaction) required in a learning environment at a global university.

**Ideas:** Empower international students via proactive English communication programming designed to increase proficiency and confidence. Encourage interactional diversity inside and outside of the classroom during first and second year through study groups, academic team work, residence, campus events, buddy systems and mentorship programs to enable community building. Educate domestic students on the value of interactional diversity toward developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (i.e. global fluency).

**U of T Best Practices:**

- Innis College's Office of Student Life (OSL) hosts English Learning Communication Cafés. The College's Transition & Support Don serves international students living in residence. Select upper-year students are enlisted to assist with the transition of international students into Innis.
- Woodsworth College offers a pre-arrival e-mentoring program for international students, providing one-on-one transition support. This connection continues upon arrival through peer mentorship.
- UTSC's English Language Development Centre provides a range of innovative programs designed to accelerate students' language abilities, along with their confidence and ability to interact productively.
- UTSG's CIE invites students to participate in a language exchange program where students exchange their fluency in a language other than English for conversation in English with native speaker.

**6) Reaching Students Early**

**Opportunity:** Early intervention to prevent isolation and a lack of student integration into campus.

**Ideas:** The orientation and integration of international students at U of T needs to start as early as possible. U of T must not only convey to international students that they are welcome, but that they will be looked after (have resources, find community, build friendships and networks and well as direct services (health and wellbeing, experiential learning, academic success) once they've arrived. Clear, coordinated and timely pre-arrival communications that provide guidance on what to expect and next required steps are essential. Upon arrival, international students should be engaged in robust orientation relevant to their needs and interests (i.e. setting up bank accounts, health insurance, navigating campus and the surrounding area, etc.). As students transition into their upper years of study, providing workshops on accessing the post-graduation work permit and the Canadian job market would be very helpful. In addition, a coordinated set of ongoing transition workshops throughout the first semester timed to support students in understanding U of T and Canada and building tools to self-manage or access resources as they encounter issues would help address the inability to absorb everything on arrival.

**U of T Best Practices:**

- Chestnut Residence offers international students the opportunity to speak individually with a staff member to address any questions they may have prior to arrival. Chestnut also offers a student-curated blog and a video tour to help orient international students to their new home-away-from-home.
- UTSG Student Life on Location teams work in partnership with many of the divisions to offer services and programs where students are as well as in the central service points.

**Conclusion**

Efforts to enhance the international student experience at U of T by creating campus environments that foster and emphasize intercultural understanding serve all students and promote the University's wider mission of global engagement and impact.