

## Project Proposal for the Graduate Student Life Advisory Group: International Graduate Student Pre-Arrival and Orientation

This proposal is made with full-time graduate students in mind, but an expanded orientation programme could benefit full-time undergraduate students and both graduate and undergraduate exchange students.

At the moment, the orientation for international students operates with a conception of orientation as being an occasion for various campus bodies - the SGPS, the HCDS, the SGS, etc - to impart valuable information to international students. This is a crucial part of orientation, and much of this information is also already available on the QUIC website. What's proposed here is not so much a different or increased amount of information so much as an expansion of the understanding of orientation. This may become especially important should the current cap on the number of international students attending the university be raised.

At the moment, information for full-time international graduate students is available on the QUIC website and during a 2-3hour slot one evening during the second week of the fall term. This is supplemented with tax workshops, understanding the Canadian winter sessions, etc. However, for whatever reason, this initial orientation in the fall is very poorly attended. Further, it seems that exchange students are much more likely to avail of QUIC's resources than full-time graduate students. While this may be because full-time international students are more interested in becoming integrated in their own departments than in connecting with other international students, the fact is that the international student experience is not the same as the domestic student experience. In a number of departments, there are only one or two international students, meaning that each is left to her own devices when it comes to dealing with the problems of understanding UHIP, or figuring out the OGS application process, or understanding that the ITA is distinct from the QGA, and the list goes on; these are only possible institutional difficulties, and don't include personal challenges of a practical and emotional nature, for example. Further, in such cases, departmental support staff may not be familiar with the various aspects of international student funding or finances, making the isolation of these students more acute.

First: Information for international students needs to be made more palatable and easier to access. Queen's should also encourage international students to access this information prior to their arrival. Reformatting the information will require an understanding as to why international students don't attend QUIC's orientation, and considering ways of supplementing or enhancing current orientation materials.

Second: As well as offering information, international orientation should also create the possibility for students to connect with their peers (both other new international students and international students who have been at Queen's for a couple of years). This is the beginning of the creation of a support network for individual international students and the creation of a confident, vibrant international community on campus. Further, as the first weeks in a new place can be frenetic, and the amount of information overwhelming, it seems as important to enable students to access information in the future as to hand them information at the beginning.

As a preliminary exercise, it would be worth understanding why international students don't attend orientation and why they don't access QUIC's online information when they are the ones who are most likely to seek help and advice from the student advisors.

**Here are some initial suggestions regarding the enhancement of international orientation for full-time graduate students (amongst others):**

- In the acceptance package, include a check-list detailing what needs to be done pre-arrival, in the first week, in the second week, by the middle of the first semester, by the end of the first year, and on a yearly basis.
- Re-format QUIC's information into an international student handbook. This may seem cosmetic, but a self-contained, discrete document is much easier to navigate than a series of proliferating webpages.
- Integrate QUIC's orientation with specific social and informative sessions held by the SGPS, the SGS, and other important campus bodies, such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Ban Righ, the HCDS, the ARC, etc. Offer a combination of informative, social, and informative/social sessions. An integrated timetable of events, some particular to international students, some more general (such as the teaching and learning day) should be included. If QUIC's orientation is both supported and integrated, it will emphasise its importance.
- Social/informative: Throughout orientation week, present practical information in small group clinics / workshops run by student volunteers if possible. Students should be able to attend a number of these. In each such small group, they'll have the opportunity to connect with other international students.
  - Possible clinics could include: understanding your healthcare; campus tours; understanding Queen's administration (i.e. who to contact re. awards, fees, transcripts, etc); library tours; where to buy groceries / open a bank account / buy a mobile phone / navigate the transit system; house-hunting together (a service QUIC already provides)
  - A further service could include contract-checking and tips for students looking to rent.
- Informative: More abstract / less immediately practical information could be presented in larger groups - so understanding what homesickness feels like, culture shock, the educational ethos at Queen's etc - could be dealt with in larger sessions. This should include an address by an important administrative figure, again, formalising the day and increasing the likelihood of larger attendance. Similar to the teaching and learning day, perhaps? There should be registration, and this should begin early.
- Social: A variety of low-key events catering to a variety of different interests culminating in one large event. The idea is that students have several opportunities over several days to socialise informally at events which they can attend alone, but where they may see a few of the same people. This provides a context out of which their own social lives can emerge. Having a weekly event throughout the year is also a good idea.

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