



Society of Graduate and Professional Students
Preliminary Report on Resources for International Graduate and
Professional Students

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Introduction

The purpose of this research was to determine issues that international graduate and professional students face at Queen's University. The research focused on four (4) main areas of concern namely: language barriers knowledge gaps, academic expectations and accommodation of cultural backgrounds. There was also a focus on student's experience with transitioning into Queen's and Canada in general.

The research was carried out by conducting interviews with departments and offices on campus that offer services useful to international graduate students. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an in depth knowledge of the specific services provided to international graduate students by the relevant departments, the normal issues and complaints heard by these departments from international graduate students, and the extent to which international graduate students utilize these services.

Interviews were conducted with the following departments and individuals:

- Queen's University International Centre (QUIC).
- The School of Graduate Studies (SGS) Cross-Cultural Advisor at the Student Wellness Centre.
- The Human Rights Office
- The Equity Office
- The Student Academic Success Services (SASS): The Writing Centre and Learning Strategies Unit
- The Ban Righ Centre
- SGPS International Student Affairs Commissioner
- SGPS Student Advising Services

The plan upon the commencement of this research was to conduct a survey of international graduate students in order to collect first hand qualitative and quantitative information on their

personal experiences at Queen's University regarding the four main focus points of the research. In an effort towards this end, a list of possible survey questions was drafted. The same is attached to **Appendix A** of this report. However, this endeavor was impeded due to an inability to receive the requisite clearance from the Ethics Committee. It is recommended that a similar survey be conducted in future research in this area in order to gain a more precise understanding of the issues and experiences of international graduate students at Queen's.

Summary of findings.

The research focused on the experiences of international graduate students on points of **language barriers, their academic expectations, possible knowledge gaps, and how their cultural backgrounds** have been accommodated by students, faculty and staff at Queen's. There was also focused on student's experiences with transitioning to Queen's and Canada in general. In absence of the survey, we gathered information on these issues through interviews conducted with the above-mentioned departments. The views expressed by the interviewees reflects the normal complaints and concerns of international graduate students who utilize these services.

Even though the research focused on four separate and specific areas, we found that each of these areas correlate with each other. For example, a language barrier may affect the academic experience of students and their ability to transition to the University. Furthermore, some departments offer assistance with more than one of the areas of concerned.

A fundamental issue that touches upon almost all four of the areas of concern in this research, is the relationship between supervisors/professors and international graduate students, especially

those who speak English as a second language (ESL). Issues of lack of communication with supervisors, receiving prompt and proper feedback from supervisors, supervisors having unrealistic expectations of international students and possible micro-aggressions from supervisors have been a recurring theme throughout the research process. The need to address the cultural insensitivity of supervisors and professors towards international graduate students, especially those who are apart of the visible minority group and/or speak English as a second language, is one of the most vital conclusions reach by this study.

Resources at Queen’s University Available to International Graduate Students

A. ENGLISH LANGUAGE and ACADEMIC SUPPORT

1.) QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CENTRE (QUIC)¹

The QUIC offers English language support for international students and their spouses through an English Conversation Group and One-on-One Assistance programs.

- **English Conversation Group**

The ELS Conversation Group are intended to help international students, workers and their partners who wish to improve their English grammar and pronunciation. Generally, the sessions include a group activity as well as small group discussions with volunteers.

¹ Queen’s University International Centre, English Language Support website:
<http://quic.queensu.ca/international-students-and-staff/english-language-support-program/>

The setting is a casual one where persons can converse with each other and socialize while becoming more familiar and comfortable with speaking the English language. Spouses are also invited to attend.²

- **ELS One-on-One Assistance**

Queen's student volunteers work with international ESL students for an hour per week. The sessions focus on building and improving students' English and conversation skills. Volunteers are not academic tutors or teachers, but they are friendly and competent in the English language. The individual assistance program runs mostly between September and March each year.³

2.) SCHOOL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

- **Conversation Partner Program**

The School of English, by way of the Conversation Partner Program, gives students the opportunity to take part in weekly meetings with English speakers. Volunteers conduct conversations with small casual groups of students weekly. International students get the opportunity to improve their speaking and listening skills. International students are also encouraged to share aspects of their culture and learn more about the other cultures in the group.⁴ Students also have the opportunity to be paired with a conversation partner.

3.) STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS SERVICES (SASS)-The Writing Centre⁵

The SASS is a primary resource for international graduate students for academic skill development. It is comprised of two partner units, the Learning Strategies Unit and The Writing

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Queen's School of English Studies, website: <http://queensu.ca/qsoe/>

⁵ Student Academic Success Services, website: <http://sass.queensu.ca>

Centre. The SASS offers graduate students the opportunity to work with a writing consultant over multiple appointments. A high percentage of international graduate students in the process of writing a dissertation usually utilize the services during the summer months. The SASS see a large number of international students by appointment.

- **Learning Strategies Unit**

The SASS Learning Strategies Unit collaborates with School of Graduate Studies (SGS) via the Expanding Horizons program, where workshops are offered to graduate students on topics such as how to write a literature review, how to edit work, perfectionism in writing, building confidence in presenting, etc. They also assist coordinating a dissertation ‘boot camp’ where graduate students can sit for extended periods of time and focus on writing their dissertations as a group. The SASS also, offers a thesis writing support group for graduate students. There are also a variety of resources offered on the Learning Strategies site such as information on how to organize projects, time management and stress management, how to stay motivated and not procrastinate, and presentation skills.⁶

In general, the SASS offers skills to enhance students’ academic experience and performance capabilities. They also assist international graduate students coming from different backgrounds with transitioning to the new academic cultures. The SASS does not assist with proofreading or editing work, however, they assist students with improving their proofreading and editing skills.

- **The Writing Centre**

The Writing Centre works specifically with ESL students to further develop their English writing skills. They assist writers at all levels of proficiency, on all forms of academic writing such

⁶ Student Academic Success Services, Learning Strategies Unity, website:
<<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/>>

essays, reports, labs, dissertations, etc. They offer one-to-one academic writing support to students.⁷ They assist students who are experiencing writing issues while working on assignments and projects. Students normally come for assistance with brainstorming ideas, drafting an outline, refining a thesis statement, improving an argument, improving grammar and style, overcoming writer's block.⁸

Students writing dissertations are encouraged to utilize the one-to-one program. ESL students having issues reading and listening in English can also get assistance from the Writing Centre. In addition, the Writing Centre helps students with practicing presentation skills and pronunciation. In fact, many of the international graduate students seeking assistance at the Writing Centre, require assistance with practice for presentations for their course in their program or a conference. **A big issue that ESL students have with regard to presentations is a lack of confidence.** The Writing Centre assists with these concerns.

B.) ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS, ACCOMODATION OF CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS & TRANSITIONING TO QUEEN' S.

1.) SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES (SGS) and Student Wellness Centre: Cross-Cultural Advisor⁹

Queen's University provides culturally sensitive counselling to students from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds through the specialized services of the cross-cultural counsellor. The Cross-Cultural Advisor is mostly concerned with the mental health of students. She listens to

⁷ Student Academic Success Services, The Writing Centre, website:
<<http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre/>>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ <http://www.queensu.ca/sgs/cross-cultural-advisor>

concerns of students in relation to all areas of life and offers professional advice and counselling to students in need.

Issues of concern that may be addressed include social identity, personal development, crises, personal and family problems, adjusting to university life in Canada, stress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem and self-confidence, ethnicity, race and minority issues, intercultural relationships, intimate relationship issues, racism, abuse and assault, cultural and sexual orientation concerns, grief and mourning. The cross-cultural counsellor also provides consultation to the university community on issues of cultural awareness and sensitivity, equity and intercultural communication.

In relation to the four key areas of this research, the Cross-cultural advisor has identified the following concerns that international students when transitioning into Queen's University, Kingston and Canada in general:

- ***Language barrier and academic achievements:***

Students who speak English as a second language find transition more difficulty with the language barrier in terms of academic achievements. Students have difficulty starting a new unfamiliar course, making presentations, writing essays. International ESL students also experience anxiety in relation to making presentations. This usually stems from being self-conscious about their accent and especially when it comes to using jargon.

On the other hand, many international students possess advanced writing skills, depending on their training in the school that they previously attended. Even though the Writing Centre now focuses more these issues, students may not be aware of the resources available at there and those who know about it may not always utilize it.

Some supervisors are great with assisting ESL international graduate students with writing and presentation skills and providing feedback. On the other hand, other supervisors have an expectation that these students should be able to do the work without special assistance. This portrays an insensitivity on behalf of some supervisors to the needs of international graduate students.

Reading and conducting research in a different language can prove to be more challenging for ESL students than native English speaking students. It can take almost twice the amount of time it would take a student who speaks English as their first language. The English proficiency test that international graduate students take prior to acceptance to Queen's does not indicate their level of preparedness to conduct extensive research in English. Just because students can speak, read and write English to a required level, this does not mean that they should be expected to perform academic research, write and read complex material at the same level or pace as native English speakers. Supervisors should remain cognizant of this reality when dealing with ESL international graduate students.

- *Academic Expectations & Knowledge Gaps*

While some professors/supervisors are really helpful and patient with international graduate students, others have high expectations of international graduate students, expecting them to delve directly into work, without realizing that students need time to transition to their new environment. Professors must understand that these students are not only adapting to Queen's, they are also adapting to living in an entirely new country, culture, climate, and educational system with a new set of academic expectations. Professors and supervisors should give new international graduate students time to acclimatize to the environment.

In terms of knowledge gaps, there is sometimes an academic barrier where international graduate students, who may not have a background in a particular area of the course because it was not a part of the curriculum in their home country, may struggle in that course. This is aside from ESL who struggle because of the language barrier.

- ***Transitioning***

An issue that needs to be addressed is the social isolation of international graduate students. There is a need to form a community where international students can feel a sense of belonging. Studies carried out by the Wellness Centre found that international students can feel isolated within the community. Social activities of Canadian/Queen's students normally consist of going out to bars/pubs and consuming alcohol. A lot of international graduate students coming from differing backgrounds are not comfortable with socializing in this manner. This can make them feel isolated from the other students because they cannot relate.

Moreover, international graduate students have said that they find it hard to make connections with people outside of their ethnic groups. Not being very proficient in English can prove to be an addition barrier for making friendships outside of an ethnic group. Also, local students, even though they are usually polite to international students, are very reluctant to include international students of a different ethnicity within their social groups. Furthermore, some students have complained of experiencing micro-aggressions from other students and also from faculty.

2.) SGPS STUDENT ADVISORS¹⁰

The SGPS Student Advising services is a referral service where advisors listen to the general concerns of students. They provide general advice, offer self-advocacy strategies and refer graduate and profession students to specialists or other avenues available on campus such as Student Wellness Centre, School of Graduate Studies, the Human Rights Office, etc. Student Advisors are available to hear graduate student issues on any topic. They offer general advice to students such as information on their rights as a graduate student and the duty of a supervisor to them as graduate students. Student advisors are not counsellors, however, they are available to have 'peer to peer' discussions with graduate students. These services are available to all graduate students, however, Student Advisors see mostly international graduate students.

Most of the issues heard from international graduate students are in relation to issues with their supervisors, academic problems, issues on how to appeal failing thesis grades thesis and financial issues. This process of appealing grades can especially be a daunting task for students because it is not very straight forward.

Students who seek assistance from Student Advisors with an issue that considered as a human rights issue are referred to the Human Rights Office. Students whose issues are determined to be emotionally taxing are referred to the Cross-cultural Advisor at the Student Wellness Centre. Students with issues such as immigration status in Canada or legal or administrative issues and those who may be experiencing social isolation are referred to the QUIC.

¹⁰ SGPS at Queen's University, Student Advisor Program, website: <http://sgps.ca/sgps-services/student-advisor-program/>.

The following are some issues that Student Advisors found common among international graduate students:

- ***Academic Expectations:***

- Experience with Supervisors*

- ESL students have complained about being ‘sidelined’ by their supervisors. They would be overlooked by supervisors for opportunities such as presenting papers at conferences mostly because of their accent when speaking.

- Experience show that supervisors are not very accommodating of international graduate students. Students find that they cannot receive proper feedback from their supervisors in a timely fashion, which is critical especially for international graduate students to whom English is a second language.

- ***Transitioning:***

- Financial Issues*

- International graduate students, especially those who brought their families to Canada along with them, normally complain about financial difficulties. They usually do not have enough money or access to funding.

3.) SGPS INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMISSIONER

The SGPS International Student Affairs Commissioner is tasked with organizing different events to bring awareness of the international graduate student body and to facilitate the socializing and networking of these students with other graduate students. The commissioner is also available to hear the concerns of international graduate students as needs arise.

The following are some issues that have been identified by the International Student Affairs Commissioner:

- ***Academic expectations:***

Professors normally expect students to automatically be familiar with the Canadian (North American) educational system. Students need time to adapt to a different learning culture. Students also need additional guidance with regards to understanding and appreciating program structures, academic expectations, grading schemes, etc.

- ***Transitioning:***

 - Social Issues*

International graduate students experience difficulty in making acquaintances within their department. Normally, some departments only admit a handful of international students which can translate to just one international student per class. This can make an international graduate student feel isolated, especially when other students are reluctant to reach out to them.

Some international students cannot relate to the drinking culture at Queen's that is observed as socialization. A student who does not want to hang out and drink may be perceived as 'weird' or anti-social. Furthermore, drinking alcohol and hanging in clubs and bars can be expensive for international graduate students who are usually dependent on some source of limited funding.

4.) HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE¹¹

The Human Rights Officer (HRO) advises students referred by counsellors at the Student Wellness Centre, SGPS Student Advisors, School of Graduate Studies, Chaplains Office whose

¹¹ Queen's University, Human Rights Office, website:
<http://www.queensu.ca/humanrights/home> .

complaints may fall within the realm of a violation of their human rights. The HRO observes the Discrimination and Anti-Discrimination Policy of the University.

The following are some of the issues, as determined by the Human Rights Officer, that international graduate students face with regards to the four main concerns of our research:

- *Language Barriers*

Students sometimes complain of discrimination by their peers or professors because of their accents. They are sometimes perceived to be less educated than they are because they speak English differently than their native English speaking peers. ESL students sometimes face certain academic barriers based on others perception of them.

In one particular instance, an international graduate student was told that they were not welcomed to participate in different group projects being carried out within the department because it was perceived that they did not communicate English well. They were told by their peers that the way in which they speak would have a negative effect on the group's grade. They expressed that they preferred for that particular student to be seen but not heard.

Other instances involve students being told on evaluations by their professors or supervisors that they would be more successful if they communicated in a different way and that because of their accent they would have to compensate in other ways or face the reality that they will not be received well.

- *Academic Expectations and Knowledge gaps.*

Persons managing a transition from another country often times need additional academic support and resources in order to become accustomed to what is expected of them. Sometimes

conflicts arise around different expectations. Sometimes students complain of supervisors who do not speak to them or who that haven't heard from in six months. They also complain of submitting work and not receiving feedback receiving insufficient feedback.

Some students end up in conflicts with supervisors because the supervisor was not equipped to make use of the theory and international experience that the student brought with them. Instead of acknowledging that they may have taken on a student whose thesis interests knowledge and background is something that they are not prepared to deal with, some supervisors make it appear as if it is the student's incompetence that is the issue. They would try to compel the students to redirect their interests into an area that the student is not interested in. By the time as the issue reaches the HRO, it has already begun to be framed as a possible harassment or discrimination on the basis of the student's status.

- *Accommodation of Cultural Backgrounds*

International graduate students have complained about being perceived to lack knowledge because they come from a different background. Some students have been made to feel that the knowledge that they acquired before coming to Queen's/ Canada is not valuable, despite the fact that before entering the program (during the recruitment process) they were told that their international experience would be an asset at Queen's, only to have their supervisor devalue this quality.

There is also the question of whether faculties or departments acknowledge the need for additional assistance of international graduate students? It is counter-productive to recruit students from around the world, coming from different cultures and backgrounds, only to leave them unaided and unaccommodated once they arrive.

- *Transitioning:*

Social Issues

Kingston and Queen's are not easy places to integrate into, even at the best of times. Even some domestic staff and students are of the view that Kingston could be a "stand-offish" place. Therefore, this can be all the more difficult for persons coming from a different background.

Some international graduate students feel isolated within their departments and faculties. They find it difficult to make friends and socialize especially with domestic Canadian students. Domestic students have a way of isolating international students. For example, there have been complaints about international graduate students not being invited to group meetings and only told about the meeting after the fact. Behavior like this can have a negative impact emotionally and mentally on the international graduate student.

There is a true lack of sensitivity to cultural differences at Queen's with regards to students and some faculty and staff. There exists a decided unwillingness on behalf of domestic students to engage authentically, willingly, and respectfully with diverse students. The vast majority of students are not engaging with internationalization in an academic or intellectual manner. It has been said that some domestic students choose to come to Queen's because it was historically known to lack diversity. This is an area that the University should incorporate within the campaign to become more internationalized.

5.) BAN RIGH CENTRE¹²

The Ban Righ Centre offers a informal and comfortable environment for mature female students to socialize with each other. It is open to all students on campus. There are opportunities to meet other mature students such as the weekly speaker series and the lunch time soup kitchen

¹² Queen's University, Ban Right Centre, website: <http://banrighcentre.queensu.ca> .

held at the Centre free of charge. The centre also offers quiet spaces for female students to rest and study. It also has a breast-feeding centre for nursing mothers.

The Student Advisors at the Centre assist international female students with general advice on applying to the University, and also any personal advice relating to issues experienced at home. The Advisors are not counsellors. They refer students to counsellors available in the QUIC, Student Wellness Centre, Human Rights Officer and other places according to their needs.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In comparison to other similar sized universities, Queen's University's international graduate student services are up to par with the national standard. However, there is room for improvement.

- ***Recommendations to Improve English Language Support***

Advisors at the SASS found that there is a great demand for proofreading and editing services for international graduate students who speak English as a second language. Advisors at the SASS have determined that graduate students are usually isolated because they normally conduct work independently. Therefore, they do not have sufficient interactions to practice their English. So a concern is helping them get more practice in speaking English. In this regard, more opportunities for international graduate students to socialize and converse in English with other international students are needed. The QUIC program may not be sufficient because its offered only once per week and international graduate students need constant communication in order to maintain the English that they have learned.

- ***Raising Awareness of Available Resources***

There is also a need for on-going campaigns and promotions to keep students aware of all of the resources available to them on and off campus, especially those at the QUIC. It is understood that students are informed of these resources during orientation by the QUIC and other departments at the beginning of their degree. However, many students do not run into difficulties until later on during their studies. As time progresses, it is normal for students to forget about these resources when issues arise. Therefore, a constant campaign inviting students to utilize these options should be conducted year round.

- *Issues with Supervisors*

Essentially, supervisors should receive training on how to accommodate international graduate students' needs, especially in relation to language barriers and cultural backgrounds. Many of the reported complaints of international graduate students surround issues they have faced with their professors and supervisors. It is safe to conclude that a greater effort towards training and sensitizing graduate supervisors and professors to the needs of international graduate students is necessary.

- *Accommodation of Cultural/Diverse Backgrounds*

A number of advisors in the departments interviewed are of the view that there exists a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences at Queen's by many domestic students, faculty and staff. This is reflected in the recurring theme of the social isolation of international graduate students. There is an urgent need to sensitize students especially, in order to raise an awareness of the concerns of international graduate students. If the university is to continue improving its international and diversity profile through by increasing the presence of international students on campus, it is imperative that students, faculty and staff, many of whom many not be accustomed to interacting with diverse groups, are properly sensitized to become more accommodating to these students.

Another recommendation is the further diversification of faculty on campus to reflect the diversity in students. Doing so will compliment the University's efforts towards internationalization and diversification. More importantly, it would make international students feel less isolated and more accepted to see diversity represented within the faculties as well. Furthermore, there should be a point of contact within each subject department/ faculty where international graduate students can feel comfortable to express their concerns within the department, with the hope of resolving those issues without having to leave the faculty.

Need for further Research

This research does not represent a comprehensive report of the needs of graduate students to be address. Additional resources and time must be expended for the purpose of gaining a higher level of understanding in this area. A good starting point would be to conduct surveys and interviews with actual international graduate students in order to gain first hand knowledge of their experiences on campus, their awareness of the resources available to them and how often the use these resources.

Appendix

DRAFT SURVEY QUESTIONS

LANGUAGE BARRIER-

- What languages do you speak?
- What language is your mother tongue.
- If you are an ESL student, have you had any difficulty with the language barrier?
- Are you aware of any programs to assist you with communicating in English?
 - Programs that assist with learning to speak English.
 - Programs that assist with learning to write English.
- If so, have you utilized these programs as yet?
 - Do you find them helpful?
 - Is there anything that you think can improve these services?

KNOWLEDGE GAPS/ Experiences with classes:

- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the difficulty level of the class requirements of your program?
- Does this level of difficult meet or exceed your expectations?
- How is your educational experience (educational system) back home different or similar to your experience here at Queen's?
- Have these differences, if any, posed any difficulties for you? If yes, kindly explain those difficulties.

Are you aware of any services offered by Queen's to assist you in overcoming these difficulties with the purpose of assisting you to achieve your academic goals?

CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS-Welcoming and accommodation of cultural backgrounds:

- Please describe the major social cultural differences that you've experienced since arriving at Queen's.
- If so, which services do you know about and have you utilized any of these services?
- Did you attend any international orientation sessions upon your arrival at Queen's?
 - What was this experience like?
 - Did any of these sessions address your cultural difference and language barrier?
 - Did it make you aware of any services to assist with adjusting to a language barrier (if any) and cultural difference?

SUPERVISOR-Their experience with supervisors.

- Have you experienced any difficulties in communicating with your supervisor due to a language barrier or cultural differences?
- If yes, please give an explanation of how these difficulties have affected you.
- Have you been able to resolve these differences? If so, how?

PEERS/ Social life

Interaction with peers:

- -Do you find it difficult in communicating with peers?
- -Does the language barrier affect your ability to socialize with peers? Does it make it difficult to make friends?
- Overall, what are the top three challenges/ barriers to success that you have experienced as an international student?