



# WELCOMING THE WORLD

*Building an International Student Plan*

TRU Students' Union

# WELCOMING THE WORLD

## Thompson Rivers University Students' Union

The Thompson Rivers University Students' Union (TRUSU) is the membership organization of more than 10,000 students at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in Kamloops, BC. Our members collectively provide and receive advocacy, services, and entertainment that contributes to universal access to and a fulfilling experience in the public postsecondary education system.

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### Thompson Rivers University Students' Union

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## STARTING A CONVERSATION

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International students have become an increasingly important part of our university community. This has provided exciting opportunities in new perspectives and connections as well as financial and economic impact. But, as with most opportunities, welcoming international students presents new challenges. We need to face them together to make the most of our international experience.

The TRU Students' Union seeks to ensure that we are thoughtful in our approach to welcoming international students. We want our university to be deliberate in seeking and delivering benefits for international and domestic students as well as faculty, staff, and the broader community. And we want to involve the community in determining what welcoming international students means to us.

This discussion paper is a starting point for the campus to come together to talk openly about this important topic. It is based on focus group discussions with domestic and international students as well as staff and faculty who teach and provide services across our campus. It reflects their experiences and ideas about recruitment and enrolment, meeting students' basic needs, the academic experience, and the cultural and social experience.

We invite you to use this as a foundation on which to help build an international student plan for Thompson Rivers University. Contribute your own experiences and ideas at [trusu.ca/international](https://trusu.ca/international).



[trusu.ca/international](https://trusu.ca/international)

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## A PLAN TO WELCOME INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

There is a broad and deep appreciation at TRU of what international students bring to campus and of what they may gain here. At the same time, there is a desire for our approach to realizing these benefits to be more intentional, purposeful, and values-driven.

That approach starts with the recruitment and enrolment of international students. What do we aim for in welcoming international students?

To answer this question, we can't ignore the conditions that government provides. Government has approached international education largely as a commodity, seeking to maximize fiscal and economic impact while providing minimal regulation or support.<sup>1</sup> There have been calls for more robust policy from many sources across the province – thankfully, the provincial government is considering building its own, more comprehensive international student plan as a result.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, there is a great deal that can be determined here at TRU. While the local financial and economic benefits of international enrolment are recognized, what priority this is given and what else might need attention is up for debate. We heard a need for greater balance or even a reordering of priorities. From the university perspective, this is reflected as international enrolment driven by academic planning, performance, and learning outcomes. From an international student perspective, this is described as broadening their role from consumer to community member with human, social, cultural and academic needs and contributions.

### Recruitment: Who and How?

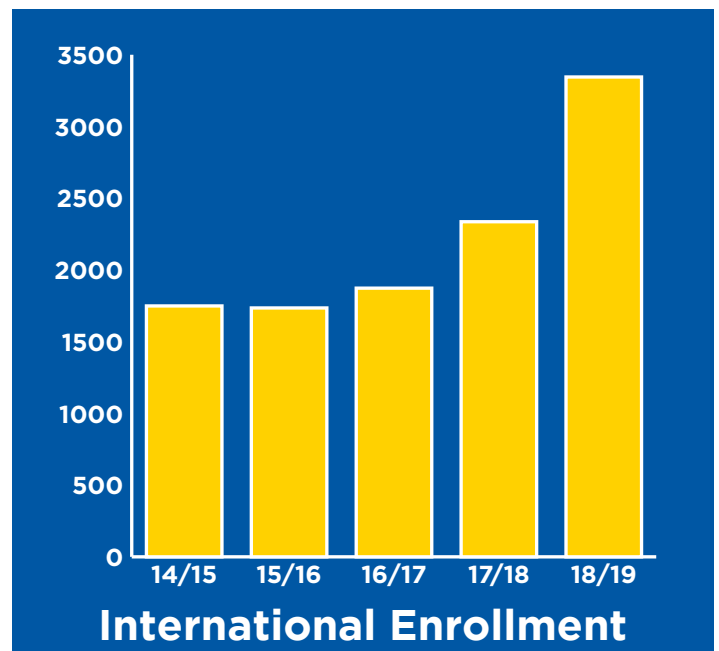
When considering how recruitment can contribute to a new international student plan, three broad themes have emerged.

First, there is an expectation that recruitment be deliberate and selective – that prospective students will have the motivations, expectations, and characteristics to contribute and succeed. There is no

doubt that most do, but the question is whether we are intentional and consistent. This is expressed in terms of maintaining academic standards and experience within the university. It is also about ensuring that international students are not enticed into making life-changing investments in experiences that may not be positive or beneficial to them.

Second, and closely related, there is a call for greater transparency and communication with prospective international students. This would help international students themselves determine whether TRU is a good fit for them, and, should they decide to come, to have clearer expectations. Clarity is seen as needed in terms of admissions requirements, transfer credits and prior learning recognition, costs, resources, responsibilities, rules and policies, and what they can expect while living in the Kamloops community.

Finally, the benefits of international perspectives are seen as limited by a current lack of diversity and balance in the student population. A plan for international students should seek to truly welcome those from



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across the world in a way that encourages exchanges of ideas, experiences, and cultures between many international groups and the Canadian population.

## Enrolment Growth: How Much and How Fast?

Beyond who we welcome and how, a key point of concern for a new plan is how many international students we can responsibly welcome in a given time.

This is an ongoing consideration, but has become prominent at TRU by recent, much larger intakes of international students. These intakes have been characterized as unstable and overwhelming. From

infrastructure such as housing to programming such as course delivery to workloads for service delivery, rapid growth is a concern. We heard a vision of international enrolment described as 'slower', 'controlled', 'organic', and 'assured'.

“*Too much too fast - we feel like TRU grew very quickly and we didn't have the courses, we didn't have the supports, but we brought in the students.*”

To realize the full range of benefits from international enrolment, there is a clear consensus that we must be proactive not reactive. We need an international student plan.

## Questions to Consider

- What should we aim for in welcoming international students?
- Who should we be recruiting internationally and how?
- How many international students should we enrol now and into the future?
- Is there anything about international student recruitment and enrolment we missed?



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## MEETING STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS

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In welcoming international students, we also take on obligations as hosts. We have an obligation to be transparent and forthright about cost when recruiting these students, to have appropriate infrastructure and services prepared before accepting them, and to be fair and responsive while serving them.

To be good hosts, we must honestly recognize what international students need and how we can meet those needs in conjunction with those of the broader student body and community. In many ways, international students face the same challenges as domestic students. They enter the same limited job and housing markets. They have a similar range of financial means despite popular conceptions that they are all well-to-do. Further, their challenges are heightened by significantly greater fees and stricter payment requirements.

### Fees and Costs

The context for international students meeting their basic needs is provided in large part by the fees they pay and the related costs they incur.

We heard, primarily from international students themselves, concerns about their ability to plan for the full cost of their time here. They need predictability in fees charged, fee amounts, and fee increases. To this end, TRU recently began setting international tuition fee increases for a number of years in advance, but more can be done to ensure international students are made aware and assured of all costs. This includes ancillary fees, course materials, housing, food, and transportation. Students suggested providing more services directly (particularly considering higher fee rates) or providing more fulsome cost information and budgeting support.

“ I remember the first time I saw one of my students pushing a grocery cart full of bottles. Maybe they're having one meal a day? So we need sustainable fee policies so

*a student can see how much money they need, including if they fail or have a bad semester.* ”

There was also concern, from all groups, about fairness in how and how much international students are charged. This reflects the call for limited, predictable fee increases, but extends to question the factor of difference between domestic and international fee rates, the different payment deadlines, and the requirement that international students pay for at least four courses per semester regardless of registration.

For both fairness and practicality, we need to think about how international students are charged and prepared for fees and other costs.

### Student Financial Support

There is also a growing need to recognize that not all international students confront the fees and other costs of a TRU education with the same means – and many are in financial need.

While they may win merit-based awards at TRU, international students have minimal access to financial support on the basis of need. This policy is untenable so long as we continue to recruit and enroll international students whose financial means may be insufficient to meet their needs. Currently, some international students report struggling to make ends meet, including needing to access the food bank.

There are two options to address this. The first would be to restrict enrolment to those international students with predictably sufficient financial means, accepting a narrower purpose and benefit of that enrolment. The second, with more support in discussions so far, would be to expand the financial aid available to international students in support of their broader contributions to campus.

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## Employment

Another way in which international students meet their needs, and gain Canadian experience, is through employment. International students expressed a broad expectation that employment and employment support will be available.

They and their domestic peers face a job market that can accommodate only so many students. International students face further limitations due to visa and study conditions and campus employment policies.

There are again only two broad options to move forward. We can be forthright with international students about reasonable expectations of employment, recognizing that this is a central motivation for many in coming here. Alternatively, we can better match supply and demand through a combination of controlling enrolment and creating more employment opportunities.

## Housing

A final basic need of concern is housing. International students, like their domestic peers, struggle to find available and affordable housing, and often do so for the first time from outside the country.

Kamloops has a minimal rental housing vacancy rate of 1.3%. The impact of growing enrolment at TRU in recent years, entirely international, is evident in an even lower and declining vacancy rate of 0.7% closer to the university. The average price of rent in Kamloops has also steadily increased to \$988, with higher rates closer to the university where demand is greater.<sup>3</sup>

This has led some international students to use nonstandard housing options such as long-term motel rentals and double, triple, or greater over-occupancy to share costs. They expressed a desire for housing to be supplied or secured as part of enrolment, assistance in securing housing, and/or means to reduce housing costs.

*“ Let’s actually have housing for students because there are students that are in motels right now with three or four people in a room, and that’s how they’re surviving. To me that’s completely unacceptable for a university and we have to do a better job. ”*

Again, to fulfill our obligations as hosts, we must take one or a combination of actions. We can restrict enrolment to match existing the housing market, or expand the availability of affordable student housing.

## Questions to Consider

- How should we charge international fees and at what rates?
- How can international students be better prepared to meet fees and other costs?
- Should financial aid be made available to international students, and, if so, how?
- How should we address international students’ need and desire for employment?
- How should we address international students’ need for affordable housing?
- Is there anything about meeting international students’ basic needs we missed?



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## THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

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At the centre of the student experience is the academic experience. It is ultimately why students, international or domestic, choose our university. Ensuring that international students are adequately prepared at the start of their studies and supported through those studies is a vital part of welcoming them. This also means ensuring we effectively deliver meaningful educational programming and support the faculty and staff who do this work.

### Student Preparedness and Support

International students' academic success is seen as determined in combination by requirements at admission as well as the level of support available once enrolled.

Like their financial means, it is inaccurate to think of international students' academic preparedness as uniform. Faculty and staff shared experiences with international students they described as 'raising the bar,' 'keen,' 'hardworking,' and 'engaged.' Alternatively, others described a 'crisis' of unpreparedness and a lack of discipline-specific literacy, lab skills, or even regular attendance. A more nuanced explanation of the challenge was that the range of international student preparedness is too great. Faculty are concerned with shifting course content to accommodate, and some students are seen by faculty and their peers as set up for failure. As a result, the first recommendation we heard was for more consistent admissions standards closer to that bar that many international students are seen as setting.

In providing better academic support for international students who are enrolled, a series of specific considerations were raised. First and foremost is adjusting to a Canadian academic culture and expectations of teaching and learning. Particular challenges heard from faculty included the influence of higher fees on grading expectations, prioritization of work permits over study, and concepts of academic integrity. From an international student perspective,

there are additional stresses to adapt to the academic culture along with social and language immersion and often part-time work to pay higher fees. Higher fees and aspirations to immigrate also create higher stakes for success and failure.

“ We need to not just say it's an international student issue or problem, and instead look at it as new to TRU students. What kind of knowledge do they need to have in order to be successful in this institution? What kind of supports can we provide? ”

There is a call for more resources and specific supports to be provided to address these needs, such as foundational courses in cultural expectations. Importantly, students, faculty, and staff also reported that most supports that international students need are the same as their domestic peers. From tutoring, supplemental learning, and study skills courses to study space, undergraduate research, and academic events, a vision emerged of more fulsome, inclusive, and integrated system of academic support for all students.

### English Language Learning

One area of preparedness demanding particular attention is English language learning. Again, this is seen as an issue of both admissions and support.

Insufficient English proficiency was the most common concern about international students' preparedness. In addition to the impact on the classroom, this was particularly seen as a detriment to underprepared international students. They were described alternatively as set up for failure or unfairly recruited into protracted and expensive periods of English language courses. The first step to improving this situation was identified, therefore, in higher English language requirements and/or more reliable testing and placement.



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“ A student who has to take ESL courses will take the minimum. If it was a credit course they might be encouraged to take a higher level, which could help them further down the road. They could use that as a credit in their program. ESL courses should be credit courses. ”

In supporting the English language learning of international students who are admitted, there is one specific and overwhelming consensus – we should award academic credit. This is justified on practical grounds that it would provide international students motivation to take and succeed in English language courses as a foundation to further academic pursuits. It is further justified on grounds of fairness, in that students learning English as an additional language achieve similar or even greater outcomes than their counterparts who may earn credit learning Chinese, French, German, Japanese or Spanish as their second or additional language.

## Delivering Educational Programs

Our primary responsibility in welcoming international students is to provide meaningful and well-organized educational programming. We heard two areas that need consideration to better fulfil this responsibility, and a third to take full advantage of the related opportunities.

The first and most prevalent concern amongst all groups was related to enrolment growth and course capacity. Students, international and domestic, reported a growing challenge of accessing seats, including in mandatory courses. This has led to a ballooning waitlist issue in the short-term and difficulty planning an efficient path to a credential in the longer-term. Faculty echoed this concern, adding that dramatic international enrolment growth also led to unbalanced class compositions that limit international and domestic student interaction and thereby the quality of the educational experience. There were calls to, again, better control international enrolment growth relative to teaching capacity, and to develop

a proactive, strategic plan for course offering growth rather than reacting to demand.

“ In our program we had big problems with waitlists and people not able to get into courses because perhaps there isn't the support there for them in the countries that they're coming from to make the transition smoothly. ”

The second concern addresses how international students navigate their educational career at TRU, from transfer credits and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) to academic advising and registration. Transfer credits and PLAR were a top concern for international students, who complained of difficult and unclear processes by which and for which existing experiences could be recognized to determine remaining requirements to earn a credential here. Similar issues were raised regarding academic advising, and advising staff also suggested that processes for international students could and should be streamlined.

A final consideration is the opportunity to internationalize the curriculum. Both students and faculty sought to engage more with international concepts and examples. Suggestions included both expanding the content of what is taught, but also the methods of learning to incorporate and intentionally engage with the diversity of perspectives.

## Faculty Preparedness and Support

It is important to remember that the foundation of the academic experience for international and domestic students alike is the faculty. To successfully address the considerations above – international student academic support, English language learning, course delivery for growing enrolment, and internationalizing the curriculum – we need to actively prepare and support our faculty.

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“ I can certainly say in our faculty a sudden influx of international students has led to classroom situations where 90% were international students. This is not a traditional classroom, so it creates all kinds of issues. Instructors struggle with that, and certainly students do. The classroom landscape changes and somehow we need to provide support. ”

Fortunately, we heard an eagerness from faculty to take these challenges on, and they identified what they need to do so. This begins with the opportunity to plan for enrolment change and create better classroom dynamics, and continues with orientation to international learners and skill-development for intercultural communication and teaching.

## Questions to Consider

- How can we ensure international students are academically prepared and supported?
- How can English language proficiency and learning be improved?
- How can we better deliver educational programs with international students and perspectives?
- How can we better prepare and support faculty to engage international students and perspectives?
- Is there anything about the academic experience we missed?



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## THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

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Welcoming international students is often seen as a benefit for the cultural enrichment it provides. This has certainly been the experience at TRU, but there is a growing recognition of that international students cope with additional cultural and social challenges that need support. It is also often easier to socialize and work with peers from a similar social, cultural, and language background. To realize the full benefits of international enrolment, we need to continue to foster deeper exchanges between students with diverse backgrounds, while providing a safe and supportive environment to all.

### Cultural Exchange and Equity

Students, faculty, and staff have overwhelmingly welcomed the diversity that international students have brought to campus and the broader community. Many identified the value of exposure to and opportunities to learn about other cultures and to reflect on their own. There was, however, a desire to move beyond the presence of diversity to greater social inclusion, intentional cultural exchange, and the promotion of cultural respect and equity.

While most, if not all, in the campus community have had interactions with diverse others, many also reported a generalized social segregation based on countries or regions of origin. There was concern that the organization of services for international students, beginning with orientation, may unintentionally foster this segregation. Similarly, it was often suggested that social activities, particularly soon after arrival, be intentionally integrated between domestic and international students. These suggestions ranged from identifying ways to bridge social interests to purposefully pairing or grouping diverse students through mentorships or other high-impact practices. Overall, there was a consensus around the value of inclusion.

“ *This is an opportunity because international students can be a great source of becoming mentors to our students culturally. Would it be possible to develop a system that more systematically utilized the expertise that international students bring in?* ”

Similarly, we heard appeals for more intentional cultural exchange beyond individual social interactions. A common concept was the organization and promotion of additional cultural events, similar to the positive example set by iDays and culturally or ethnically-based student clubs. Many others, however, suggested a ‘deeper’ exchange through cultural dialogue and education with an emphasis on creating safe and respectful spaces for this to take place. Importantly, this includes education about local Indigenous peoples and reconciliation in Canada.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the introduction of diversity is not without challenges of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. International students raised concerns and experiences, and domestic students, faculty, and staff acknowledged their own biases. Together, we heard a desire to actively cultivate an appreciation of diversity with suggestions for broad intercultural and inclusion training or even a formal Diversity and Inclusion Representative.

### Student Wellbeing

International students bring a great deal of potential in their diversity, but in doing so also enter a challenging new environment. They need support to become socially and culturally oriented and to maintain their physical, mental, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing.

International students face a particular challenge to their wellbeing in their introduction to campus, the community, and Canada at large. We heard reports of culture shock, homesickness, and a lack of friends

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to rely on. At this critical stage, a deeper and more comprehensive orientation is seen as needed prior to the additional demands of classes. It was also suggested that this be extended through further workshops on Canadian culture, interpersonal skills, and other supports for integration. A specific, common proposal was for a 'transition buddy' system with domestic students.

“ *Resources and information should not only be in English, but many languages, especially for mental health, sexual assault, academic appeals, and student affairs.* ”

Throughout their time at TRU, international students also face additional challenges to their well-being. As described above, they often deal with heightened stresses of immersion and financial demands. This was reinforced by reports from international students of a need for greater mental health supports, and concerns that these supports be inclusive and not jeopardize their study permits. Similarly, international students were seen to have varying levels of mental, physical, and sexual health literacy that need accommodation. For critical services, it was suggested that information and access be supported through provision in multiple languages. Finally, well-being is also spiritual, and a specific concern was raised in the lack of sufficient space for the practice of all faiths.

## Service Preparedness and Support

As with the academic experience, the foundation of student support is the faculty and staff who provide student services. To successfully address the considerations above - cultural exchange and inclusion, orientation, and student wellbeing - we need to actively prepare and support our service providers.

“ *Diversity and intercultural training for everyone - staff, faculty, and students. We're all part of this so we all need to be prepared and trained.* ”

We are fortunate, again, to have faculty and staff who express a commitment to be responsive to international students' needs in terms of policy, infrastructure, and service delivery. To fulfil that commitment, we need to recognize the workload implications of increased international enrolment. This was explained in terms of both volume and differences in needs. It requires additional funding, better communication regarding incoming students, and training for intercultural communication and support.

## Questions to Consider

- How can we better support cultural exchange and equity on campus and in the community?
- How can we better support international students' wellbeing - socially, mentally, physically, and spiritually?
- How can we better prepare and support faculty and staff who provide services to international students?
- Is there anything about the cultural and social experience we missed?



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## JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

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This discussion paper is just the beginning of our work to have TRU build an international student plan. It reflects the start of an ongoing conversation that we want you to join. We invite you to consider the questions posed in the paper and provide feedback at **[trusu.ca/international](https://trusu.ca/international)**.

For more information, contact us at [info@trusu.ca](mailto:info@trusu.ca) or visit us in the Students' Union Building.

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## ENDNOTES

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