



WELCOMING THE WORLD

*Report on the International Experience
and Vision at TRU*

TRU Students' Union

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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.

Thompson Rivers University Students' Union

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April 17, 2020

WELCOMING THE WORLD

REPORT ON A CONVERSATION

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. This is a report on a conversation to explore those challenges and 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 report is the result of the campus coming 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. This led to an interim discussion paper upon which further feedback from individual community members was solicited and incorporated. The body of this report thereby reflects the community's experiences and ideas about recruitment and enrolment, meeting students' basic needs, the academic experience, and the cultural and social experience. This conversation is exemplified by quotes presented in the following manner:

“*The majority of my classmates are international students. I think they're great.*”

Further, the report presents, as in the box below, the important contributions and perspectives of TRU World on each of the themes identified by the campus community.

TRU World Perspective

TRU World is a dedicated department focused on helping international students from when they are first thinking about applying, through to their graduation.

tru.ca/truworld/about-truworld.html

We invite you to use this report as a foundation on which to think about and contribute to a continuously improving international experience for all at Thompson Rivers University. Learn more and stay connected to this conversation at trusu.ca/international.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began as this report was being finalized. Both the pandemic and its after-effects have and will undoubtedly create circumstances very different from those under which this conversation has occurred so far. Our needs and direction as a university community may be altered for some time, and to

some extent in a lasting way. Some of the specifics in the report may seem less urgent or even out-of-place now. Nonetheless, this conversation illuminates community values to guide us and valuable lessons to apply both presently and certainly when we can more fully welcome the world once again.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

KEEPING POSITIVE EXPERIENCES FRONT OF MIND

This report is a candid reflection of an open community conversation. The topics are complicated and experiences vary, which is exactly why it's important to maintain honest dialogue to address challenges head-on.

However, we want to ensure that the pursuit of improvement maintains constructive relationships, recognizes current efforts, and highlights the broadly positive international experience. The following is a selection of the sentiments that belong front of mind as a context for this conversation.

“ One of the pieces that I think this institution does well is – we've got TRU World. It's recognized across the world. We've got great support for students. We've got ISAs [International Student Advisors]. ”

“ She learns a lot from the students. She actually gets internationalized by the students. I think it's a positive feedback. TRU does a good job. We are always constantly learning, and the exchange happens not only one way but the other way. ”

“ I have really enjoyed the opportunity to work with international students. ”

“ A few of my friends are international students, and a number of them have been a part of an organization I'm with. It's always been a pleasure having them. ”

“ On the positive side, this is an opportunity because international students can be a great source of becoming mentors to our students culturally. ”

“ I like having the diversity at TRU. It allows for a broader perspective in classes and the ability to learn about many cultures in one place. ”

“ Regarding the ... program, all the faculty have been extremely accepting and helpful. The rest of TRU has been less close, maybe because of the special program I am in, but the welcoming was good. ”

“ It has been wonderful. I'm an international undergraduate student and am studying what I love thanks to TRU. ”

WELCOMING THE WORLD

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?

The Context for Planning

To answer the question above, we can't ignore the context provided by government and broader forces. Recognizing this context, we can better determine our own approach.

Government has approached international education largely as a commodity, seeking to maximize fiscal and economic impact while providing limited regulation or support.¹ Fortunately, the provincial government has responded to calls for more robust policy by considering building its own, more comprehensive international student plan.² The impact and scope of this plan will also depend on broader provincial postsecondary policies. Not least among these the issue of (under) funding, which many at TRU see as driving a narrowly financial approach to internationalization.

The federal government, with its critical visa-issuing authority, recently released an international education strategy to carry through the next four years. While this plan adds a focus on diversifying the international student population, it also maintains a thoroughly economic and growth-driven motivation.³

Furthermore, our governments pursue these policies in a global environment of market competition.

“Every country is trying to take more and more international students because of the economic trend. Economic globalization is a major trend that drives internationalization.”

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 by most, what else might need attention is up for debate. We heard a need for greater balance. 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.

Overall, we heard a consistent desire for decisions about the international experience to include the community to ensure all perspectives are considered and balance can be maintained.

Recruitment: Who and How?

When considering how recruitment can contribute to a deliberate international experience, 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. 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. This would help international students themselves determine whether TRU is a good fit for them,

WELCOMING THE WORLD

and, should they decide to come, to have clearer expectations. Some suggested that this information is sufficiently available and international students are responsible for educating and preparing themselves. In either case, the issue remains how to better align expectations and realities.

Finally, the benefits of international perspectives are seen as limited by a current lack of diversity and balance in the student population. Lack of diversity is understood in terms of countries of origin as well as other factors such as financial means. The community aspires to truly welcome those from 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 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. In terms of resources, infrastructure such as housing, programming such as course delivery, and workloads for service delivery are stressed by rapid growth. It is also a social concern, both on campus and in the community, when an unanticipated or poorly understood pace of change creates animosity or alienation. We heard a vision of international enrolment described as 'slower', 'controlled', 'organic', and 'assured'.

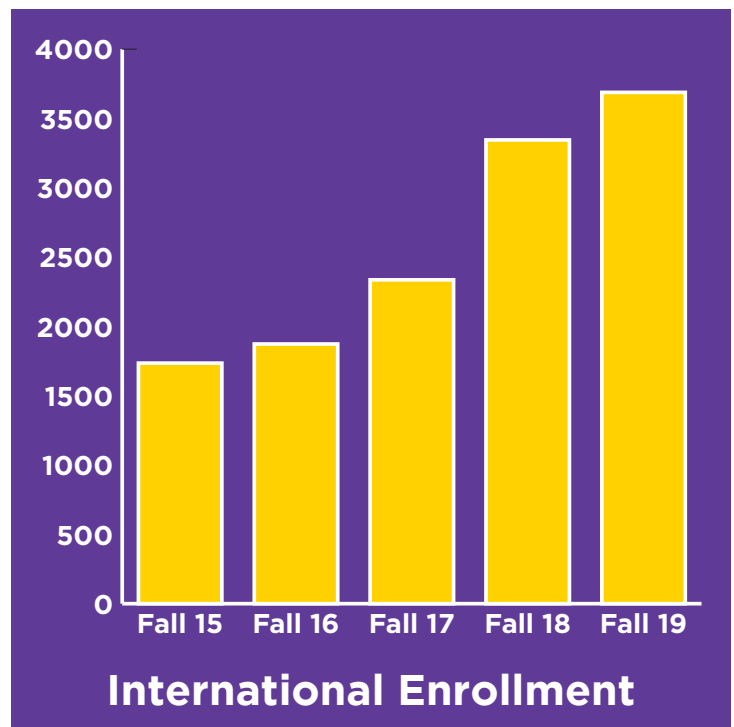
“*Too much too fast - we feel like TRU grew very quickly and we didn't have the courses, we didn't have the supports, but we brought in the students.*”

“*Work needs to be done by Immigration itself. They're bringing students here. They have a responsibility to teach and educate Canadians about why we are*”

bringing these people here and how these people are contributing to our economy... The Kamloops community blames the university and they say, 'TRU brought so many international students, and it's their fault!'”

A further consideration, not raised in the community conversation but recognized by university management, that the financial benefit provided by a large international student population also represents a financial risk should international events cause dramatic enrolment drops.⁴

To fully realize the benefits and minimize the risks from international enrolment, there is a clear consensus that we must be proactive not reactive. This begins with the forthcoming Strategic Enrolment Management Plan, which will need to fulsomely address international enrolment to be effective.⁵



(Source: 2019/2020 Budget Town Hall Presentation. Bovis-Crossen and Milovick. January 14, 2020)

WELCOMING THE WORLD

TRU World Perspective - A Plan to Welcome International Students

TRU has many benefits that make studying here a popular choice, including flexible admissions, choice of programs, academic partnership pathways, affordable tuition and living expenses, supportive recruitment processes, fast admission processing, and supporting communities.

These factors, along with current student experiences all contribute to TRU's international growth and success. In Fall 2019, 3,688 international students from 103 countries were studying in TRU's vibrant campus community.

Pre-arrival support is provided to international students before they apply to TRU and during the application process. Pre-departure sessions are conducted in person, or online, to prepare students with important information before attending TRU.

International Student Advisors (ISAs) provide personal support for international students and help them towards a smooth transition into life as a student in Canada. A comprehensive, multiday orientation is required for all new international students. The orientation covers topics such as accommodations, medical insurance, student service resources, academic support, academic integrity, life in Canada, culture and recreation, personal safety, immigration regulations, financial planning, and forms.

In 2018, Thompson Rivers University was among 46 universities, colleges, and polytechnic institutions across the country who participated in the Canadian Bureau of International Education's (CBIE) 2018 International Student Survey, with close to 500 TRU international students responding.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

MEETING STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS

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 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 must get to and from campus and keep themselves well-fed between classes. 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. Many suggested more can be done to ensure international students are made aware and assured of all costs including ancillary fees, course materials, housing, food, and transportation. Others argued this information is provided. Again, the issue remains how to better align expectations and realities. Students suggested providing more services directly (particularly considering higher fee rates) or providing more fulsome 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 debate about how and how much international students are charged.

In terms of how much, the debate reflects the call for limited, predictable fee increases, but extends to question the factor of difference between domestic and international fee rates. The majority opinion, from all groups, called for lower international fee rates, and highlighted issues of fairness as well as whether admissions prioritized wealth or academic merit. Some, by contrast, expressed support for high differential fees. This reflected a notion of greater tax and other social contributions of domestic students and their families, the university's market position, or the need for cost recovery.

In terms of how international students pay, there were calls to ease more restrictive payment deadlines and the minimum fee for four courses per semester regardless of registration. There were further calls to better help facilitate payment in the face of challenges with currency conversion, home government restrictions on outgoing cash, navigating the Canadian banking system, etc.

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.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

While they may win some merit-based awards at TRU, international students have minimal access to financial support on the basis of need. As a result, in the CBIE 2018 International Student Survey, satisfaction with financial aid services was amongst the lowest ratings for TRU (75%).⁶ It is untenable to continue to recruit and enroll international students whose financial means may be insufficient and to restrict their access to aid. 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.

Employment

Another way in which international students meet their needs, and gain Canadian experience, is through employment. International students expressed a broad expectation, and often necessity, that employment and employment support will be available. This contrasts with official regulation, cited by some, that employment may not be depended upon for tuition and living expenses.

“*Why can these poor students not work 30 hours? It is set by the regulations from the federal government. And they are here to study. They're not here to work under the guise of studying. That is not right... On the one hand we need to support international students, but we also need to know where the line is.*”

International students 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. For example, while the CBIE 2018 International Student Survey found that 49% of TRU respondents are currently working

compared to only 37% at other BC institutions, 71% at TRU reported “difficulty finding work” as a problem compared to 52% at other BC institutions.⁶ There were also concerns that competition with local populations for limited jobs, real or perceived, leads to animosity or discrimination against international students.

“*They're not taking anything away from you. They're filling positions that are minimum wage positions. They're not going directly into managerial posts. They're not even getting the jobs that they have experience in.*”

There are again two broad options to move forward. We can be more assertive 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

One critical basic need of concern is housing. International students, like their domestic peers, struggle to find available and affordable housing. This raises questions of the supply of appropriate housing and processes for securing it safely and fairly.

Kamloops has a low rental housing vacancy rate of 2.1%. The impact of growing enrolment at TRU in recent years, entirely international, is evident in a lower vacancy rate of 1.6% closer to the university. Fortunately, rates have begun to increase from even greater lows following new housing starts. However, the average price of rent in Kamloops has continued to steadily increase to \$990, with higher rates closer to the university where demand is greater.⁷

It is broadly agreed that students, international and domestic alike, are seeking greater affordability in housing. Similarly, most agreed that a lack of availability exacerbates the challenge, particularly as international enrolment has increased demand. The rental market was described as ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘a mess’, creating pressure in the community.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

This has also 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. These experiences raised points of debate. Some identified this as an unacceptable condition to be wholly remedied. Others, however, suggested that high-density, communal living may be acceptable to some international students to save money, and that the aim should rather be to provide appropriate facilities for it.

“*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.*”

A tight rental market can be made worse by difficulty searching for housing and vulnerability to both scams and abusive tenancy arrangements. International students often search for housing from outside the country and have limited familiarity with legal rights and responsibilities of tenants. In the CBIE 2018 International Student Survey, 56% of TRU respondents said “arranging for a place to live” pre-arrival was a problem compared to 49% at other BC institutions, and satisfaction with housing services was amongst the lowest ratings for TRU (72%).⁶ A number of participants shared stories of their own or their acquaintances that exemplified the importance of increasing housing services and protections.

“*Housing is a big problem because internationals don’t search for apartments the same way in their home countries. There are agency companies for that. Contacting landlords is a new thing for them when they come here, and they don’t know where to look to contact them or how to use those tools. If dorms are not available, TRU might still help them further. Workshops on the basics of the Tenancy Act, the outline of a lease contract, how to use Kijiji, bus routes...*”

Proposed solutions include that housing to be supplied or secured as part of enrolment, assistance in securing housing, and means to reduce housing costs. In particular, student residences were identified as providing positive experience currently and as an ideal solution to be expanded. Residences could allow for more appropriate housing conditions, preferably as defined by students, a housing guarantee, and greater affordability.

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 and purpose-built student housing.

Food

A second basic need identified for improvement is food. Here, the points of concern for international students are a reiteration of an ongoing conversation about how food services support the university community, as well as those struggling financially.

In 2018, TRU hosted a consultation to shape a new campus food service contract in response to student calls for improvement. Those calls identified issues of variety, options, and accommodations; price, quality, and value; and hours of service, diversity of food providers, and space and amenities. The consultant recommended immediate improvements through additional food trucks, enhanced or new (potentially independent) retail outlets, extended hours, and a full range of meals. It further recommended the eventual creation of a dining hall, operating 24/7 with all-you-care-to-eat meal plans.

“*[A dining hall] is the norm in all the universities in China. When the students come, they say, ‘Where’s the canteen?’ And their idea of a canteen is a big hall with a buffet of all varieties of food. You pay a fixed fee and you can eat. The student eating on campus in many countries is cheaper than eating out, but it seems to be worse here.*”

WELCOMING THE WORLD

“TRU needs to invest in a large cafeteria that is open 24/7 so that ALL students and faculty can have access to healthy affordable meals on a meal plan. The culinary arts school is not enough. It is not open on weekends or evenings. I feel badly for International students who are on campus on the weekends and few food vendors are open.”

The present conversation reflected, very closely, these same issues and proposed solutions. International students expressed or were described as having the same needs and wants, perhaps to a greater extent because they are more likely to live on campus or have expectations from campuses in their home countries.

“Affordable meals on campus is another thing. Quite honestly, I can't afford to eat on campus every day. How could a student?”

While campus food services might provide further savings through meal plans and other offerings, affordability is one of the more intractable service issues. Supplementary initiatives and services are called for, and those that exist, such as the Food Bank, are described as under increasing pressure. Ultimately, affordability is a fundamental issue that must be addressed more comprehensively than one issue such as food.

Food as a basic need of students and as a foundational service of a campus community is part of the conversation on the international experience largely because it continues work to evolve and grow to match the development of the university. As international enrolment grows, the need to continue to implement the recommendations of the food service consultation report also grows.

Transportation

A final basic need with implications from and for the international experience at TRU is transportation. Here, growth of international enrolment has provided a considerable benefit and opportunity to improve public transit service and support sustainability goals. Many suggested this can be better leveraged, and international students can be better supported in a range of transportation options.

Because international students are less likely to have a private vehicle, they are more likely to use public transit. This has contributed to increased ridership that has supported expanded service. However, many pointed out that the expansion has not fully met the demand and could be more closely coordinated.

“If we know what kind of volume is coming in we can network more with community stakeholders like housing societies and BC Transit to say 'This is what we're anticipating - what do you think you can do?'. Knowing that this percentage of students home stay up in Aberdeen or out in this area we need more buses.”

International students expressed a frustration with the limitations of transit service, particularly for those living off-campus. A secondary concern is the provision of information and orientation to the transit system.

This orientation and preparation for transportation is a more urgent concern where international students choose to drive vehicles and may be unfamiliar with road conditions, particularly in the winter. Recent tragic vehicle incidents involving TRU students serve as a call to action on this front.

The international experience at TRU has largely been a positive force in developing transportation services in support of the needs of all community members, and this experience can be built on in a forward-looking approach.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

TRU World Perspective - Meeting Students' Basic Needs

TRU Responsibilities

The estimated cost of attending TRU and living in Kamloops is clearly laid out prior to students applying for a study permit, and the estimate is adjusted yearly for continued accuracy. All students receive the breakdown of the approximate cost of living in their Conditional Letter of Acceptance, so they can plan ahead and there are no surprises.

After enrollment, scholarship opportunities exist, but availability is limited due to eligibility requirements for each scholarship. Financial aid has strict guidelines and cannot make all funding available to International students.

TRU World staff help students find accommodation on campus, off-campus, and through Homestay. TRU has three residence options on or close to the University campus. Homestay is a unique experience which allows students to live with a Canadian family and participate in Canadian culture and customs.

Working in Canada is discussed in the predeparture and in the mandatory orientation for international students when they arrive in Canada. International Student Services provides workshops and are also available to questions throughout the semester.

Student Responsibilities

The Government of Canada requires students to demonstrate financial sufficiency for only the first year of studies, regardless of the duration of the course or program of studies in which they are enrolled.

Officers may take into consideration sources of funds derived through scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships, as well as financial support. International students in Canada are ineligible for benefits under the Canada Student Loan program.

Students that are coming to study in Canada need to make their studies the priority. Working in Canada should not be to meet basic needs or for survival.

Students are expected to use the information provided by TRU to make informed decisions about the resources realistically required to succeed in Canada (i.e. if rent is communicated to be \$800-1000, don't expect to get by on \$300/month).

Students can find more information about working in Canada on the TRU World and Canadian Government websites.

CBIE's 2018 survey says: One of TRU international students' top 5 reasons for applying was that TRU was the most effective at communicating and providing information.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

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, staff, and domestic students shared experiences with international students they described as 'raising the bar,' 'eager,' '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.

“ We talk about stereotypes - that we [faculty] all agree that our best students tend to be international and also our worst. ”

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.

“ I struggled with studying when I first came here. However, I have made many adjustments in order to catch up with the new study system and culture. ”

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. Particular challenges heard from international students included navigating academic resources, understanding class structure, and managing an appropriate course load. 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 or writing support at the graduate level. 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

WELCOMING THE WORLD

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.

I have had international students in my university level courses who cannot read or speak English. I have referred students to the fresh start/back on track program but that program is limited in terms of what it can do. If students cannot speak or read English and are using translation computer services in university level classes, have they been screened adequately? How can international students benefit from courses if they are unable to understand the professor and content? And what is the impact on students given they are constantly struggling to keep up? It doesn't seem fair to them or the professors or other students.

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.

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. International students further highlighted this challenge in the summer semester, in which they are more likely than domestic students to seek courses.

“Classes are limited especially in summer semester. They only have one or two classes, and they get filled within a day. For example, in managerial accounting lots of students are on the waitlist. They should open one more class. We are paying a lot of tuition fees. At least there should be some flexibility for classes.”

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. English language learning concerns also become a further impact on classroom dynamics.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

“*In some classes it does seem to be a hindrance when an instructor has to cater to students with limited English proficiency. This is also a challenge during group projects.*”

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. In the CBIE 2018 International Student Survey, 46% of TRU respondents said “getting course credits accepted from home” was a problem while much fewer said so at other BC institutions (28%).⁶ 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.

“*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.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

TRU World Perspective - The Academic Experience

International students have free access to academic supports at TRU to improve their journey to success, including: academic advising, counselling, learning support centers, and career education.

In addition to all of the student services provided by TRU, we recognize that international students also have additional needs for supports. A robust support system is in place within TRU World, including the diverse team of ISAs to provide students with continued support from pre-arrival to orientation.

A dynamic English as a Second Language program focuses on improving English for Academic Purposes and provides the core courses to develop language proficiency, laying the foundation for student success.

In response to unprecedented International Student growth, TRU has renewed the Strategic Enrollment Management Planning to improve access to courses, and to manage growth and diversity.

CBIE's 2018 survey says: One of the highest ratings (96%) for TRU students was that they were able to choose a program of study to meet their objective

WELCOMING THE WORLD

THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

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.

More than any other topic, cultural and social exchange prompted reports of positive experiences. Diversity, campus life, friendships, engagement, and inclusion were highlighted as benefits of internationalization. Similarly, the CBIE 2018 International Student Survey found “sense of belonging” measures to be much higher at TRU compared to other BC institutions, from “faculty members and teaching assistants help me to feel included in the classroom” (77% agree vs. 63%) and “staff and students here have shown an interest in my country and culture” (70% agree vs. 54%) to support in “becoming involved in campus activities” (84% vs. 69%).⁶

“As a domestic student, I have learned much about global differences and culture norms thanks to the amount of international students at TRU. Since starting my degree, I have made many good friends from across the globe.”

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 and related language barriers. There was concern that the organization of services and programs for international students, beginning with orientation and continuing with ESL training, 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 promoting inclusivity in clubs, to purposefully pairing or grouping diverse students through mentorships, buddy-systems, or other high-impact practices. Others suggested that diverse socializing would improve organically if campus life was improved through more events and sense of school spirit. 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

WELCOMING THE WORLD

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. This conversation itself was not exempt from expressions of animosity from some domestic students, and we heard of further negative interactions on campus and in the community.

“ I've heard stories both from fellow international students and domestic students as well. There are definitely more people turning against people from two specific countries, India and China. ”

“ Everyone must have a story from their students where they have experienced some kind of racism in Kamloops - a small, friendly city like this. It all comes down to education in the community about the positive side international students bring and contribute economically and culturally. ”

Together, we heard a desire to actively cultivate an appreciation of diversity with suggestions for broad intercultural and inclusion training and activities. These included making STSS1060: Intercultural Perspectives mandatory for all students, the creation of a formal Diversity and Inclusion Representative, community partnerships for education, and community integration of intercultural events.

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 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. This should address contemporary issues international students may confront for the first time such as legalized cannabis and LGBTQ+ pride. A specific, common proposal was for a 'transition buddy' system with domestic students.

“ [Name] is teaching Japanese students about life in Canada and how to live and exist in Canada and talk to Canadians. At the same time, [those] students learn about students from India, students from China, their customs and their norms, and how all of that should work together. While they are trying to adapt to a new country, within that country that is so much more ... How do you adapt quickly enough to be successful in your studies and social life? How to maintain that balance with the resources that you have... and still be yourself? ”

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, securing basic needs, 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.

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

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 through interpreters or translation. Others repeated

WELCOMING THE WORLD

the possibility of a peer mentorship program to support the navigation of services building from foundational information provided through orientations.

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.

With increased numbers [of international students], supports have not increased to match the demands. We are supporting double the number of students or more with mostly the same resources that were available ten years ago.

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, training for intercultural communication and support, and ensuring student feedback is incorporated.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

TRU World Perspective - The Cultural and Social Experience

TRU has launched its Intercultural Ambassador program to support students and encourage cultural exchange and equity on campus. ISAs also advocate on behalf of international students by providing culturally relevant information across campus and in the community.

The TRU Intercultural Coordinator provides training for faculty and staff to enhance intercultural understanding at TRU.

In addition, the TRU Wellness Centre is a great resource on campus to help support students who are stressed, suffering from culture shock, need nutrition tips, and so much more.

Programs like LEAP and Adventure U, as well as service learning, clubs and volunteering all provide opportunities for student engagement to enhance the sense of belonging.

A Multi-Faith Space is available on campus where students can reflect, pray, and meditate. There is also a Multi-Faith Chaplaincy on campus to provide religious and spiritual care to the TRU community.

The Tournament Capital Centre is a state-of-the-art facility on campus that includes a gym, indoor and outdoor track, courts, gymnastics centre, and swimming pool. TRU students have free access to the aquatic centre using their student card.

International students bring opportunities for all to develop their intercultural understanding and make friends from around the world.

CBIE's 2018 Survey says: Thompson Rivers University was rated as the top institution among similar institutions in BC (number 2 in Canada) for students feeling successful in living in Canadian culture and society.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION!

This report concludes the current project, but is intended to serve the ongoing work of the university community to continuously improve the international experience for all. It reflects the current moment in a conversation that we encourage you to continue.

We invite you to consider the issues identified in the report, and raise them in the spaces you participate in TRU decision-making. For more information and support, you can request a presentation and guided discussion for your group at trusu.ca/international.

For more information, contact us at info@trusu.ca or visit us in the Students' Union Building.

WELCOMING THE WORLD

ENDNOTES

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