

International Students Toolkit:



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario

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Social Determinants of Health Framework

This toolkit uses a social determinants of health framework to examine different facets of the international student experience to better understand their unique vulnerabilities and needs regarding their mental health. This framework refers to the non-medical aspects of a person’s life that shape their health outcomes. As outlined in the [Anti-Oppressive Practice Toolkit](#), they are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. This approach is reflective of the World Health Organization’s stance that mental health and the onset of many mental disorders are shaped by the upstream factors that construct our environments and material conditions.



Introduction

Canada has a strong reputation as a desirable and welcoming destination for international students. Over the past several years, there has been a marked increase in the recruitment of international students to Ontario's post-secondary institutions. These post-secondary institutions have consistently demonstrated that international students are critical to the long-term viability and success of Ontario's university and college sectors. The unique contributions and lived experiences of international students are also integral in promoting the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion within post-secondary education.

International students provide significant financial contributions to Canada's post-secondary education system and can also face considerable financial strain while attending Canadian institutions. According to data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, in 2019, international students contributed over \$21 billion to the Canadian economy, with over half of that amount going towards tuition and other fees at post-secondary institutions. This is particularly true for private satellite schools that partner with Ontario's public colleges. Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk found the net profit margin for them ranged between 18 and 53 per cent in 2020.

Arriving from more than 180 countries, international students who come to Canada are ethnically and culturally diverse, contributing positively to Canada's multiculturalism. They are also essential in supporting population growth and filling the growing gap in an aging labor force. As Canada continues to experience employment shortages, international students are an important pool for organizations seeking staff. In addition to their economic contribution, international students bring cultural diversity and new perspectives to Canadian classrooms, enriching the learning experience for all students.

The mental health and well-being of international students are important topics for post-secondary institutions to address. Being far away from their home communities, cultural differences in the understanding of wellness, and the age-related developmental trajectory of mental health concerns make international students an important population for institutions to consider when developing supportive mental health and well-being services and programming. Through an analysis of these critical facets of daily life, this toolkit aims to dissect key issues and provide a fulsome understanding of how the unique vulnerability of international students intersects with daily life to mold mental health outcomes. While the issue of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of international students is a complex subject, this toolkit aims to provide a snapshot of the issue coupled with practical strategies for post-secondary institutions to implement that can improve their well-being. As the world is rapidly changing, we acknowledge this is a living document that will be amended as newer sources of information become available.

International Students’ Mental Health

The challenges of adjustment and acculturation have been well-documented; however, the same attention has not been given to the mental health challenges experienced by international students. Recent research has shown that international students often report higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and stress than their domestic counterparts. These feelings of mental distress can further be exacerbated by the complications associated with the many barriers that international students navigate in Canada, such as managing basic needs while also forging a new life without familiar supports. Studies consistently demonstrate that many international students experience a conflict between their own values and those of their adopted home, exacerbating feelings of difference. Researchers theorize that international students may not be well equipped to handle the challenges that may arise over their post-secondary careers, such as caring for themselves, balancing competing priorities, and adjusting to new social norms. International students are more likely to report a hesitancy to seek supports, as well as poor physical health, fewer social supports, less religious involvement and spirituality, and negative attitudes, all of which have been linked to higher levels of psychological distress. These issues demonstrate the critical need to establish key supports both on and off campus. International students face unique and added concerns regarding immigration, employment, and finances.

Many campuses have a department that is focused specifically on providing support for international students, including help with obtaining a Post-Graduate Work Permit, applying for Permanent Residency, investigating and resolving study permit concerns, and assisting with immigration for immediate family members (such as a spouse and/or children who remain in their home community). International student support departments can also often help with emergency bursary applications, and host peer support programs that match upper-year student mentors with younger students who need help with navigating life on campus. These programs can vary depending on the institution and size of the international student population.

SPOTLIGHT

St. Lawrence College has recently made changes to its international student department through its [One College One Student](#) philosophy, a fantastic example of the whole campus approach in action. A result of this approach was the collapse of two separate departments (International Education and Student Affairs) into the new Student Success department. Global engagement and intercultural understanding and support are woven throughout the work of the new Student Success division.

Recruitment and Pre-Arrival

A significant issue affecting international students in Canada is the existence of independent international college recruiters who earn commissions by registering students to attend various Canadian post-secondary institutions. According to public records, Ontario's public colleges paid more than \$114 million in commission to recruiters in 2020-21, according to the 2021 auditor general report, a total that excludes the amount paid by private colleges. A CBC investigation found that some freelance recruiters are incentivized to push international students to enroll in private colleges, where their commissions are often higher. However, these private institutions can be ill-prepared to fully support the needs of the large number of international students that are recruited to attend. Some of the misleading claims that external recruiters make when recruiting international students include the ease of financing their education, their ability to gain permanent residence following their studies as well as misrepresenting how quickly international students can find permanent work in their chosen fields.

Post-secondary institutions have had to respond to these issues, including expanding their own in-house recruitment departments and shrinking the number of external recruitment agents that they work with, to ensure that they are properly trained and credentialed. Many post-secondary institutions have also been proactive in making connections with students and their families prior to their arrival in Canada. It is imperative that post-secondary institutions develop pre-arrival orientation programs to ensure that international students and their families are well-informed on what students can expect during their time in Canada. By providing all this information upfront and connecting students to essential resources, post-secondary institutions can support student success right from the moment of admission and have a better understanding of the cohort and what needs they may have.



SPOTLIGHT

- **Fleming College** offers virtual and in-person [Connect and Get Ready](#) sessions, where students can connect with peers from the same program, meet the International Student Services staff, and attend themed sessions aimed at preparing them to come to Canada and get ready for their studies. Example sessions include topics on housing, immigration, counselling, and health insurance, among others.
- **Fleming College** also offered a [Global Friends Café pilot](#) program in 2022, which ran one month prior to students arriving in Canada. The program connected current Fleming students to future Fleming students abroad in order to form a bond based on common interests and cultural curiosity. The program promoted acceptance of diversity, better integration of international students, and opportunities for true connection and friendship.
- **University of Waterloo** has developed an [online resource](#) that provides preparatory information to students prior to their arrival. This guide includes information on preparing to travel, registering for orientation, programs and services, immigration consulting, filing taxes in Canada, transportation, technology, applying for a social insurance number, and so much more.
- **Sheridan College** has recently begun sending senior staff to countries that send a large pool of students. Often, they are joined by upper-year students attending the college from that country. Making these in-person links can allow families to learn more about the campus community and allow leadership to dispel some of the misconceptions that students and their families may have regarding their Canadian educational journey. A full list of topics covered in these sessions is found [here](#).
- **Lambton College** has mandated [virtual modules](#) that educate international students on all the documents they will need to have in place prior to their arrival in the country. Topics are wide-ranging and encompass the process of getting their student visa, navigating border services, how to succeed academically, how to build a social network, and how to navigate the post-graduate job market.
- **Colleges Ontario** in March 2023 published the Ontario public colleges' [Standards of Practice for International Education](#), which sets out a common set of minimum standards for international student activity.

Financial Vulnerability

Official statistics indicate that in 2022 and 2023, international undergraduate students paid 429% more than domestic undergraduate students, while international graduate students paid 184% more in tuition than their domestic student counterparts. This significant differential in tuition exacerbates the cost-of-living crisis that many Canadians, including international students are experiencing in today's economy. Statistics Canada estimates that living costs have risen by 5.9%, compared to the same metrics in January 2022. Research has also found that international students often have high levels of debt but also bear the high expectations of their families and home communities. While the federal government requires incoming international students to have the equivalent of \$10,000 Canadian, post-secondary institutions have begun to recognize that this is not sufficient when accounting for the full expense for many students.

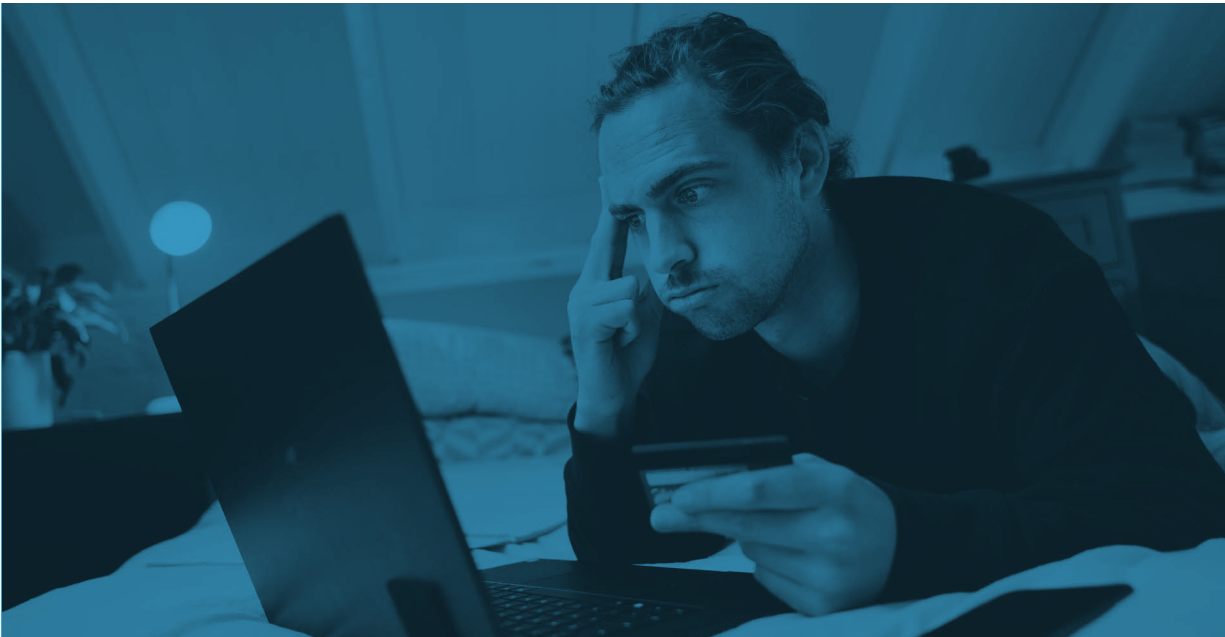
Financial stress has been linked to significant negative mental health outcomes. Students with fewer financial resources are likely to have diminished academic performance, poorer physical health, and increased levels of anxiety and depression. They may be forced to drop out of their studies due to these financial issues and are also likely to struggle with developing healthy coping mechanisms, which can affect their overall quality of life.

In October 2022, there was a federal policy change that allowed students to work an unlimited number of hours until the end of December 2023. This recent change is aimed at alleviating labor shortages while also helping eligible students to address rising living costs. However, as it is a short-term strategy, it does little to address the structural issues that place students in a position of increased financial vulnerability. While this opportunity addresses the national affordability crisis, it also has the potential to increase levels of stress for students as they are required to balance their academic commitments with their employment commitments. Furthermore, finding and maintaining a job, a necessity for most international students, may be a struggle in and of itself.

Qualitative research has demonstrated that international students often lack an in-depth understanding of personal finance and the Canadian financial system. This is especially concerning as these students are undertaking expensive educational pursuits and may have taken large loans that will have long-term impacts on their financial and overall wellness. Research consistently demonstrates that international students are uninformed about the Canadian banking system, and often struggle with making sound financial decisions to help fund their education. Data shows that families often underestimate the full cost of their Canadian post-secondary education for their students.

Post-secondary institutions often have dedicated staff in place to help support international students with their transition, but this staff is often not equipped to provide personal finance education to students, who are often navigating these issues on their own for the first time in their lives. While many institutions have made information on emergency loans or bursaries accessible for students, international students often require more support, given the fact that they have significantly higher costs.

Financial norms also differ between countries, and international students may be unaware of common Canadian standards. For example, it is common to use credit cards for everyday purchases in Canada, including online transactions, while many other societies rely on cash. Many students have also struggled with a weakened home currency, increasing their chances of experiencing financial hardship. These unique factors mean that international students often require increased support compared to their domestic counterparts. These supports are not only vital for the long-term success of students but also to ensure that they have enough financial savvy not to fall prey to scams. Research demonstrates that students would benefit from having financial conversations embedded into their orientation experience. Furthermore, having ongoing opportunities to educate students on the basics of Canadian banking, and ensuring they have timely access to important resources, such as emergency bursaries and financial professionals is also critical.



SPOTLIGHT

- The [online resource](#) developed by the **University of Waterloo** also provides overarching financial information to students prior to their arrival. This resource outlines simple but critical information, such as the amount of money that the average international student will require in their first few months in Canada, how to set up a Canadian bank account, and how to pay tuition fees to avoid delays and late penalties. By providing this information for students to learn some banking and financial basics, they are helping to alleviate financial anxiety, while also ensuring that students understand common Canadian banking norms.
- **York University** has developed a series of pre-arrival [webinars](#) to provide students with information they need to make informed decisions while planning their finances. This includes the general cost of living in Canada, available sources of aid and resources for budgeting and financial planning.
- **RBC** also offers [educational resources](#), providing an overview of Canadian banking basics. These resources also provide a snapshot of some common issues that international students face, including how to find a part-time job, managing money and how to build a professional network. By providing these resources, international students can learn long-term strategies of how to manage and build financial resources within the Canadian context.

Recommendations

- 1. Enhance financial literacy programs and support** – Develop comprehensive financial literacy programs specifically tailored for international students.

Examples: Programs can include topics such as personal finance, budgeting, banking systems, and navigating the Canadian financial landscape. Offer ongoing support and resources, including access to financial professionals and emergency bursaries, to ensure students have the necessary tools to make informed financial decisions and manage their financial well-being effectively. Ensure ongoing opportunities for financial education and support throughout students' academic journey.

- 2. Embed financial conversations into orientation and ongoing support** – Integrate financial education and conversations into the orientation process for international students.

Examples: Resources and workshops during orientation to educate students about the Canadian banking system, credit cards, and financial norms. Realistic estimates of the cost of living in Ontario. Realistic estimates of the time needed to find a job in Ontario.

Housing Insecurity

Housing is a complex issue, and housing shortages are currently impacting much of the population in Ontario. This issue has a significant impact on wellbeing, and many students have reported having to choose between a safe location and cheaper housing costs. Students must navigate between competing priorities, including balancing academic success with working to offset their costs. Furthermore, while undergraduate students often start off in residence or university housing, graduate students must often make long-term decisions about housing without having a full understanding of their new city. Many landlords require a credit check and local references, which makes even acquiring housing a serious problem for some international students.

International students may be vulnerable to couch-surfing due to precarious housing situations. Incoming international students undergo significant life transitions and are often required to find housing without their regular social supports. Difficulty finding safe and appropriate housing and the associated instability have been linked to higher rates of anxiety, stress, and depression. International students are also at risk of mistreatment from Landlords, as they may be less aware of their tenancy rights. These issues demonstrate that investing in quality, safe, and affordable housing is a key issue in supporting international students in the long-term.

SPOTLIGHT

- **Sheridan College** has partnered with organizations to help facilitate quality and safe housing for international students.
 - [Partnership with Canada Homestay Network](#) — A homestay refers to when an individual is hosted by a family. Through this partnership, Sheridan College can ensure that the homestays are carefully vetted, while also providing the opportunity for cultural immersion and additional support as international students navigate their adoptive homes.
 - [Partnership with Places4Students.com](#) — This partnership with an established provider of off-campus housing, allows international students to connect with a large number of landlords in local areas. Listing fees have also been significantly reduced or entirely removed, to further incentivize landlords and increase the available listings.
- **Northern College** has developed a Student Resource Coordinator role, that has a specific focus on facilitating housing supports for students. Through this role, students can access virtual peer groups to find roommates and homestay opportunities and to connect with community housing and property managers in the area.

Recommendations

1. **Establish partnerships with landlords and property managers** – By creating partnerships with local landlords, campuses can help to increase access to potential housing options for students.
2. **Educate international office staff on housing issues** – And have them available to international students for counsel. By providing this information upfront, as well providing in-house resources who are knowledgeable about rental laws in their communities, students can avoid common tenancy issues.
3. **Prepare students for the housing market** – Encourage them to begin the house hunting process ahead of time, and educate them on questions to ask, etc.



Healthcare

International students may struggle to access healthcare services both on campus and in the community due to a variety of factors, including difficulty navigating the healthcare options available, misunderstanding their insurance coverage, and learning a new system that may differ from their home community.

To ensure that students are supported in accessing timely and effective healthcare, service providers should have a baseline knowledge of the provincial healthcare system, including which healthcare concerns can be addressed by an on- or off-campus walk-in clinic, how to access an Emergency Department, and what to expect when attending the hospital for medical care. Accessing on-campus healthcare can also be beneficial for students who require documentation for medical illness if they have missed academic work, or if they are seeking verification of disability to access Accessibility Services on campus.

Support staff on campuses should also understand the healthcare provided at the institution so that students can be referred to appropriate support as proactively as possible. They should also be able to provide information to students about counselling and mental health support, including crisis services available in the local catchment area.

For more information, please refer to this [infosheet](#).



SPOTLIGHT

- **Ontario Tech University** has established [international student wellness checks](#) that provide a comprehensive check-up and referrals to specialists as needed on campus. Services are offered in multiple languages and allow students to get connected to on-campus health services early in their time on campus and to familiarize themselves with available resources.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that service providers have a baseline knowledge of the provincial healthcare system

– Including what is covered by UHIP or any other private insurance used by the institution.

Example: This includes educating service providers on which healthcare concerns can be addressed by an on- or off-campus walk-in clinic, how to access an Emergency Department, what types of identification will be accepted and what to expect when attending the hospital for medical care.

2. Support staff on campuses should also understand the healthcare provided at the institution

Example: This includes ensuring that staff have the relevant information to educate students about the available counselling and mental health support, including crisis services available in the local catchment area.

Food Insecurity

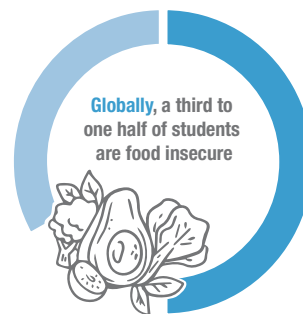
Food insecurity not only has a significant impact on one's physical health, but it can also impact mental health and wellness. While food insecurity is a growing issue across Canada, following the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation, international students have unique vulnerabilities. Research has found that a lack of financial stability is the primary reason that students are unable to eat nutritious and adequate foods. Qualitative data collected nationally consistently indicates that international students are at a heightened risk of experiencing food insecurity. Accordingly, studies have demonstrated that international students are often juggling competing costs, without the resources or strategies to which domestic students are more likely to have access.

Being in a new environment also has an impact on food habits. Descriptive studies indicate that students often struggle to find foods that are familiar, sharing that even if these foods can be found, they are often in stores that are not easily accessible, making it difficult to access these foods regularly. Many students are responsible for planning their meals for the first time in their lives, and often struggle to find a balance. Research shows that many students also struggle to successfully find the time to properly plan, resource religiously appropriate foods and prepare meals.

Irrespective of the root cause, students who are unable to access adequate and nutritious foods suffer from heightened levels of worry, disrupted learning and poorer quality social relationships. Food insecurity also has a direct impact on academic performance and has been linked to poorer class and exam attendance. Students often report poor mental health outcomes, including higher levels of anxiety, anger, and weakened feelings of social connectedness. With the cost of living rising quickly, many international students are being forced to use food banks to meet their nutritional needs. A news article in the CBC from 2022 described an increase among the general population in usage of food banks in the Greater Richmond Area in British Columbia. According to data collected by one organization, more than 17% of those accessing food bank services were international students.

Community groups and resources have also become an important source for many students by providing discounted or free meals. In Brampton, community kitchens run by Gurdwaras (known as langars), provide culturally appropriate meals to many Indian students who live and study in the area. These meals continued during the COVID-19 restrictions, allowing students to pick up packed meals, helping to address food insecurity issues, while also alleviating any feelings of shame these students may associate with food banks. There are also several apps that aim to address this issue, promoting aging but consumable foods that restaurants and grocers would typically dispose of, to app users for a small fee. By using these apps, international students can access healthy foods at a significantly cheaper cost, while also supporting initiatives to reduce food waste in their communities.

For additional information on the impact of food insecurity on student mental health, see our infosheet on [“Food Insecurity and Mental Health”](#).



SPOTLIGHT

- **University of Lethbridge** has established holiday meals for international students who may not have families that they are able to stay with during the holiday season. This initiative also helps to address food insecurity that these students may be facing during this period, due to many businesses being closed and there being fewer work opportunities.
- **The University of British Columbia** has developed a Meal Share program that allows food insecure students to access a grant, once per semester, that allows them to purchase food on campus. Students can apply for the program through an online portal, and individual details are kept confidential so that students can use the funds without stigma.
- **Queen's University** has developed a Fresh Food Box/Mason Jar Meal program that allows students to access fresh produce for a nominal cost. The boxes are designed to make nutritious foods accessible to food insecure students, while also promoting healthy eating, meal planning and alleviating stress. Students can pick up the boxes at a designated time, helping to maintain their confidentiality, while also supporting their overall wellness.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance financial support for international students** – Recognize the unique vulnerabilities of international students and provide increased financial assistance to address food insecurity.

Examples include expanding scholarship programs, offering emergency grants, or creating dedicated funds specifically aimed at alleviating food-related challenges for international students.

2. **Improve access to culturally appropriate and affordable food** – Collaborate with local communities, cultural organizations, and food banks to ensure international students have access to culturally familiar and affordable food options.

Examples include developing partnerships with community kitchens, religious institutions, or other organizations that can provide culturally appropriate meals to international students.

3. **Raise awareness and promote existing resources** – Increase awareness among international students of available resources such as discounted or free meals provided by community groups and organizations.

Examples include developing communication channels, including online platforms and information sessions, to inform students about these resources. Additionally, promote the use of food waste reduction apps that offer affordable, consumable food options to international students, reducing their food expenses.

4. **Provide comprehensive support services** – Establish support services that address the broader impacts of food insecurity on international students' mental health, academic performance, and social well-being.

Examples include counselling services, financial literacy programs, and workshops on meal planning and budgeting to empower students with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage their nutritional needs effectively.

Sexuality

LGBTQIA+¹ international students also require a nuanced approach to support their transition to and success in Canada. Some international students may be navigating a space where they can fully explore their sexuality or gender identity for the first time. Students who may have initially expected to return to their home countries may find that decision complicated by local politics and social realities as they explore their sexual identity in Canada. These complexities can have a marked impact on a student's overall mental health and wellbeing.

One of the ways that staff and faculty can support these international students is to implement a culture of student-directed care. This approach allows the student to articulate their needs and work collaboratively with staff to form a support plan that is reflective of those needs. LGBTQIA+ identities can be very complex for international students who may have to balance validating their identity within the complexity of their cultural contexts. It is imperative that post-secondary institutions develop external partnerships with LGBTQIA+ organizations in their communities that can provide the cultural safety and understanding necessary. By developing meaningful partnerships, and referral pathways with these external organizations, post-secondary institutions will be equipped to provide warm referrals to students in need, while also ensuring that any gaps in service can be addressed through these culturally responsive community resources. It is also imperative that staff and faculty are reflective of the diversity in their student populations. By doing so, post-secondary institutions can ensure that their staff have a wider perspective and will be able to support students in a variety of situations. These students may be navigating complex issues, including applying for Permanent Residency status on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, managing relationships back home as well as finding community in Canada for themselves. Having staff who have similar experience, or some knowledge of these processes can help to build trust and increase student confidence.

For more information on supporting LGBTQIA+ students, please see our Invisible Intersections [toolkit here](#).

SPOTLIGHT

- **Western University** has initiated [Learning Communities](#) within their student residences. Students have the option of living with others who share similar values, lifestyles and/or faculty. As part of this initiative, students can select to reside on the “LGBTQ + Ally floor.” By providing this space, Western University supports advocates for LGBTTTQQ rights, students questioning their identities, and those striving for an environment where all residents feel celebrated and empowered (UWO, 2022).

¹ Throughout this toolkit we will be using the umbrella term LGBTQIA+. ^{2S} refers to two-spirited, which is a term used by Indigenous communities in Canada to refer to gender and sexual identities. Therefore it would be inappropriate to use it to refer to international students.

- **Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention's (ASAAP) [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity \(SOGI\) Module](#)** is an online, asynchronous training that provides an overview of gender, sexuality, affirming care and allyship from a South Asian cultural perspective. This training aims to provide a holistic view of how to support LGBTQ+ South Asian students.

Recommendations

1. **Implement student-directed care** – Adopt an approach where LGBTQIA+ international students are actively involved in articulating their needs and collaborating with staff to create personalized support plans.
2. **Establish partnerships with LGBTQIA+ organizations** – Post-secondary institutions should develop meaningful partnerships and referral pathways with external LGBTQIA+ organizations in their communities. These partnerships can ensure cultural safety and understanding for LGBTQIA+ international students, providing them with additional resources and support beyond what the institution alone can offer.
3. **Promote diversity among staff and faculty** – It is important for post-secondary institutions to have staff and faculty members who reflect the diversity of their student populations. This diversity can bring a wider perspective and understanding of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ international students.
4. **Address mental health and well-being** – Recognize the impact of the complexities faced by LGBTQIA+ international students on their mental health and well-being.

Example: Offer comprehensive mental health services that are inclusive and responsive to the specific needs of these students. Provide resources for counselling, support groups, and other relevant services to ensure their holistic well-being.

5. **Foster inclusive and welcoming communities** – Create an inclusive and welcoming environment within the campus and local communities.

Example: Encourage cultural integration, organize awareness events, and promote cross-cultural understanding to help LGBTQIA+ international students find a sense of belonging and create supportive social networks.

6. **Be aware of legal challenges and resources** – Recognize that for some students, returning home may pose legal and safety challenges due to their sexuality. It is important for staff to be aware of what those challenges might be, and to be able to refer those students to the appropriate resources.

Social Connectedness

The mental health and education fields have long recognized the impact of culture on individual wellbeing. Research has also shown that international students of colour often face racism from staff and faculty at points in their academic journey. It is therefore imperative that staff and faculty are educated on, and actively challenging their explicit and implicit biases. Post-secondary counsellors and mental health professionals require a nuanced understanding of how international students' specific cultures shape their mental health outcomes, and how aspects of Canadian life may cause moments of stress. In doing so, and in helping students to strengthen a variety of ties, post-secondary institutions can help mitigate the effects of acculturative stress and support healthy adjustment.

Most post-secondary institutions recognize that international students need specific programming to help them adjust to life in Canada. However, much of the focus of these programs is on incoming students and specific programming often only occurs for the beginning few weeks of the school year. On the other hand, many institutions also conduct peer-based mentorship programming that pairs more experienced international students with incoming international students so that they can learn more about the school environment, and this mentorship will usually occur for at least a year.

Similar efforts must be made to help students maintain their cultural ties. This can be done in a myriad of ways, including connecting students to cultural organizations, creating campus-wide awareness of different cultural events and current events that may be impacting international students' friends and families in their home countries.

For more information on the mental health impacts of culture shock, please view our [infosheet](#).

SPOTLIGHT

- **Conestoga College** has established a [Peer Wellness Navigator \(PWN\) program](#). It aims to support the building of networks through lived experience by connecting Conestoga's students with trained peer supports. This program focuses on building networks through lived experience by connecting Conestoga students with other Conestoga students as a wellness resource. This program was crafted by a Peer Support Advisory Committee of international student volunteers, based on their experience at the college. PWNs utilize their lived experience with mental health and/or substance use to support students seeking a more informal approach to their wellness needs (Conestoga College, 2022).

- The [Pardesi Project](#) is a series of short films developed by **CICMH, Sheridan College and SOCH Mental Health**. The Pardesi Project aims to start the mental health dialogue for South Asian international students as well as providing information on how to access support. This project explores a variety of mental health topics with a culturally appropriate lens, while also providing practical ways to broach these conversations.
- **Fleming College** has developed an [International Peer Mentor program](#), where incoming international students are matched with an upper year international or domestic student. This opportunity helps to connect incoming students with someone who can help to provide 1:1 supports and use their own experience to guide incoming students.

Recommendations

1. **Develop ongoing culturally responsive programming** – Expand and sustain specific programming aimed at supporting international students throughout their entire academic journey.

Examples include comprehensive orientation programs that address cultural adjustment and provide ongoing support throughout the year. Foster peer-based mentorship programs that pair experienced international students with incoming students to facilitate cultural integration and provide guidance on navigating the post-secondary environment.

2. **Foster cultural connections and awareness** – Create a supportive campus environment that values and celebrates diversity.

Examples include connecting international students with cultural organizations and provide opportunities for them to maintain their cultural ties. Promote cultural celebrations, workshops, and campus-wide initiatives that promote cultural exchange and increase understanding of current events that may impact international students' friends and families in their home countries.

3. **Promote diversity and inclusion training** – Provide training and professional development opportunities for staff and faculty to address explicit and implicit biases, equity, and racism.

4. **Strengthen social support networks** – Encourage the formation of social support networks among international students and provide resources for students to connect with their peers, join clubs or student organizations, and participate in campus activities.

Examples include developing a club week early in each semester where international students can learn about different ways to be involved on campus.

The Francophone Perspective

Throughout this toolkit we've been introduced to many of the challenges faced by international students. While many of the issues facing francophone international students have been mentioned throughout this toolkit, there are a few key differences which will be addressed in this section. One of the major differences impacting many of the challenges francophone students face is the issue of language. Students coming from French-speaking nations to study in Ontario often quickly learn that despite French being the official second language of Canada, navigating most of our social, educational, and employment systems is not made any easier by being francophone.

International students comprise a large part of the post-secondary student population on campuses across the country. Unlike international students coming to Ontario to study at anglophone institutions, those coming from abroad to study on francophone campuses have a different demographic makeup and external forces that further complicate the path to French post-secondary education in Ontario.

In the 2015-2016 academic year, Ontario post-secondary institutions saw 21,300 students enrolled in French-language post-secondary programs. Although francophone post-secondary institutions in Ontario can see up to 75% of their student body coming from abroad, for many of them, Canada's immigration system can often pose a huge barrier to institutional success. In 2022, several articles were published highlighting the 60%-75% rejection rate of visa applications submitted by prospective francophone international students - the majority of which were from French-speaking Africa. In 2021, 72% of student visa applications coming from French-speaking Africa were rejected, when compared to the 35% rejection of applications coming from other regions of the world, one can see the additional hurdles faced by prospective francophone international students, particularly those from Africa, where 44% of the world's French speakers live.

As mentioned previously, it is important to recognize the impact of culture on feelings of connection and thus on the wellbeing of international students. Adjusting to life in Ontario can be challenging for anyone coming from abroad. For international students coming from French-speaking nations, there is the additional challenge of adjusting a second time to the often-smaller francophone communities that exist in and around Ontario's francophone post-secondary schools.

SPOTLIGHT

- **La Cité**, an Ottawa-based francophone institution, offers a multitude of services and supports for international students in their Services d'accompagnement International (International Accompaniment Service). Offering international students support with orientation, integration and general information about campus life and student resources, this program is a one-stop-shop for international students to get support and build confidence and connections on campus.
- **Université de Hearst** is one of Ontario's 2 Francophone universities, and the only university supporting Francophone students in Northern Ontario. Hearst has programs such as their 'Café Étudiant' and services like their mentorship program, which are designed to support their students with social connectedness and integration. By facilitating these opportunities for students to share their experiences, learn about each other, build networks, and find care among their peers, they are supporting student integration that has the potential to extend beyond the campus.
- **Collège Boréal** is one of Ontario's widest-reaching francophone post-secondary institutions. From organized fitness and recreation activities to intercultural celebrations, and a wealth of rotating social activities, Collège Boréal supports the wellbeing of international students by creating experiences and opportunities to expand their horizons and engage with their peers while prioritizing and celebrating the richness and diversity of student experiences.

Recommendations

1. **Whole Campus Approach** – It is integral to the wellbeing of international students that everyone on campus shares responsibility in supporting the emotional, social, physical, and mental health of international students.

Example: Improving the language accessibility of on-campus events, student clubs, sports teams and non-clinical supports. Translating promotional and outreach materials into French is one way to support francophone students' access to activities and information that can support wellness and a sense of belonging on campus.

2. **Pre-arrival Preparation** – As many francophone students learn about Ontario post-secondary schools through recruiting and research, informing prospective students about key aspects of the language barriers that life in Ontario may present can help prepare them for success.

Example: Informing students that Ontario is primarily Anglophone and that depending on where they are studying, access to off-campus services and supports may come with limitations.

3. **Cultural Exchange** – Providing opportunities for francophone students to not only learn and experience life and customs in Ontario but share their cultures and experiences in-kind.

Example: Facilitating orientation events outside of ‘orientation week’ to help familiarize francophone students with on-campus services and support personnel or hosting conversation cafés like the one spotlighted at Université de Hearst.

4. **Professional Development for Staff and Faculty** – Recognize that a cultural adjustment isn’t always required on the part of the student alone. Ensure that staff and faculty are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support francophone international students to integrate into the school community in a culturally adaptive and psychologically safe way.

Example: Taking courses to educate staff and faculty on cultural safety, and useful knowledge about the cultures of the students coming from abroad. Additionally, reading up on how to incorporate anti-oppressive principles into your practice at work is another way post-secondary staff and faculty can learn to better support incoming international students.

5. **English-language support** – Although there are vibrant francophone pockets across the province, speaking English is a useful tool to support integration in Ontario. Providing activities and courses to support English skills and social networking can help open additional avenues and ease challenges in systems such as healthcare and employment.

Example: Providing courses and opportunities for students to practice their English skills in either informal school-based activities, or through offering referrals and information for formalized English-language supports, such as LINC courses and workplace language skill-building courses.

Supporting Students Coming from Areas of Conflict

Canada has long been recognized as a safe haven for individuals fleeing conflict or disaster in their home countries, and this support extends to international students facing similar challenges. Students are impacted by the globalization of our world, and political unrest in some parts of the world has direct consequences on the day to day lives of international students in Canada. Post-secondary institutions and communities play a crucial role in providing a nurturing environment for these students. By offering financial assistance, scholarships, and specialized programs, post-secondary institutions ensure that international students fleeing conflict or disaster have access to quality education and necessary resources to rebuild their lives. Moreover, Canadian post-secondary institutions often establish dedicated support systems, including counselling services and cultural integration programs, to address the unique needs and experiences of these students, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting their overall wellbeing. Through such initiatives, Canada demonstrates its commitment to providing a safe and inclusive environment for international students seeking refuge from political turmoil.

Staff can play a key role, particularly by familiarizing themselves with issues that may be affecting international students on their campuses. Students who have families and friends who are also impacted by these issues would also have clear impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. By ensuring that staff is aware of these issues, it is feasible to pre-emptively develop supports for students who find themselves in these situations, including academic accommodations, additional counselling supports, and access to resources such as housing, food or other essentials.

In addition to the institutional support, Canadian communities play a significant role in welcoming and integrating international students fleeing political conflict. Developing partnerships with community organizations and volunteer groups can help to promote cross-cultural understanding and provide platforms for international students to share their experiences. By embracing diversity and supporting international students, post-secondary institutions showcase their commitment to upholding human rights and nurturing a harmonious multicultural society that is welcoming to all, regardless of their backgrounds or the political conflicts that may be happening on the global stage.

Recommendations

1. **Understand and recognize stressors** – Be aware of global issues potentially impacting international students. Students may have experienced trauma during their premigration and resettlement experiences, or they may have been exposed to violence, displacement, or detention. Many students have been forced to leave their home country and cannot safely return. Awareness of these challenges is critical.
2. **Equip staff to provide trauma sensitive responses and supports** – As mentioned, international students may have been exposed to extreme stress, adversity, and trauma. Trauma-sensitive approaches involve understanding the impact of trauma on academic functioning and seeing behaviour through that lens.
3. **Access community resources** – Reaching out to partner with organizations that specialize in working with refugee families, if that is an available resource, is a great way to ensure that international students have access to the right services. Support groups, for example, would be a beneficial resource. Keep an accurate and evolving list of available community resources.
4. **Stop any type of harassment or bullying** – Students coming from areas of conflict may be at risk for bullying and harassment if classmates stigmatize them. Make it abundantly clear that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable.



Summary of Recommendations

- **Whole Campus Approach** – It is integral to the wellbeing of international students that everyone on campus shares responsibility in supporting the emotional, social, physical, and mental health of international students.
- **Pre-arrival Preparation** – As many students learn about Ontario post-secondary schools through recruiting and research, informing prospective students about key aspects and challenges of life in Ontario can help prepare them for success.
- **Challenges of relocation and acculturation** – Staff should have a good understanding of the significant adjustments that international students must make when adjusting to their new community and post-secondary institution.

Addressing Financial Vulnerability

- Provide education around the Canadian banking system and banking norms – embed them into the international student orientation.
- Ensure access to financial resources and financial professionals in case of emergencies.
- Enhance financial literacy programs and support and develop comprehensive financial literacy programs specifically tailored to international students.
- Embed financial conversations into orientation and ongoing support.

Addressing Housing Insecurity

- Establish partnerships with landlords and property managers in your area – by creating partnerships you can help to increase access to potential housing options for students.
- Educate international student office staff on housing issues and have them available to international students for counsel. By providing this information upfront, as well providing in-house resources who are knowledgeable about rental laws in their communities, students can avoid common tenancy issues.

Addressing Healthcare Access

- Ensure that service providers have a baseline knowledge of the provincial healthcare system.
- Support staff on campuses should also understand the healthcare provided at the institution.

Addressing Food Insecurity

- Recognize the unique vulnerabilities of international students. Enhance financial support for international students. Provide increased financial assistance to address food insecurity.
- Improve access to culturally appropriate and affordable food. Collaborate with local communities, cultural organizations, and food banks to ensure international students have access to culturally familiar and affordable food options.
- Raise awareness and promote existing resources among international students on available resources such as discounted or free meals provided by community groups and organizations.
- Provide comprehensive support services and establish support services that address the broader impacts of food insecurity on international students' mental health, academic performance, and social well-being.

Addressing Sexuality

- Implement student-directed care. Adopt an approach where LGBTQIA+ international students are actively involved in articulating their needs and collaborating with staff to create personalized support plans.
- Post-secondary institutions should develop meaningful partnerships and referral pathways with external LGBTQIA+ organizations in their communities. These partnerships can ensure cultural safety and understanding for LGBTQIA+ international students, providing them with additional resources and support beyond what the institution alone can offer.
- It is important for post-secondary institutions to have staff and faculty members who reflect the diversity of their student populations. This diversity can bring a wider perspective and understanding of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ international students.
- Address mental health, wellbeing and recognize the impact of the complexities faced by LGBTQIA+ international students on their mental health and well-being.
- Create an inclusive and welcoming environment within the campus and local communities.

Social Connectedness

- Expand and sustain specific programming aimed at supporting international students throughout their entire academic journey.
- Create a supportive campus environment that values and celebrates diversity.
- Encourage the formation of social support networks among international students and provide resources for students to connect with their peers, join clubs or student organizations, and participate in campus activities.

Francophone Perspective

- Provide opportunities for francophone students to not only learn and experience life and customs in Ontario but share their cultures and experiences in-kind.
- Recognize that a cultural adjustment isn't always required on the part of the student alone. Ensure that staff and faculty are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support francophone international students to integrate into the school community in a culturally adaptive and psychologically safe way.
- Provide activities and courses to support English skills and social networking can help open additional avenues and ease challenges in systems such as healthcare and employment.

Areas of Conflict

- Be aware of global issues potentially impacting international students. Students may have experienced trauma during their premigration and resettlement experiences, or they may have been exposed to violence, displacement, or detention.
- Equip staff to provide trauma sensitive responses and supports.
- Reach out to partner with organizations that specialize in working with refugee families, if that is an available resource.
- Students coming from areas of conflict may be at risk for bullying and harassment if classmates stigmatize them. Make it abundantly clear that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable.

Resources

[Browse by Topic - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

["Working Without a Blueprint" - Supporting International Students & International Student Advisors - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[An International Student's Perspective - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Supporting International Students Infosheet - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Supporting International Students Webinar - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[International student says she spent months in mental anguish after Canadian immigration error - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[The Pardesi Project - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Government of Canada page Study in Canada as an international student - Canada.ca](#)

[Study in Ontario: International Students](#)

[International Student Connect](#)

[YMCA Newcomer Information Centre](#)

Check out these CICMH resources aimed at international students:

[Culture Shock - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Test & Exam Anxiety - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Stress and Anxiety - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[The Winter Blues - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

[Rest and Sleep - Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)

Appendix

One College/One Student Overview

Student Success, St. Lawrence College

October 2022

Shelley Aylesworth-Spink, Vice President, Student Success

Background

The SLC student population is evolving rapidly with enrolments increasing among international students and decreasing among domestic students. This evolution complements the commitments in SLC's strategic plan, SLC in Five, to belonging and creating a college that is global in character and culture.

The Student Success division's mission is to help students experience belonging in the SLC community and to offer meaningful supports that ensure their physical and mental well-being, academic success and ability to thrive in an interconnected world. The division comprises Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being, Health, Wellness and Accessibility, Community Development, Athletics and Student Engagement, Student Services, Residences, Libraries and Learning Centres, Global Partnerships and Learning Services, Student Rights and Responsibilities, Spiritual Care, Public-Private Partnership Relations and Student Success Assessment and Evaluation.

With this mission in mind, the Student Success division adopted a One College/One Student philosophy that responds to SLC in Five, with its commitment to building a global mindset, strengthening our global network and connecting our students to the world.

Approach

The One College/One Student approach focuses on the student experience and support from admission to graduation. It began under two separate divisions, International Education and Student Affairs. Shortly after the One College/One Student project began, in the spring of 2022, the two divisions collapsed to create a new division of Student Success. This organizational change accelerated efforts relating to the One College/One Student philosophy. Key to this change was several international-related functions moving to relevant college divisions. International Admissions joined the Registrar's Office and International Recruitment became embedded in Marketing and Recruitment.

Global engagement and intercultural understanding and support are woven throughout the work of the new Student Success division. We are integrating services throughout the division, including transitioning the Student Services Centre (formally known as the Welcome Centre) to a 'one-stop-shop' where students can seamlessly access information and services. English language support is growing in our academic support centres. Additionally, the One College/One Student approach resulted in strategic initiative funding to enhance equitable, culturally relevant access to mental health support, expand sports offerings to serve our diverse student population, and support on and off-campus housing needs for students.

The following five action planning groups were struck in early 2022 to focus on achieving this work:

- Student Supports
- Student Engagement
- Housing
- Student Services
- Information Systems and Communication

Each action planning group has the mandate to develop recommendations designed to:

- Advance and entrench collaboration in tri-campus
- Maximize our ability to meet the needs of our student population as articulated in the College's five-year enrolment plan
- Support/advance the objectives of our Strategic Enrolment Management process

One College/One Student under the new division of Student Success maximizes resources to ensure SLC focuses on helping each student achieve success. What began as a project is now an integrated and harmonized approach to supporting all students.



Sheridan College Leadership – Visits to International Students

Sheridan College staff travel to key areas of recruitment to provide students with face-to-face time and vital information for them to plan for their arrival in Canada. Often, they are accompanied by an upper grade student studying at Sheridan from that country.

Items that are discussed:

- What to pack
- Types of paperwork and how to properly fill them out
- How to manage flights and navigate the airport
- How to get to campus from the airport
- Information on public transit
- What the weather is like in Canada (what clothes they may need)
- The types of foods are available in grocery stores (so they have the same food as at home)
- How rent works in Canada and current prices for rent
- Introduction to campus services
- Student activities on campus
- Clubs on campus
- How to apply for a job (interview process etc.)
- Types of jobs available on campus
- Extent of work hours allowed for international students
- Differences between post-secondary schools
- Class schedules
- How marks are tabulated
- Plagiarism
- Health insurance
- A guide to the college website and the online learning platform
- How to avoid scams and the different types of scams



Fleming College

– Connect & Get Ready

Topics Covered:

- Finding a Place to Live
- Immigration 101
- What is academic integrity?
- APA Citation for Successful Assignments
- Finding a part-time job
- Applying for a SIN
- Your Health Plan
- Classroom Expectations
- Navigating D2L – The Student Learning Platform
- Equity, Diversity & Inclusion – Your Human Rights in Canada
- Is there a Canadian Culture?
- Academic Supports Available to International Students
- Housing search – Virtual drop-in

Additional Sessions:

- “Ask Us” sessions
- A welcome session with department representatives
- Security on and off-campus session
- “Self-guided tour” activity where students receive information about support services by visiting multiple departments by following a map to various check-in points



Fleming College – Global Friends Café

Matching Process:

Students in Canada and abroad are given a questionnaire to determine their student profile. A computer program then matches students with similar interests.

Some samples of questions are below:

- Do you have an interest in knowing more about other cultures? Which ones?
- What do you do in your free time?
- Do you consider yourself an introvert, extrovert or a balance between both?
- What kind of a roommate are you? Organized? Messy? A balance of both.
- Who is your favorite hero? Wonder Woman? Batman? Superman?

Through this program, students in Canada can receive Co-Curricular Record (CCR) hours, learn about different cultures, as well as receive community hours that are eligible for police foundation, social service workers, child youth workers, etc. For incoming international students, it is an opportunity to learn more about Canada and campus environment, reduce the anxiety and stress of figuring things out once they arrive and learn to navigate post-secondary education in Canada.



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH