April 20, 2020

Report of the Committee on International Student Issues

Background

The Dalhousie Student Union (DSU), as the official representative of Dalhousie students, has a responsibility to advocate for our international student members. Nearly 24% of all DSU members are international students.¹ These students contribute greatly to the DSU and the Dalhousie community through diverse experiences, voices, and skills, and yet often face additional difficulties compared to domestic students. As tuition fees for international students continue to climb at Dalhousie, including an 8.1% increase in the 2019-20 academic year and planned increases over the course of the coming four years, and as xenophobic anti-immigration sentiments grow across Canada; international students are struggling with not only a growing financial burden, but also with racism and discrimination.² Through initiatives such as the #notDalBound campaign led by the Dalhousie International Students’ Association (DISA) and the DSU, international students have called for the issues facing them to be seriously addressed. In committing to prioritizing the voices of international students and advocating for their rights, the DSU joins students’ unions across Canada fighting for fairness and justice for international students.

President Aisha Abawajy, Vice President Academic and External (VPAE) Hasan Sinan, and International Students’ Community Representative (International Rep) Sara Goswami met in May of 2019 to begin discussing a process to create a DSU issues policy centering on international students.³ In compliance with the Consultations Policy, the three identified key stakeholders to include in discussions

around the policy, and began gathering a committee. Over the past academic year, the committee has engaged in consultation and research in order to identify international students’ concerns and priorities.

This document outlines the committee’s terms of reference, the steps it has taken up to this point, and its recommendations. It should be used as guidance in the development of an International Students’ Issues Policy, which should itself involve continued consultation with, and direction from, international student members of the DSU.

Committee and Timeline

The President, VPAE, and International Representative began meeting about this project in May of 2019. The first consultation step was an online survey, by the Dalhousie International Students’ Association (DISA), that went out to all of their constituents and ran between May and June 2019. Informed by the results of the survey, a committee convened throughout the 2019 summer term to conduct research and compile the following report.

This committee was composed of individuals from communities identified as key stakeholders in the eventual policy and held open meetings. The members were:

- Sara Goswami (International Students’ Community Representative) - Chair
- Hasan Sinan (DSU Vice President Academic and External)
- Josh Awe (member of international student community at Sexton Campus)
- Dylan Miller (member of international graduate student community)
- William Coney (member of international student community at Agricultural Campus)
- Korver Zhang (member of Chinese international student community)

Former Policy and Governance Coordinator Meghan McDonald, former Director of Research and Outreach Tanisi Pooran, President Aisha Abawajy, and current Policy and Governance Coordinator Zoe Brimacombe also met with the group to provide direction on the policy creation process and to resource the committee.

Recommendations

The committee compiled an extensive list of issues currently facing international students at Dalhousie University, and some of the things that the DSU, Dalhousie University, the Halifax Regional Municipality, the Province of Nova Scotia, and the Government of Canada could change to improve the experiences of said students. The recommendations that follow should provide guidance for the creation of an international students’ issues policy that will guide the DSU’s advocacy, lobbying, and service provision.
A. Orientation Week

The group found that in addition to adjusting to the university environment, international students have to adjust to the greater community of Halifax and Canada. Often times, orientation week is the first time international students have been in Canada. International students can also find the process of connecting to others, both domestic and international student peers, difficult during Orientation Week.

Orientation Week Recommendations

The DSU should:
1. Ensure that orientation week includes materials relating to adjusting to Halifax and/or Truro and that orient international students to the Canadian lifestyle. In particular, information must be available about transit and weather.
2. Provide information during Orientation Week about how to connect to other members of the international community:
3. Encourage Dalhousie University to partner with Halifax organizations oriented towards different cultures and supporting newcomers to create engaging, supportive programming
4. Ensure that international students have access to all the information associated with the International Center, the Dalhousie International Students’ Association (DISA), and cultural societies within Dalhousie, and ensure that this information is included with the welcome week package and in residences.

B. Transportation

While international students need access to transportation throughout the year and many rely on public transit, most who work in Canada during the summer do not meet the requirements to get a summer U-Pass.

Transportation is especially difficult for international students studying at the Agricultural Campus in Truro: many struggle to get around the town and to find affordable transportation to Halifax. This matter is of particular concern to graduate students at the Truro campus, who often need to commute between Halifax and Truro on a regular basis to meet with faculty, participate in labs, and access resources.

Transportation Recommendations

The DSU should:
1. Lobby Dalhousie University and the Halifax municipal government to allow international students to opt in to the Summer U-Pass regardless of course load.
2. Investigate low-cost, accessible options for transportation within Truro and between Truro and Halifax, with a focus on the needs of international students.

C. Study Permits

International students report that the process of applying for and receiving study permits is often confusing and drawn out, and receiving incomplete or inaccurate information can lead to serious issues with Canadian or Nova Scotian Immigration departments. International students should have the information they need and should be able to begin their studies at Dalhousie University in a timely fashion.

Study Permit Recommendations

The DSU should:

1. Ask Dalhousie University to create a web page dedicated to the study permit & visa application process with clear instructions for varying nationalities.
2. Support or develop federal lobbying efforts that call on the Government of Canada to process student visa applications efficiently and to mitigate delays.
3. Support or develop federal lobbying efforts that call on the Government of Canada to reimburse processing fees to international students who are subject to delayed study permit processing.

D. Communication

International students should have important information and resources communicated to them through accessible avenues. International students raised concerns about official Dalhousie email accounts, particularly that many are unfamiliar with the platform or do not use it. International students were also unhappy with ineffective social media communications and felt that there needed to be a more effective way for international students to communicate with each other than social media platforms or e-mail.

Students were also concerned about the needs of international students for whom English is a second language, and wanted to see more translated information.

Communication Recommendations

The DSU Should:

1. Support the Dalhousie International Student Association (DISA) in lobbying the Dalhousie International Student Centre to collaborate on disseminating vital information.
2. Support DISA in lobbying Dalhousie University to provide DISA with a mailing list consisting of the Dalhousie e-mail addresses of international students across all campuses and faculties, to be updated each year.

3. Ask Dalhousie University to give DISA access to the University’s learning management system (Brightspace) for the purpose of sending information to international students and hosting DISA elections online.

4. Lobby the University to provide important information in multiple languages.

E. Tuition

The committee found significant concern about the deregulation of international fees and the greater cost of education for international students compared to their domestic counterparts. The unpredictable and ever-increasing nature of international fees has the potential to have a negative impact on students’ ability to pay tuition costs and to complete their education. International students are concerned that their tuition fees do not reflect the real value of education at Dalhousie University, but are rather being used to fill funding gaps in the University budget.

Students were concerned about the use of international student tuition fee revenue. The group found a desire for these funds to be used for supports for international students, such as funding the International Centre and DISA. International students also want increased accountability around these funds on the part of the University.

Finally, international students reported facing various hurdles when processing loans in their home country to attend an international university. Students need the University to play a bigger role in providing information and facilitating the loan and payment process.

Tuition Recommendations

The DSU Should:

1. Advocate for the reduction or elimination of international differential fees, based on the principle that tuition should reflect the real cost of education.

2. Lobby Dalhousie University to advocate on behalf of international students in meetings and negotiations with the Province.

3. Lobby the Nova Scotia government to rework the university funding framework and increase funding to universities, including providing the same per-student funding for domestic and international students.

4. Lobby the Nova Scotia government to regulate international student tuition in a comparable way to that of domestic students.

5. Lobby Dalhousie University to make any increases to international student tuition predictable and publicly available.
6. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase the grant and sponsorship funding allocated to the International Student Centre and DISA.
7. Lobby Dalhousie University to provide accurate yearly accounts of how the revenue generated from international student tuition fees is spent.
8. Lobby Dalhousie University to conduct research and partner with financial services from various countries to support international students in their ability to pay tuition.
9. Ask Dalhousie University to provide information about paying tuition and applying for loans in various countries along with acceptance letters and on the Dalhousie University website.

F. Residence

International students should feel supported and comfortable while living in residence. Unfortunately, the group found a number of concerns around current residence arrangements as they apply to the specific needs of international students. Students reported lacking mentors equipped with knowledge pertaining to questions international students may have while living in residence, as well as a lack of access to safe, dry spaces on campus.

Moving to Dalhousie from another country poses unique problems. Some students found it difficult to choose the appropriate residence for their needs without being able to visit the campus. Move-in and move-out procedures and storage policies also currently make these processes difficult for international students, who sometimes need to move in later than the official move-in date due to circumstances beyond their control.

Residence Recommendations

The DSU Should:
1. Lobby the University to fund a dry social space that is open at night on campus, and to form this space in collaboration with the International Student Centre and DISA.
2. Lobby the University to include information about how to support international students in Residence Assistants’ training.
3. Encourage the International Centre and DISA to collaboratively host student-to-student online information sessions about each residence.
4. Ask the University include information about Residence Life in resources sent to international students.
5. Lobby the University to offer late move-in service for international students.
6. Lobby Residence Life to create moving-out and storage policies that accommodate the unique conditions faced by international students.

G. Sexton Campus
The committee found that international students on the Sexton campus need more resources and events delivered directly to them on their campus. Sexton students often miss out on DSU-hosted events that are important for international students, such as information sessions on taxation and immigration. There was also a general desire for equal services to be available on Sexton and Studley campuses.

**Sexton Campus Recommendations**

The DSU Should:

1. Using either The T-Room or classroom spaces, hold events on the Sexton campus that enable international students to connect with one another and learn important information.
2. Collaborate with the University and international students to ensure that there is an office on Sexton Campus that offers information and resources to international students, particularly by having part-time staff people available to answer questions and direct students to assistance.

**H. Healthcare**

International students should have the same access to healthcare as domestic students while studying at Dalhousie University. Currently international students face healthcare disadvantages in terms of both cost and coverage.

International students are not eligible for provincial health coverage through the Nova Scotia Health Card (MSI).\(^4\) International students are automatically enrolled in the DSU Health and Dental Plan and International Health Plan.\(^5\) These two plans do not cover all health services, meaning some have to pay out of pocket. Students also reported being unable to opt out of the International Health Plan even when having similar coverage under a family health plan, meaning they and their families were forced to pay for two plans simultaneously.

International students also expressed a need for more information about and assistance with accessing on-campus health services. New students are not often well-informed about the Student Health & Wellness Centre and how to make appointments. This information is crucial, especially for students whose only access to healthcare is the services available on campus. The committee noted that international students come from a variety of countries with a wide range of health care systems, and that their previous experiences with health services may be extremely different in form and payment methods than how these services work at Dalhousie and in Nova Scotia.

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Healthcare Recommendations

The DSU Should:

1. Expand the DSU Health and Dental Plan International Student Health Plan to provide comparable coverage to provincial healthcare (MSI).
2. Lobby the Government of Nova Scotia to allow international students to enroll in MSI for the duration of their study period.
3. Ask the University to build collaboration between the International Student Centre and the Student Health and Wellness Centre, including creating informational workshops together, creating and distributing information for international students about on-campus health services, and helping to issue health cards.
4. Review internal healthcare coverage policies and agreement with Student VIP to ensure international students don’t have hefty additional fees and are able to opt-out from duplicate coverage.

I. Recruitment

The committee found disparities between the experiences of international students from varying countries. As of December 31, 2018, over half of international students studying in Canada were from just two countries: China and India. These national statistics are reflected in the international student population at Dalhousie, where as of December 2016 China and India were also the most-represented countries of origin. The committee found that students that are not from these countries or others with significant on-campus populations could feel isolated on campus.

Students also reported that individual faculties could create assumptions around students’ countries of origin, leaving behind students from countries other than China and India. This also extended to University recruitment, which could favour students from countries identified as priorities for international recruitment. The group felt that enrolment resources tailored to these major source countries do not address specific needs of other international students. This disparity is echoed by Dalhousie’s International Strategy 2017-2020, which identifies Latin America, China, the European Union, and the United States of America as “priority geographic areas to focus university resources.”

8 Dalhousie University. Dalhousie University’s International Strategy (Plan 2017-2020): From a National University to an International University: Building on International Opportunities That Inspire. Updated April 2017, https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/dept/international-
Finally, international students are not always fully informed about the program in which they are enrolled before arriving in Canada. Students need more varied, online, accessible information about specific programs and the differences between the Halifax and Truro campuses.

**Recruitment Recommendations**

The DSU Should:

1. Lobby Dalhousie University to recruit students from a variety of different countries, accommodating for different challenges they may face based on their home country.
2. Support federal lobbying efforts calling on the Government of Canada to actively recruit international students from diverse countries.
3. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase the availability and accessibility of information about specific programs and campuses offered online, potentially including creating interactive webinars.
4. Lobby Dalhousie University to improve the navigability and user-friendliness of the Dalhousie website and extended web presence with consideration for the needs of non-native English speakers.
5. Recognize, and lobby the University to adequately account for, the fact that international students are a diverse group with varying cultures, experiences, and needs.

**J. Representation**

International students provided feedback stating that international students lack avenues and opportunities to advocate for themselves. Both within the DSU and at the International Student Centre, international students felt unsupported in their advocacy efforts.

**Representation Recommendations**

The DSU Should:

1. Support the creation and promotion of sustainable advocacy efforts by International students.
2. Lobby Dalhousie University’s International Student Centre to support the creation and promotion of sustainable advocacy efforts by international students.

**K. Employment**

Qualified Dalhousie international students should be able to access meaningful employment on and off campus during the course of their studies, and should have sufficient opportunities to begin careers post-graduation. Currently, international students face barriers to employment both during and following their studies.

The Province of Nova Scotia, other governments in Atlantic Canada, and the Government of Canada have all identified the employment of international students as a priority. The Canada-Nova Scotia Memorandum of Understanding on the Off-Campus Work Permit Program for International Students (2005) states that “the parties recognize that providing international students with limited access to the Canadian labour market will enhance the global competitiveness of Canada’s academic institutions [...] while giving international students opportunities to deepen their understanding and appreciation of Canadian society.”\(^9\) Further initiatives such as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program and the Provincial Nominee Program affirm Nova Scotia’s need and desire for immigration to fill labour demands and combat demographic decline. Despite these affirmations, there are still restrictions on work for international students, and ongoing barriers to immigration after graduation.

**Employment Recommendations**

The DSU Should:

1. Lobby the University to increase funding for the Bissett Student Success Centre in order to create programs and resources targeted towards international students.
2. Advocate for increased employment and volunteer opportunities for international students at Dalhousie and in the local Halifax and Truro communities.
3. Lobby the Government of Nova Scotia to provide more comprehensive and up-to-date information to employers about hiring international students.
4. Support federal lobbying efforts calling on the Government of Canada to extend the post-graduation work permit duration cap to facilitate immigration into Canada.
5. Lobby the provincial and federal governments to remove restrictions based on immigration status from funding for government-funded entry-level and seasonal positions.

**L. Graduate Students**

International graduate students face unique challenges compared to international undergraduate students and domestic graduate students. The committee found that this group faces hardships and barriers with respect to funding and costs, as well as bureaucracy and paperwork.

In addition to paying differential tuition fees, international graduate students suffer severely reduced opportunity to access graduate funding opportunities, such as Tri-Council scholarships. Because these funding opportunities typically offset the cost of tuition, this means that graduate students both face higher costs and fewer avenues to defray them. Lack of access to these scholarships could also affect students’ perceived academic ability and/or future career opportunities.

International graduate students are also unable to take advantage of federal and provincial loan programs and must rely on loan programs from their home countries, which vary in quantity and eligibility requirements and may be less generous than Canadian funding.

Adding to the above challenges to funding graduate studies, international students present on student visas are severely restricted in their ability to work outside their program, further reducing options available to pay for their studies.

In April 2019, Dalhousie University changed the structure for tuition fees for PhD students, lowering the tuition costs for the first two years of the program and making these costs consistent for each year of the program. Because they are more likely to take on teaching assistant positions to pay for their studies (due to the aforementioned lack of funding options), the committee found that in the long term this change could in fact increase financial strain for international graduate students, who may take longer to complete PhD programs than their domestic counterparts.

Finally, international graduate students face more bureaucratic delays than domestic students. While domestic graduate students can apply for scholarships through a harmonized application process that takes into consideration funding from tri-agencies as well as internal scholarships, this option is not available to international graduate students due to decreased eligibility for tri-council funding. This difference means that international graduate students have to fill out multiple onerous “long form” applications for individual scholarships.

**Graduate Students Recommendations**

The DSU Should:

1. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase internal funding and aid opportunities for international students.
2. Lobby Dalhousie to improve and streamline scholarship application processes for international graduate students, and consider the needs of international students in any and all future changes to these processes.

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3. Lobby Dalhousie University and federal and provincial governments to expand eligibility criteria for scholarships and grants to include international students.

4. Lobby Dalhousie University to support international graduate students in completing their studies on a similar timeline to domestic students by increasing financial aid, improving advising, and reviewing program requirements.

5. Support federal lobbying efforts that are pushing the Government of Canada to loosen restrictions on the ability of international graduate students to work outside their program of study.
Summary of Recommendations

It is the opinion of the Committee on International Student Issues that the DSU should:

A. Orientation Week
   1. Ensure that orientation week includes materials relating to adjusting to Halifax and/or Truro and that orient international students to the Canadian lifestyle. In particular, information must be available about transit and weather.
   2. Provide information during Orientation Week about how to connect to other members of the international community:
   3. Encourage Dalhousie University to partner with Halifax organizations oriented towards different cultures and supporting newcomers to create engaging, supportive programming
   4. Ensure that international students have access to all the information associated with the International Center, the Dalhousie International Students’ Association (DISA), and cultural societies within Dalhousie, and ensure that this information is included with the welcome week package and in residences.

B. Transportation
   1. Lobby Dalhousie University to allow international students to opt in to the Summer U-Pass regardless of course load.
   2. Investigate low-cost, accessible options for transportation within Truro and between Truro and Halifax, with a focus on the needs of international students.

C. Study Permits
   1. Ask Dalhousie University to create a web page dedicated to the study permit & visa application process with clear instructions for varying nationalities.
   2. Support or develop federal lobbying efforts that call on the Government of Canada to process student visa applications efficiently and to mitigate delays.
   3. Support or develop federal lobbying efforts that call on the Government of Canada to reimburse processing fees to international students who are subject to delayed study permit processing.

D. Communication
   1. Facilitate communication between the Dalhousie International Student Centre and the Dalhousie International Student Association (DISA), and help to create an arrangement between the two organizations to disseminate vital information.
   2. Ask Dalhousie University to provide DISA with a mailing list consisting of the Dalhousie e-mail addresses of international students across all campuses and faculties, to be updated each year.
   3. Ask Dalhousie University to give DISA access to the University’s learning management system (Brightspace) for the purpose of sending information to international students and hosting DISA elections online.
   4. Lobby the University to provide important information in multiple languages.
E. Tuition
1. Advocate for the reduction or elimination of international differential fees, based on the principle that tuition should reflect the real cost of education.
2. Lobby Dalhousie University to advocate on behalf of international students in meetings and negotiations with the Province.
3. Lobby the Nova Scotia government to rework the university funding framework and increase funding to universities, including providing the same per-student funding for domestic and international students.
4. Lobby the Nova Scotia government to regulate international student tuition in a comparable way to that of domestic students.
5. Lobby Dalhousie University to make any increases to international student tuition predictable and publicly available.
6. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase the grant and sponsorship funding allocated to the International Student Centre and DISA.
7. Lobby Dalhousie University to provide accurate yearly accounts of how the revenue generated from international student tuition fees is spent.
8. Lobby Dalhousie University to conduct research and partner with financial services from various countries to support international students in their ability to pay tuition.
9. Ask Dalhousie University to provide information about paying tuition and applying for loans in various countries along with acceptance letters and on the Dalhousie University website.

F. Residence
1. Lobby the University to fund a dry social space that is open at night on campus, and to form this space in collaboration with the International Student Centre and DISA.
2. Lobby the University to include information about how to support international students in Residence Assistants’ training.
3. Encourage the International Centre and DISA to collaboratively host student-to-student online information sessions about each residence.
4. Ask the University include information about Residence Life in resources sent to international students.
5. Lobby the University to offer late move-in service for international students.
6. Lobby Residence Life to create moving-out and storage policies that accommodate the unique conditions faced by international students.

G. Sexton Campus
1. Using either The T-Room or classroom spaces, hold events on the Sexton campus that enable international students to connect with one another and learn important information.
2. Collaborate with the University and international students to ensure that there is an office on Sexton Campus that offers information and resources to international students, particularly by having part-time staff people available to answer questions and direct students to assistance.
H. Healthcare

1. Expand the DSU Health and Dental Plan International Student Health Plan to provide comparable coverage to provincial healthcare (MSI).
2. Lobby the Government of Nova Scotia to allow international students to enroll in MSI for the duration of their study period.
3. Ask the University to build collaboration between the International Student Centre and the Student Health and Wellness Centre, including creating informational workshops together, creating and distributing information for international students about on-campus health services, and helping to issue health cards.
4. Review internal healthcare coverage policies and agreement with Student VIP to ensure international students don’t have hefty additional fees and are able to opt-out from duplicate coverage.

I. Recruitment

1. Lobby Dalhousie University to recruit students from a variety of different countries, accommodating for different challenges they may face based on their home country.
2. Support federal lobbying efforts calling on the Government of Canada to actively recruit international students from diverse countries.
3. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase the availability and accessibility of information about specific programs and campuses offered online, potentially including creating interactive webinars.
4. Lobby Dalhousie University to improve the navigability and user-friendliness of the Dalhousie website and extended web presence with consideration for the needs of non-native English speakers.
5. Recognize, and lobby the University to adequately account for, the fact that international students are a diverse group with varying cultures, experiences, and needs.

J. Representation

1. Support the creation and promotion of sustainable advocacy efforts by International students.
2. Lobby Dalhousie University’s International Student Centre to support the creation and promotion of sustainable advocacy efforts by international students.

K. Employment

1. Lobby the University to increase funding for the Bissett Student Success Centre in order to create programs and resources targeted towards international students.
2. Advocate for increased employment and volunteer opportunities for international students at Dalhousie and in the local Halifax and Truro communities.
3. Lobby the Government of Nova Scotia to provide more comprehensive and up-to-date information to employers about hiring international students.
4. Support federal lobbying efforts calling on the Government of Canada to extend the post-graduation work permit duration cap to facilitate immigration into Canada.
5. Lobby the provincial and federal governments to remove restrictions based on immigration status from funding for government-funded entry-level and seasonal positions.

L. Graduate Students

1. Lobby Dalhousie University to increase internal funding and aid opportunities for international students.
2. Lobby Dalhousie to improve and streamline scholarship application processes for international graduate students, and consider the needs of international students in any and all future changes to these processes.
3. Lobby Dalhousie University and federal and provincial governments to expand eligibility criteria for scholarships and grants to include international students.
4. Lobby Dalhousie University to support international graduate students in completing their studies on a similar timeline to domestic students by increasing financial aid, improving advising, and reviewing program requirements.
5. Support federal lobbying efforts that are pushing the Government of Canada to loosen restrictions on the ability of international graduate students to work outside their program of study.