

# Studying in Pembroke while enduring a pandemic

*A report on the experiences of International Students at Algonquin College, Pembroke*

The counties of Lanark and Renfrew are determined to create an inclusive environment within their communities. Welcoming new immigrants and understanding their needs, motivational factors, and comfort levels remain a key focus area to gauge strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. Post-secondary international students provide an opportunity to gain the perspective from a non-permanent resident viewpoint on whether continuous efforts to create an inclusive and welcoming environment are working. This report evaluates the factors that influence the selection of Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus, evaluates its inclusive nature, relevance and quality of the surrounding environment as well as future retention prospects of international graduates in these rural communities.

## PREPARED BY

### Shehzad Ghani

Research Officer

Local Immigration Partnership – Lanark & Renfrew

### Sumit Choudhary

Research Officer

Local Immigration Partnership – Lanark & Renfrew

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For more information, please contact the  
Local Immigration Partnership – Lanark & Renfrew  
[liplanarkrenfrew.ca](http://liplanarkrenfrew.ca)



Local Immigration Partnership  
Partenariat local pour l'immigration  
LANARK & RENFREW

## ABOUT LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP – LANARK & RENFREW

Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) are funded by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), a department of the government of Canada, and support communities in bringing together service providers, settlement agencies, community groups, employers and other key municipal organizations to create a welcoming and inclusive community for newcomers.

In Lanark and Renfrew Counties, the work of Local Immigration Partnerships is administered by Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus. To enable this work to happen, LIP staff conduct research to identify challenges that are preventing newcomers from fully participating in the economic, social, cultural and recreational life of the community. The LIP team also identifies new opportunities to help newcomers settle in rural areas.

A key principle of LIP's work is developing relationships and linkages between like-minded organizations to encourage collaboration that builds on the strengths of multiple partners. Welcoming communities are created by helping municipalities understand the benefits of newcomer attraction and assisting them with their planning and execution of activities that support immigrants who settle in their communities.

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## Executive Summary

International students bring a lot of diversity and talent to rural communities and are vital to their growth (Speer, 2019). Our research has shown mixed reactions from international students about feeling welcomed within the rural community which eventually affects the retention levels of these students when they graduate. There is an unequivocal appreciation for the faculty, staff and support staff of Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus. However, due to the rurality, students continue to face certain issues. During the survey and the focus group process, the students were open about their feelings and ideas, presenting various solutions to support and build confidence within the international student community at the Pembroke Campus.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

1. The JEDI<sup>1</sup> Student Mentor Program is well recognized and successful. However, further enhancement opportunities related to communication and reciprocity from JEDIs have been identified.
2. Overall support and help for international students are available and accessible. Additionally, focus group participants cited that having a dedicated and staffed international student support office, similar to the Ottawa Campus, would have a beneficial impact.
3. The International Education Centre's Orientation is generalized and is not specific to the Pembroke Campus. It should cover important matters related to enhancing student life.
4. Crucial topics such as accessing medical insurance, campus facilities – quiet study areas and gyms; and grocery stores – ethnic foods, if discussed during the orientation, could make it more informative and specific to the Pembroke Campus.
5. Collaborating nursing students with outdoor adventure students so that they can facilitate combined learning and increase chances of networking.  
 For example, nursing students would like to go on a trip organized by outdoor adventure students. At the same camp, nursing students could share their knowledge about CPR and other medical needs of campers with outdoor adventure students.
6. Networking and referencing are major factors in getting a part-time or a full-time job, which is a challenge for a deserving candidate.

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<sup>1</sup> A JEDI is a second-year student who takes a leadership role in supporting first-year student's college success. <https://www.algonquincollege.com/pembroke/2021/03/09/jedi-mentor/>



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## The Survey and the Focus Group Discussion

In April 2021, the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) and Algonquin College collaborated to create a survey that was rolled out during a ninety-minute focus group session. At the time, seventeen (17) international students were invited to the focus group session, out of which four (4) attended the focus group session. Appendix A (The Qualitative Group Discussion) focuses on the discussions held during the focus group. An email invitation to complete the online survey was sent to those students who could not attend the focus group session. The actual sample size of this report is thus based on a total of eight answered (8) surveys, a response rate of approximately 47%.

The participating international students represented in these findings study in the following five (5) programs:

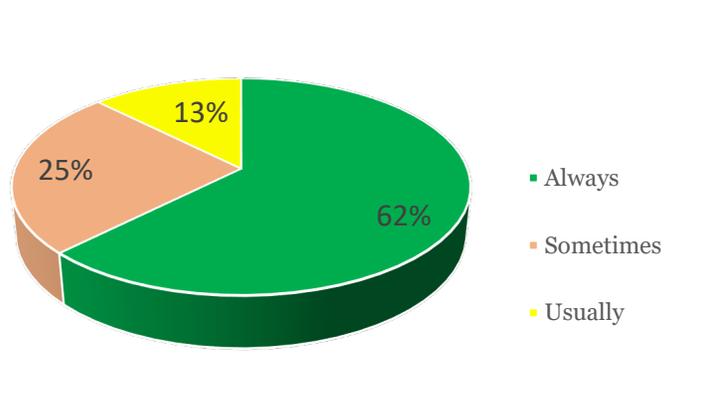
- Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- Business
- Outdoor Adventure
- Practical Nursing
- Pre-Health Sciences Pathway to Advanced Diplomas & Degrees

The COVID-19 pandemic and current unprecedented times were thoroughly considered. Remote learning and its related adaptivity were the underlying factors of all questions, conversations and analysis.



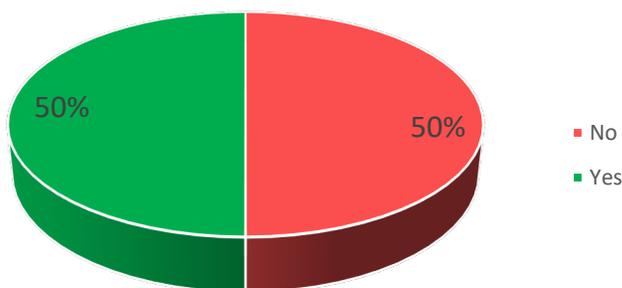
## Algonquin College and the Community

The students were asked specific questions which evaluated the college and the community separately. Generally, the students find the college to be welcoming and a place where they are readily accepted.



*Figure 1: College is welcoming*

This particular statistic is slightly better than how the students feel about the community where the College is located. COVID-19 testing was identified by one student as an instance during the pandemic which severely disadvantaged them as the testing was available only as a drive-through and as a result, students without cars had to take cabs to get tested. There was some discontent expressed as the testing was mandated by the College despite knowing the hurdles the students faced.



*Figure 2: Did you feel welcomed in the community?*

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Local Immigration Partnership  
 Partenariat local pour l'immigration  
 LANARK & RENFREW

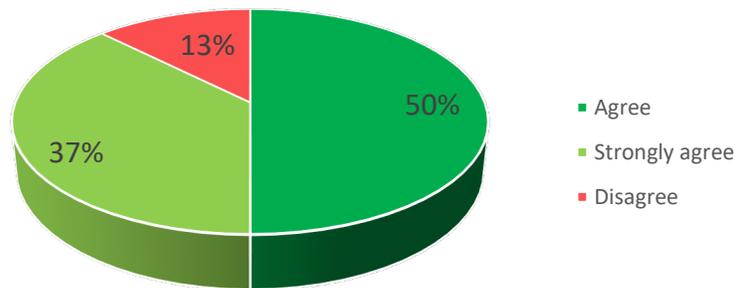


Figure 3: College has fair rules

Further, almost all students agreed that the college has fair rules. Approximately 87% of the students either 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' with this statement. Similar sentiments were conveyed in the focus group discussion.

## Student Success and Satisfaction

The feedback received on questions related to student satisfaction was positive. Approximately 62% of the students indicated that they feel well supported and recognize the help provided academically and by other staff, as shown by Figures 4 and 5. However, 38% of students do feel that academic help is only available sometimes. The following charts show the responses to specific questions that were asked as part of the survey.

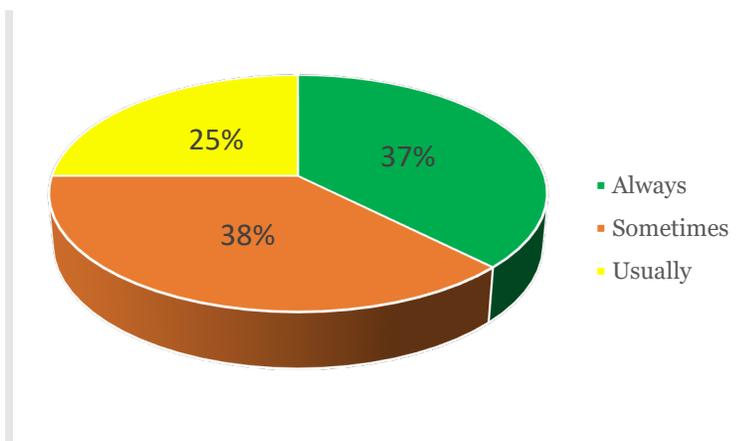
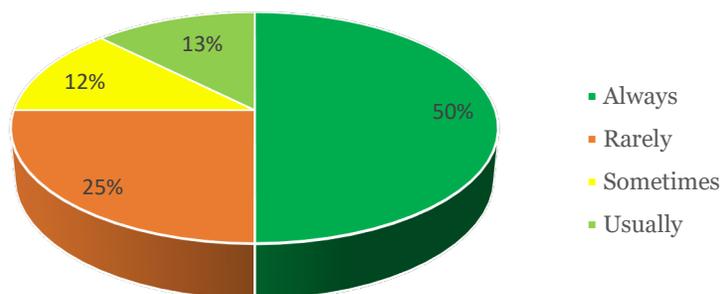


Figure 4: Availability of academic help



*Figure 5: Assistance of staff in setting personal targets*

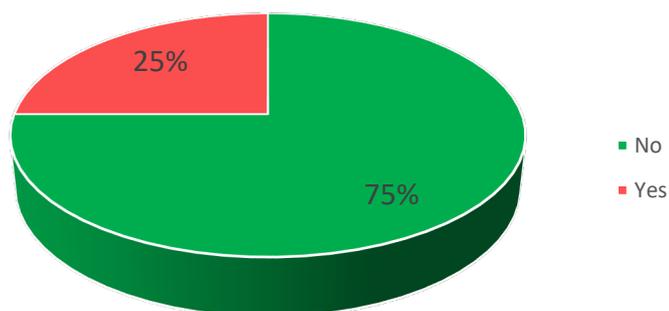
To gain further insight into these scores, students were probed to further elaborate on this topic in the focus group session as well as the qualitative section of the survey. The following are some positive sentiments:

- a. The curriculum, teaching styles and college facilities are key drivers of satisfaction and are appreciated.
- b. The faculty, support staff, professors and fellow students are supportive. They are always looking to go above and beyond to help the students. This further suggests that there is an extremely healthy learning environment at the college.
- c. Additionally, sessions and meetings related to Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) have ensured study and Canadian status permit compliance. Students feel confident and have gained knowledge about further steps about settling in Canada through these sessions.
- d. The JEDI student mentor program is seen as an opportunity to lead, mentor and make a difference. Students feel that it enhances their resumes.
- e. During the tough time presented by the pandemic, JEDIs have created communication channels through social media (e.g. Facebook). These are highly appreciated by students.
- f. JEDIs have helped students in all aspects related to studies and help create strategies for student life.

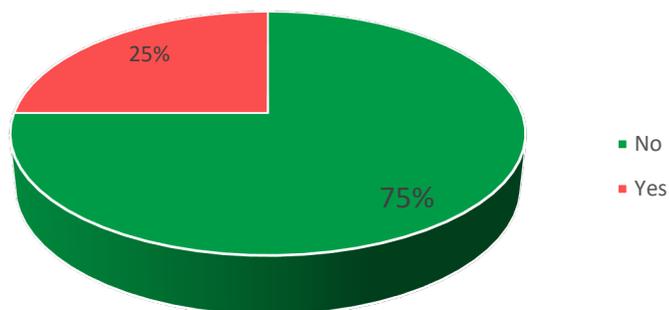
## Safety

75% of the students cited that their physical safety was not a concern on or off-campus. While the focus group poll was taking place, we received one reply highlighting safety as a concern.

Everyone's safety is a serious matter. Therefore, a follow-up question was asked during the focus group session; but we did not receive a response or any further detail from the student.



*Figure 6: Physical safety concern on-campus?*



*Figure 7: Physical safety concern off-campus?*

## The Surrounding Environment in the Communities

The survey attempted to delve into certain questions that are generally associated with factors that play a supporting yet substantial role in the learning journey of a student in a rural community. Further, certain activities and arrangements were severely impacted due to the ongoing pandemic, the survey attempted to reassess the magnitude and scope of the impact.

### a. Religious Accommodation

Restrictions on gathering at religious places and college campuses have been prevalent throughout the pandemic. Additionally, remote learning has helped students in managing their time and resources in an efficient manner (Del Arco, Silva & Flores, 2021). As a result, we see that 50% percent of the students surveyed did not request religious accommodations and a further 37% were able to follow their religious activities outside the college due to remote learning. One student, however, had requested religious accommodation which required transferring to a different campus and thus, was not granted.

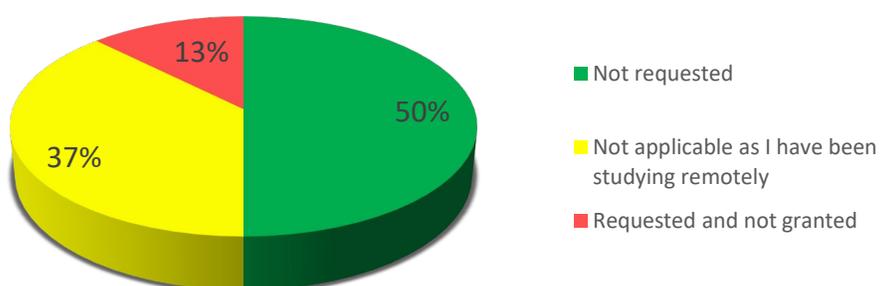


Figure 8: Requested Religious/cultural accommodations?

### b. Taking part in Cultural Activities by Pembroke Public Library

Local libraries such as the Pembroke Public Library play an important role within the community. Karthi Rajamani, the CEO of PLL, stated that “Our cultural diversity is one of

our greatest strengths and is at the heart of who we are. It makes Pembroke a great place to live” (Pembroke Observer, 2019). Interestingly, half of the students that were surveyed have not taken part in any activities arranged by the library. 37% of the respondents indicated the non-applicability of cultural activities reflecting the direct effect of the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic. A similar pandemic-based trend resonates in the negligible number of students who signed up for activities and clubs organized by the College. It was shared that activities and events were communicated weekly with sign-up details. However, not everyone signs up for these opportunities and they must be advertised more. There is an opportunity for the College to consider these trends and consider strategies to further create the 'feeling welcomed factor' discussed earlier in the report.

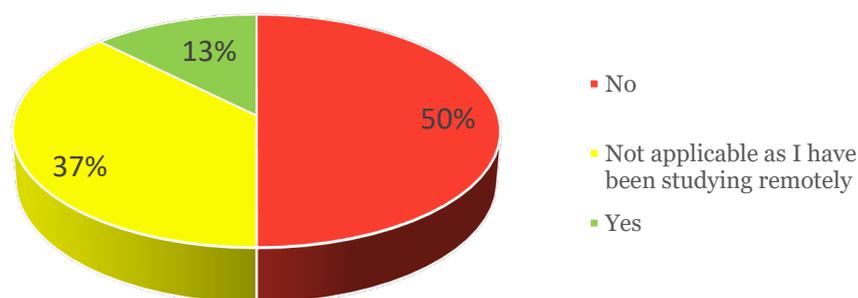


Figure 9: Taking part in cultural activities by Pembroke Public Library

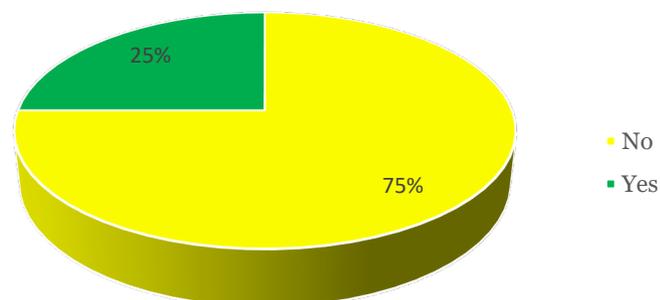


Figure 10: Are there college activities/clubs you are part of?

## Transportation and New Effective Ideas

The last survey conducted in 2019 identified transport as a continued hardship that the students were facing (Montgomery & Leggott, 2019). During the focus group discussion, it was evident that the few transportation options within Pembroke continue to pose numerous challenges for international students. This issue is exacerbated during the winter months causing additional hardship and is a major source of disappointment to students. Our questions elicited certain solutions which are concurrent to present popular trends in transportation. More than half the students who were surveyed are in favour of having a shuttle or a dedicated bus service within Pembroke. Some students also presented a solution of having a once-a-month shuttle to Ottawa or any other major city so that they could have better options while shopping for clothes, groceries, equipment and other services. Approximately 25% of the students suggested that a car-pooling service would be effective. This number is significantly lower than the students favouring a shuttle service because owning and maintaining a car and a driver's license is an added cost to them. Further, a relatively low number of students – 13% – would like to have a bike-share program. The students who are in favour of this also identify the fact that such a program would require substantial planning, funding and maintenance from the City of Pembroke or the College.

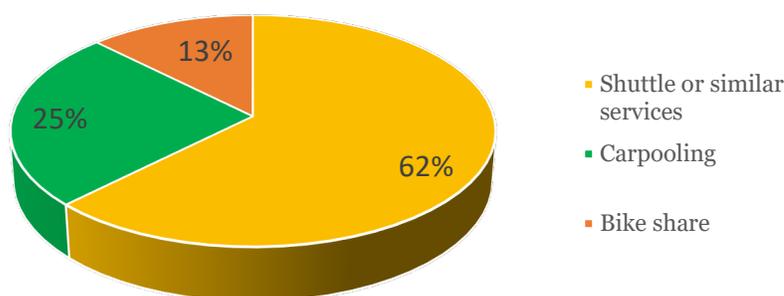


Figure 11: Effective transportation service

## Working while Studying and Expenses

87% of the surveyed students did not work part-time while studying. This led us to weigh this statistic against how difficult it was in finding part-time work in the community. A combined score of 26% is attributed to the difficulty in finding work. Thus, the analysis proposes two outcomes: Firstly, the students want to study and focus on academics alone while they complete their studies; Secondly, the pandemic caused fear, business closures and lockdowns which became the prime deterrents in looking for part-time work. The effects of the pandemic were discussed at large as deterrents in the focus group discussion.

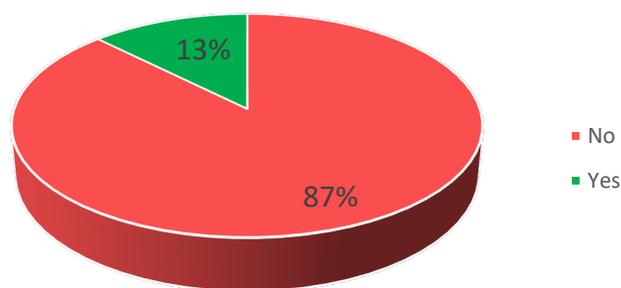


Figure 12: Did you find part-time work?

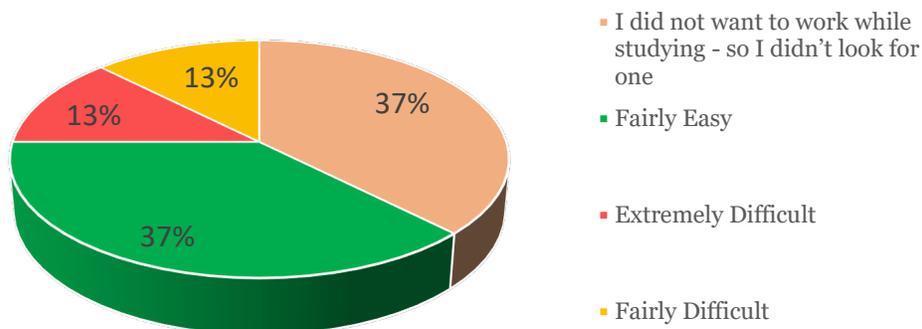
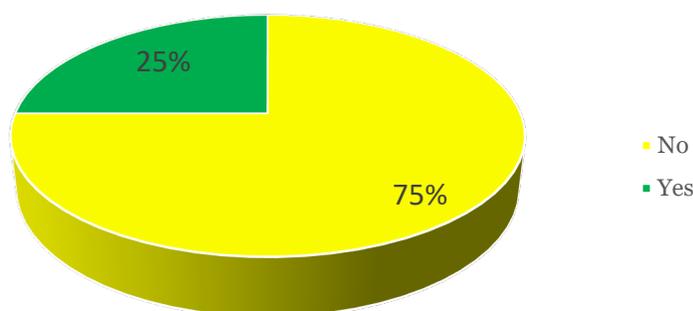


Figure 13: Ease of finding part-time work

## Choosing Pembroke and Future Prospects of Retaining International Graduates

Both the survey and focus group discussion had specific questions that asked students if Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus was chosen because it is located in a rural community and is less expensive than the Ottawa Campus. The majority of the students cited that saving on expenses was not a factor in choosing the Pembroke Campus. The focus group discussion highlighted the fact that certain programs only offered at the Pembroke Campus was the real driving force in choosing this destination as a campus – the Outdoor Adventure Program being one such program.



*Figure 14: Saving expenses a major factor?*

However, 50% of the students who took the survey indicated that they would not choose Pembroke to work and live in after they graduate. The qualitative data points that the issues related to lack of work opportunities and transportation coupled with the rurality of Pembroke would be major hurdles in retaining graduates within the community post their academic studies. Further and more interestingly, the percentage of students who do not find Pembroke as a welcoming community and who would leave the community after their studies is the same (50%). Contrastingly, a relatively high number of students (37%) have shown an interest in continuing to live in Pembroke if they have any future career opportunities.

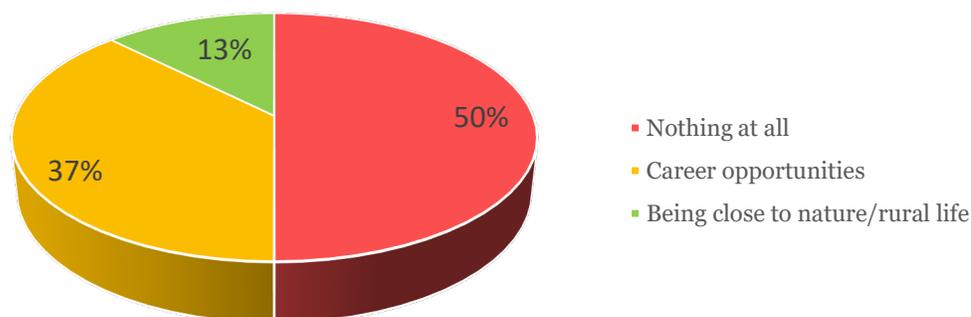


Figure 15: What will convince you to stay in Pembroke

In addition, a concurrent question asking the students about their overall satisfaction with their student experience in Canada brought out relatively positive and encouraging results.

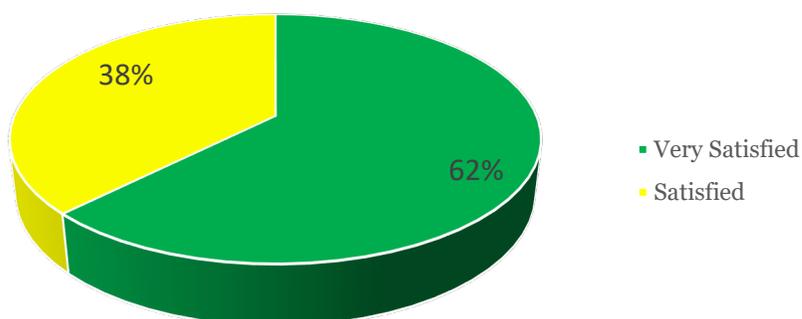


Figure 16: Overall satisfaction of educational experience in Canada

## Appendix A: The Qualitative Group Discussion

- a. The students feel well supported, however, a dedicated and staffed International Office, similar to the Ottawa Campus would help. Specifically, this point was discussed focusing on the acclimatization of international students to the community. It was suggested that after the initial orientation, such an office could help in answering all the questions related to local area information including, grocery stores, gyms, facilities of the college and other local and college activities that the students could take part in. Further, they could also contact the international office for questions related to medical insurance and immigration and status documents.
- b. International Education Centre Orientation
  1. Not interactive – almost like a monologue/lecture
  2. Does not cover information on key topics such as medical insurance, grocery stores, facilities of the college such as quiet study areas and gyms
  3. The orientation is generalized. There needs to be a specific orientation for the Pembroke campus only.
  4. Including information about surrounding areas, services and discussing student-centric matters in the orientation
- c. Medical Insurance
  1. Not clearly explained.
  2. Students have faced issues when they have accessed medical services and have not been reimbursed by the insurance companies at times.
- a. A lot of ambiguity about the coverage – there should be a detailed discussion about understanding the policy during the orientation.
- d. Further efforts in conducting and improving the JEDI program have been suggested. Since a JEDI's role is voluntary with added mentoring responsibilities, it can be made more standardized with further training. This could, for example, lead to enhanced communication with the students.
- e. Grocery shopping options and ethnic food options are limited and Farmer's Markets are closed due to the pandemic.
- f. COVID-19
  1. Has affected and continues to affect communication and networking.
  2. Affects the accessibility of whatever little Pembroke has to offer.
  3. Has severely and further affected any scope or hope of finding part-time work
- g. Part-time and full-time work
  1. Archaic ways of advertising jobs.
  2. Not enough jobs are available.
  3. Networking and referencing are major factors in getting a part-time or a full-time job, which is a challenge for a deserving candidate.



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