

Studying in Perth while enduring a pandemic

A report on the experiences of international Practical Nursing students
Algonquin College, Perth Campus

The Perth Campus of Algonquin College has made an enormous effort in growing its international student enrolments as a potential pool of candidates to help achieve financial stability while also creating opportunities for permanent immigration and the Lanark County labour force. This is together with consistent efforts to support the growth of diversity, inclusion, and equity both on-campus and within the greater community. The investigation in this report highlights survey results and focus group interviews of international students in the Practical Nursing program at Perth Campus. Local Immigration Partnership – Lanark & Renfrew has partnered with Algonquin College to evaluate international students' experience and offer evidence-based recommendations for continual improvements in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

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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 Perth 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

The Practical Nursing program allows students to gain hands-on skills in a variety of healthcare facilities. A major asset of this program is the Simulation Lab on campus, where students experience realistic patient care scenarios. Such activities help students build confidence and acquire indispensable skills and techniques before working with patients in clinical placements. Placements take place in community settings such as retirement homes, long-term care homes and hospitals.

This study aims at investigating different aspects related to the life of international students pursuing a Practical Nursing diploma. The group of students taking part in the study came originally from India and are all studying in the Perth Campus of Algonquin College. This report stems from the clear and constructive feedback provided by the international students and their responses to a systematic survey highlighting different aspects of their life as international Practical Nursing students in Canada. The focus group session highlighted the students' issues in securing student housing within the community, their issues in integrating with the wider community and the impact of transportation on their life as students. On the other hand, the majority of the students expressed their gratitude and thankfulness for the opportunity to come to Canada and pursue a diploma with many expressing the intention to stay and build a career in the country.

Key Findings

Based on the work reported, the following findings can be summed up:

- The majority of international Practical Nursing students are quite happy and satisfied with attending Algonquin College - Perth Campus and they see the added value in moving abroad from their respective home country to this College to gain a degree.
- Feedback from students highlighted a very welcoming image of the College and the wider community of Perth.
- Partly due to COVID-19 impacts, students feel safer in staying in their homes and apartments compared to going anywhere including attending the College.
- There is a general agreement among nursing students that the College has fair rules.
- The same agreement is not there when discussing student services, staff help, guidance and the overall learning environment at the College.



- The lack of an effective and reliable public transportation system in Perth is one of the major reasons, if not the most important reason, hindering students from coming to Perth to study and staying in the town rather than commuting from Ottawa.
- Finding a part-time job was not a problem for all students taking part in the study.
- Housing is another hurdle faced by students. Limited rental options available to students in Perth added to the challenges in finding accommodation.
- Students, in general, are very hesitant to show their commitment to stay and integrate in Perth community after graduation.
- None of the students reported issues with the educational experience in Canada.
- On the contrary, the majority valued their experience and supported their initial decision to move to Canada to pursue a diploma and some even mentioned staying further for a career.
- If international students are to be attracted to pursue their diploma at the Perth Campus, three major pillars are to be addressed and satisfied: Transportation, Housing and Jobs.

The Survey and the Focus Group Discussion

In November 2021, the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) – Lanark and Renfrew and Algonquin College collaborated to create a survey that was rolled out during a ninety-minute focus group session. At the time, twenty-one (21) international students were invited to the focus group session, out of which seventeen (17) attended the focus group session.

The participating international students represented in these findings are from the Practical Nursing program at Algonquin College's Perth Campus. 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 analyses.

Algonquin College and the Community

The students evaluated the college and the community through detailed questions and examples. Algonquin College and the community's commitment towards building a welcoming environment for international students continue to lead to positive results. The main question asked to the students was whether or not the College is a welcoming and accepting place. 93% of the respondents mentioned that they find the college always welcoming. This high percentage demonstrates overall that the international students are quite happy and satisfied with attending Algonquin College and that they see the added value in moving abroad from their home country to the College to gain a diploma. However, the remaining 7% of the students referred to certain

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personal experiences with the academic and support staff and rated the college lower in terms of the welcoming aspect. For example, one student mentioned that international students always have a fear of being not accepted and expect some discrimination by others at college and within the wider community. Another student also mentioned that he is happy that there is an international group of students and they can understand each other's struggles, which Canadian citizens won't understand. This is also supported by a note of one more student saying, 'We are kind of a close group'.

Another question was asked to the students related to the reaction of the wider community to their arrival. Similarly, the majority of the students (93%) feel that the community has welcomed them and that they have been greeted upon arrival to a very high extent as shown in Fig. 2. This aspect is highlighted by Canadian Immigration noting that Canadian colleges are playing a key role in welcoming international students [1]. On a larger perspective, the international student numbers in Canada have tripled over the past decade to 642,000 in 2019, moving Canada up to third place globally behind the United States of America and Australia in terms of welcoming international students [2].

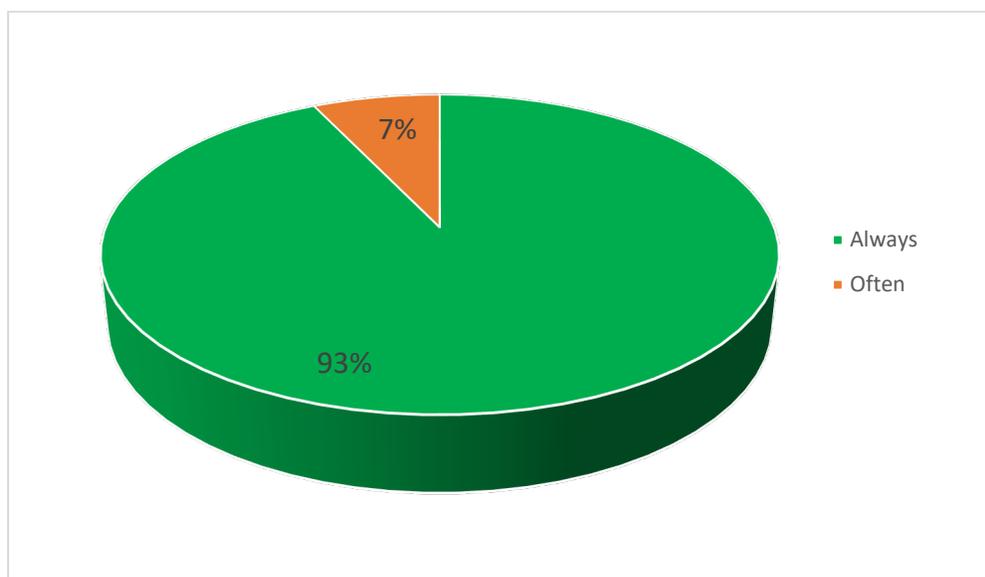


Figure 1: Is the college welcoming?

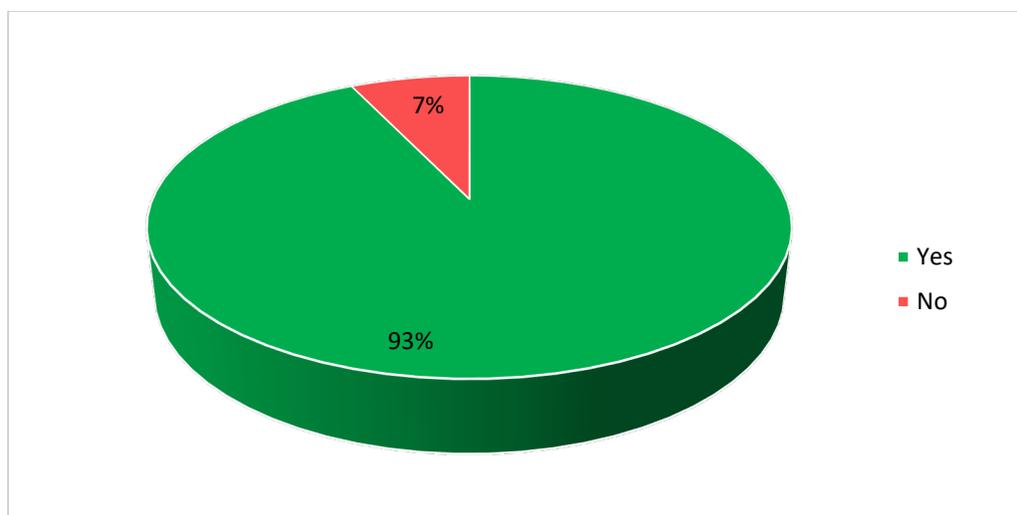


Figure 2: Did you feel welcomed in the community?

Supporting the first two questions which depict a very welcoming image of the college, and the wider community of Perth, Figure 3 and Figure 4 provide consistent reporting dealing with physical safety. The students were asked two questions related to their safety on and off-campus. In terms of safety off-campus, all the students taking part in the study answered clearly that they have no concerns regarding their safety outside the college campus. When it comes to safety on-campus, and although the majority of students still felt that they are safe (86%), 14% of the students expressed some concerns about their physical safety on-campus. Although it appeared later that one student didn't understand the question.

Overall, a recently published survey has ranked Canada among the safest and stable countries for international students, highlighting that Canada is one of the most popular destinations for international students with safety and stability being major reasons behind this appealing image [3]. A large number of international education agents took part in the survey conducted by Navitas Insights and the results showed that a substantial amount of 63% of agents rated Canada as "Very Attractive", ranking first followed by UK (51%) and Australia (49%). One major reason for some of the students raising concerns about their physical safety on-campus could be devoted to the overall situation with the new COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, students in general, and more specifically international, feel safer in staying in their homes and apartments compared to going anywhere including attending universities and colleges. In this regard, Figure 5 highlights the reaction of a pool of international education agents to the government policies and measures against COVID-19. As shown in the figure, Canada is at the top in terms of rating the actions taken against the pandemic spread compared to the other countries [3].

On the other hand, one of the major reasons why students would feel unsafe on-campus is racial or gender discrimination. While none of the students taking part in this study raised this issue or reported any related incident, it was reported in a recent study that around 50% of Canadians think that systemic racism is built into the country's institutions [4]. This also fits well with recent studies and surveys around the world which show a growing public polarization about the presence of international students in the corresponding local communities. In a survey conducted by UK universities, it was shown that around 19% of the public in the UK are in favour of universities recruiting fewer international students. This is also in agreement with results from a study reported in Australia by the Australian National University, where 46% of the public think that universities should accept fewer international students and more domestic [5].

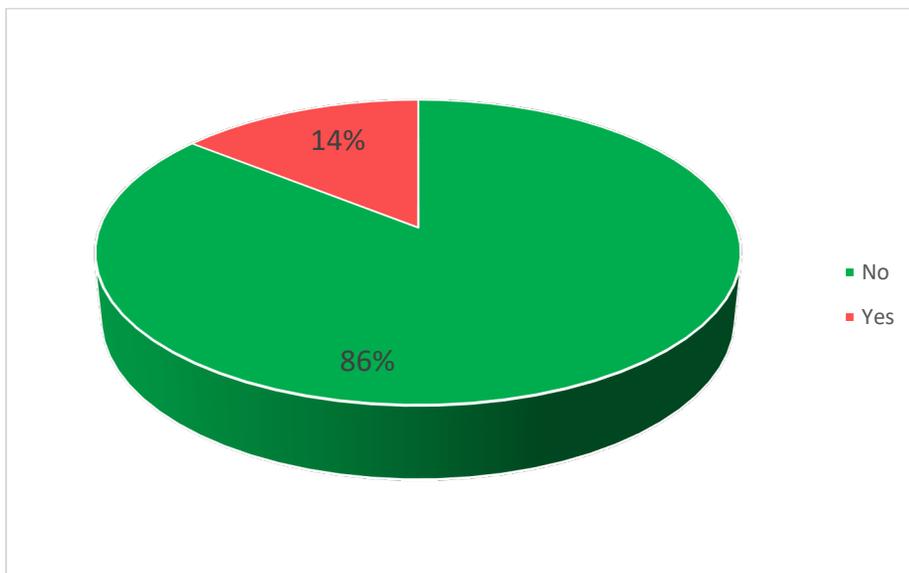


Figure 3: Is physical safety a concern on-campus?

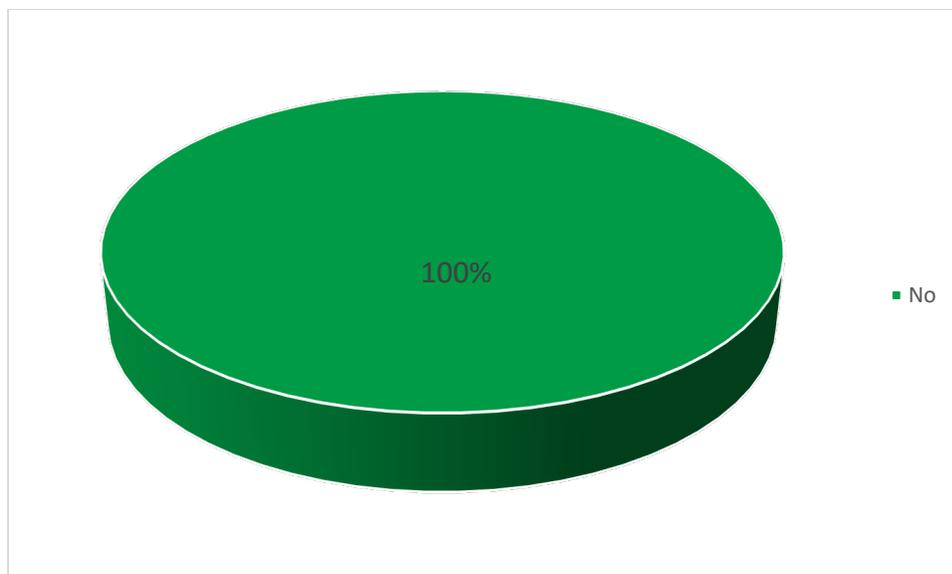


Figure 4: Is physical safety a concern off-campus?

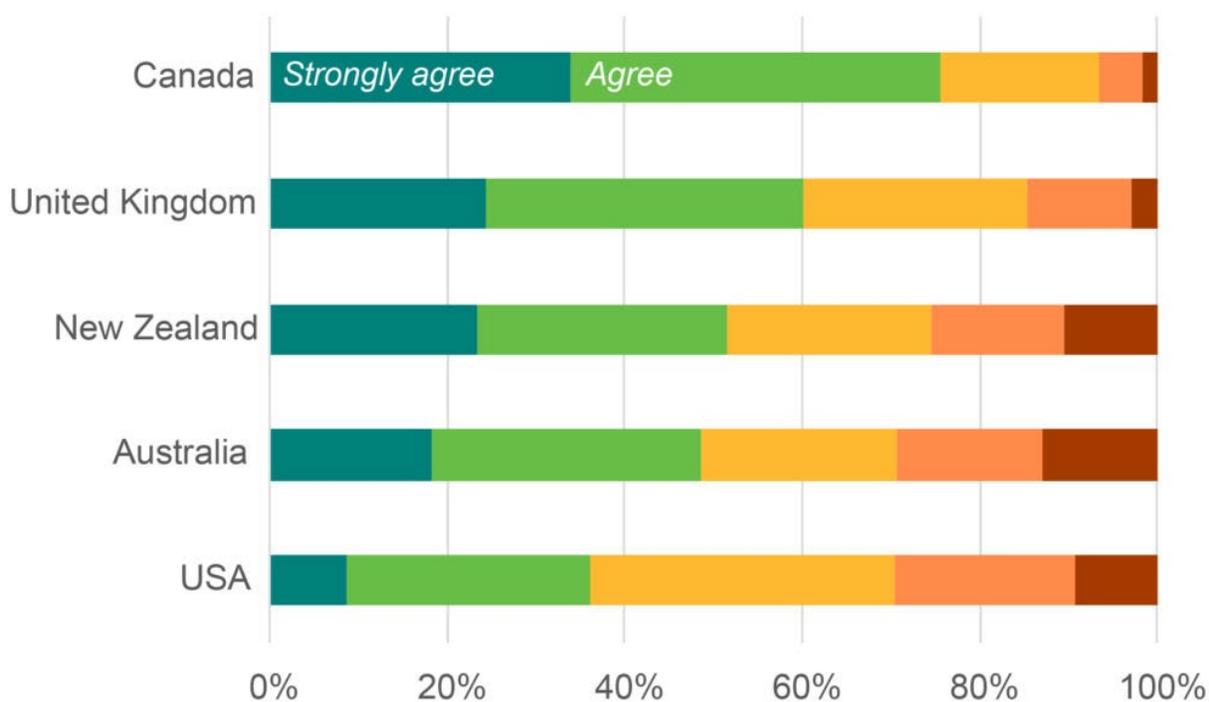


Figure 5: Reaction of the international education agents to the government policies and measures against COVID-19

Support Services and the Learning Environment

In general, the results reported above have certified to a very large degree that the Perth Campus and the wider community is a welcoming, safe and stable environment as rated by the group of the international students taking part in this study. Safety and a welcoming image are very important for international students in settling in and integrating with the community. However, some other core aspects also need to be investigated to ensure that the students have a continuous sustainable and prosperous environment in the long run. Two of the key conditions are having effective support services at the college and a well-established and encouraging learning environment.

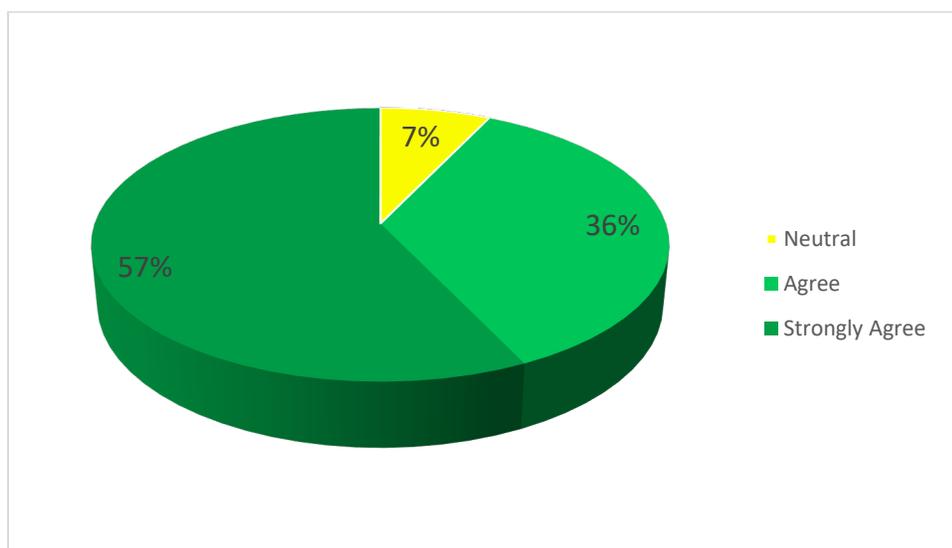


Figure 6: Does the college have fair rules?

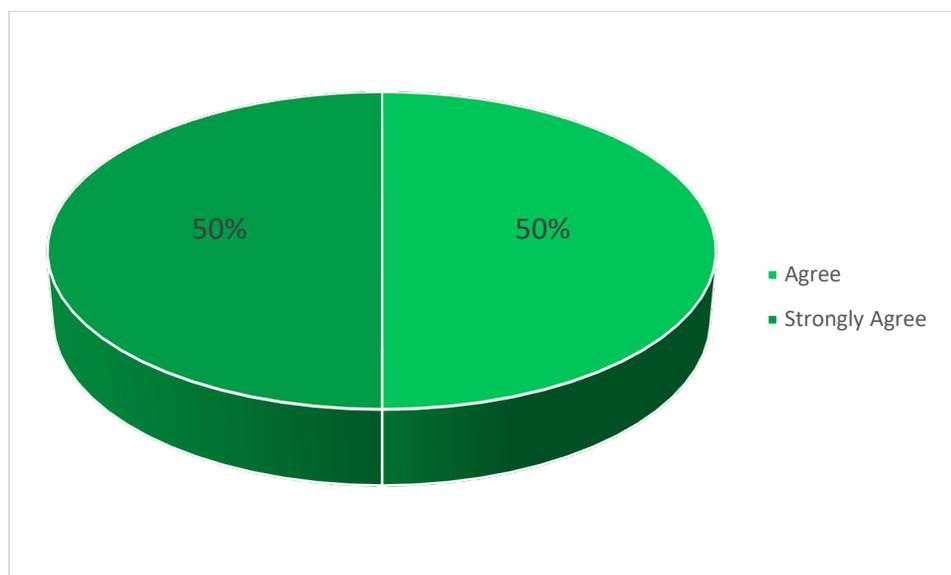


Figure 7: Is academic help easily available at the campus when needed?

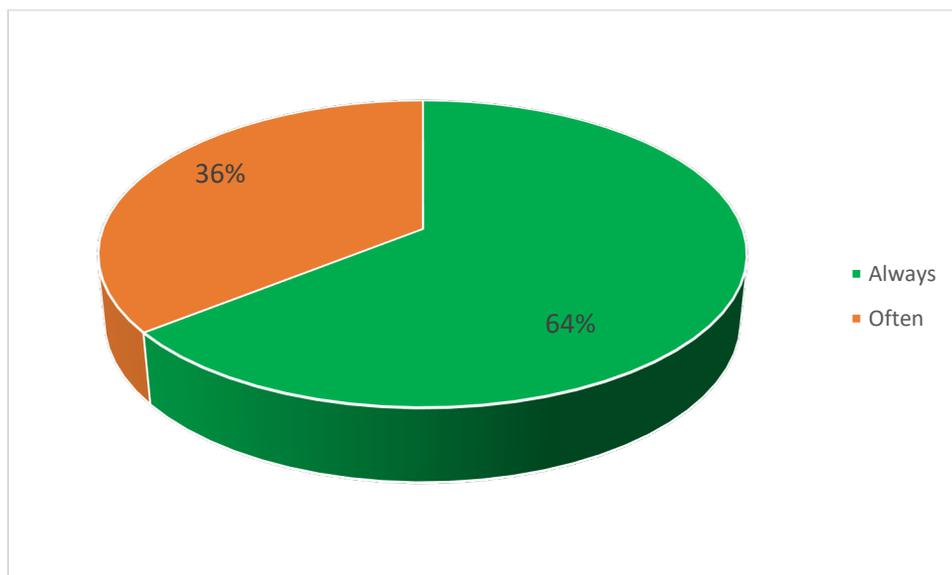


Figure 8: Is there assistance of staff in setting personal targets?

One of the questions included in the survey was if the college has established fair rules for everyone on campus. A general agreement by 91% of Practical Nursing students that the college has fair rules shows a very well-established balance and equality on campus between domestic and international students. 7% of the student reported a neutral response but none of the students highlighted any issue regarding unfair treatment or discrimination of any sort. The findings are well in line with the overall policies in Canada as well as the latest initiatives and campaigns towards establishing equality among students regardless of their background or race. Such initiatives were recently established where the Canadian Federation of Students showed strong solidarity in major Canadian regions and launched the 'Fairness for International Students' campaign in 2017 to establish fairness, consistency, and predictability for international students [6]. Thus, the status in Canada is deemed acceptable and satisfactory, especially when compared to the status of international students in other countries. For example, a recent study investigating the life of international students in the US has reported that a third of international students in the US feel discriminated against in their classes [7].

Nevertheless, the students in this study were asked to rate to what level they are satisfied with the academic help at the campus. All students responded that they find such help when needed. In comparison, 64% of the students reported that the staff on campus assist them in setting personal targets and developing strategies to achieve those targets. A student noted that 'the staff at college

are very kind to us' and another one also reported that faculty are always there to help in starting and understanding assignments, and whenever there is a need for their assistance and aid, they are there. The rest of the students also agreed that such help is often provided. A student remarked on the need for timely information on financial support for newcomers, which is normally missing. Knowing more about scholarships and grants would be beneficial. One student mentioned that professors and seniors are very helpful and kind but there is no interaction with students outside the college campus. On the other hand, a couple of students mentioned that they don't know any senior-level students and only professors were the main sources of help. This is supported by one student claiming that 'We haven't met our seniors as we are the first nursing batch from the Perth Campus'. In this regard, students also mentioned that they would be interested in mentoring the newcomers, providing advice and help regarding life in Perth and studying on campus.

The results attained in this study are supported by major findings by researchers in a large sum of recent studies. It was thus clearly reported and highlighted that most of the post-secondary institutions in Canada make substantial investments in providing diverse campus services [8, 9,10]. Overall, studies also support the claim that when colleges provide enough structured opportunities for students to take part in institutional services, the students 'rate of success and productivity will be enhanced' [11]. One interesting note is that when the students were asked how the orientation session was, no one responded. This could mean that either those students didn't get a well-organized orientation session, or they missed it completely.

Contributing Factors to Student Life

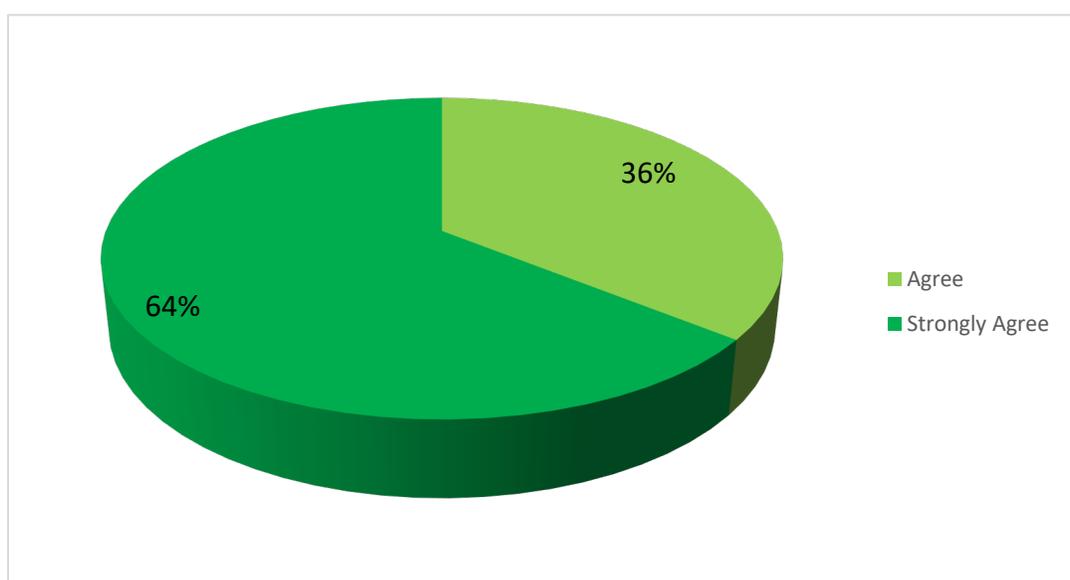


Figure 9: Important to get involved in activities and clubs on campus?

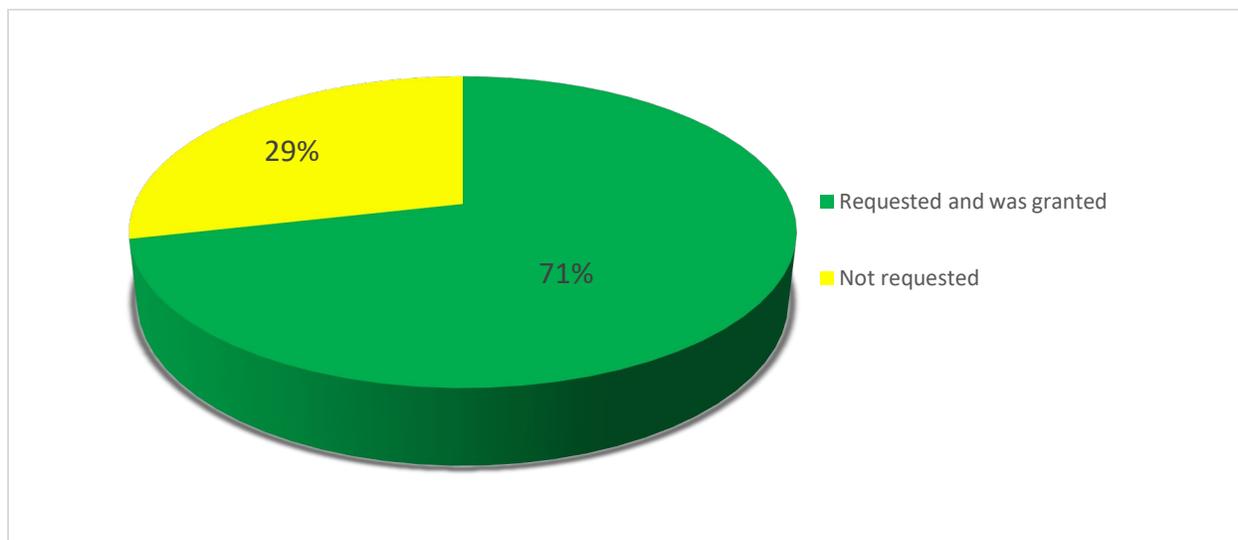


Figure 10: Requested Religious/cultural accommodations

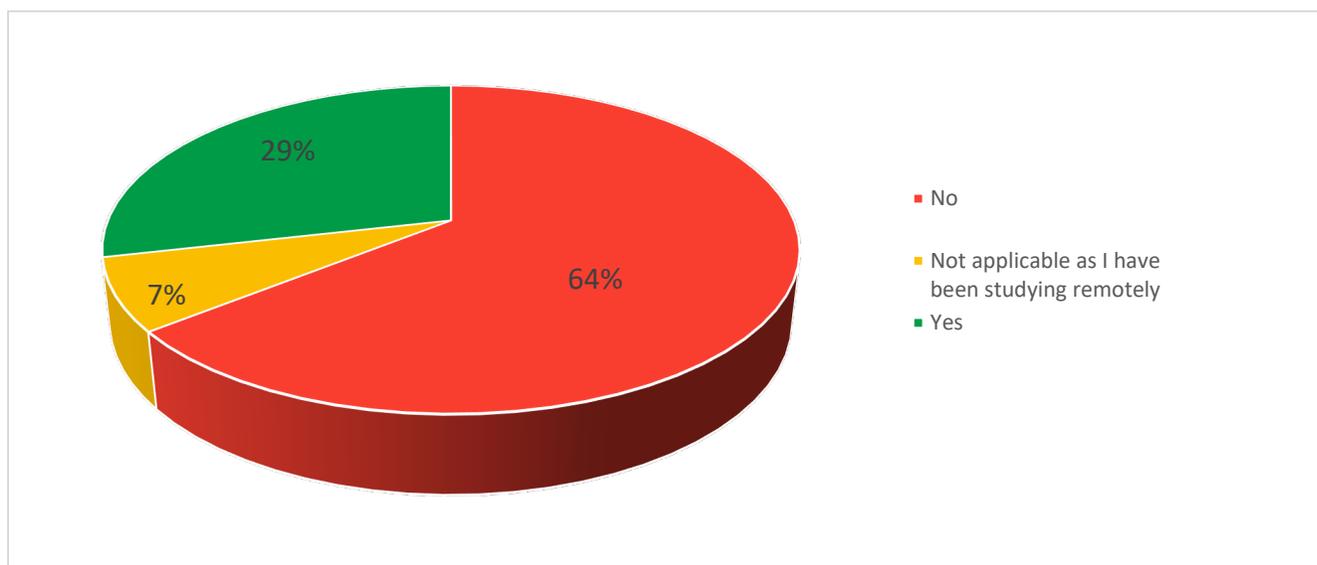


Figure 11: Participated in cultural activities by Perth Union Library?

When discussing and investigating other factors affecting student life on campus, there was a general consensus among all students involved that they are part of activities/clubs on campus. For example, one student mentioned that during the Diwali festival, there were celebrations on campus with dancing, music and candies brought by professors. Another student mentioned that it is normal that one from the class suggests an activity and the student asks the responsible staff and generally the activity will be allowed and granted. In addition, 71% of students requested religious/cultural accommodation and the college granted it. On the other hand, only 29% of students have participated in cultural activities organized by Perth Union Library.

This could be due to COVID-19 and students studying remotely which depict the actual and significant impact of the pandemic on students participating in community activities although they acknowledged it is important. Other students said they were not aware that such events/activities by the library were offered. It should be noted that 100% of the students indicated that they consider getting involved in activities and clubs on campus as important. In this regard, one student mentioned that he wished to see a big crowd of Perth Campus students at some of the common games and entertainment events. Overall, recent studies highlight that college students who participate in extracurricular and cultural activities experience greater academic success, greater character development in addition to being equipped with better time-management and leadership skills, more positive social development, and greater interest in community involvement [12]. This is important for all students but extremely important in the case of international students and a major condition towards integration in the wider community [13].

Transportation

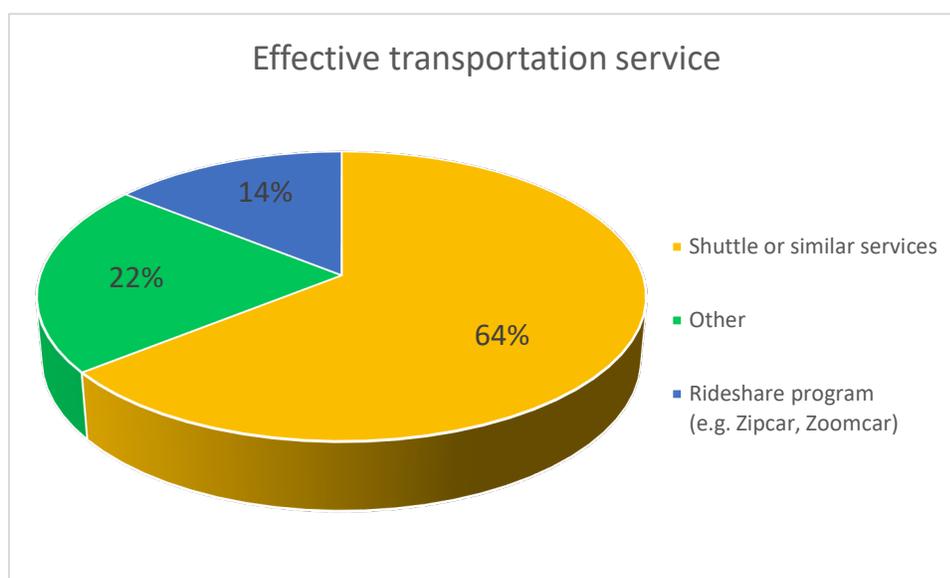


Figure 12: Effective transportation service

Though the students agreed that they knew about the rurality and limited possibilities of reliable transportation within the community, it continues to be the most glaring and talked about concern with the various international student cohorts that LIP – Lanark & Renfrew has connected with. 14% of the respondents indicated an interest in the implementation of a rideshare program. 64% of the students cohesively suggested that a shuttle service within the community, to the Ottawa Campus and other major cities, would be welcomed and 22% think other transportation media would be appropriate but with no specific suggestions. One student mentioned that ‘Perth doesn’t have a

public transport system otherwise all of us would be living in Perth'. Another student agreed and stated that without public transport, it will be difficult for new international students to settle in Perth, as they would need time to earn money and save to get their own car. Another student mentioned that a cost-effective mode of transportation is needed.

Overall, all students taking part in the study highlighted the importance of establishing reliable and flexible means of transportation on both their time management and learning capacities. To back this, a recent study on a set of engineering students highlighted that providing effective college transportation may lead to major positive impacts on students with better attendance and higher GPAs [14]. Moreover, multiple studies highlighted that a major reason behind being late to classes is unreliable transportation [15]. In addition, some studies established a direct relationship between the lack of proper transportation and absenteeism and the degrading in academic performance [16].

Working Part-time

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) allow international students to work part-time for up to 20 hours during semesters and full-time during the summer semester and scheduled breaks. 86% of the students were content that they were able to find part-time work on or off-campus after the initial wait of acquiring Social Insurance Numbers (SIN). In addition, 72% of the students stressed that it was easy to find a job. The remaining 28% reported difficulties and some issues in this regard. One of those students mentioned that it takes a fairly long time to receive a reply from work sites regarding job applications, but the same student also mentioned that there is a wide range of part-time job opportunities for students in Canada. One student highlighted that it is harder to find a part-time job in Perth compared to Ottawa, for example, due to the limited number of stores and shops.

In addition to that, 93% of students reported that they would be interested in participating in paid co-op, if offered. Such an opportunity would also be a way to support the financial burden of international students. Generally, students were very positive regarding finding a part-time job both on the level of integration in the community and acquiring extra funds to support their living. On the other hand, there were some comments raised by students stressing the importance of having a good part-time job. One student highlighted that the tuition fees they need to pay are almost three times the standard fees along with the limited number of working hours allowed.



A study on the average cost of a student in a Canadian higher education institute has shown that the long-term student needed around \$33,800 in 2015 and \$35,100 in 2016 to cover the cost of education and living while staying in Canada. This includes tuition fees, other fees, books, accommodations and meals, transportation, and discretionary spending [17].

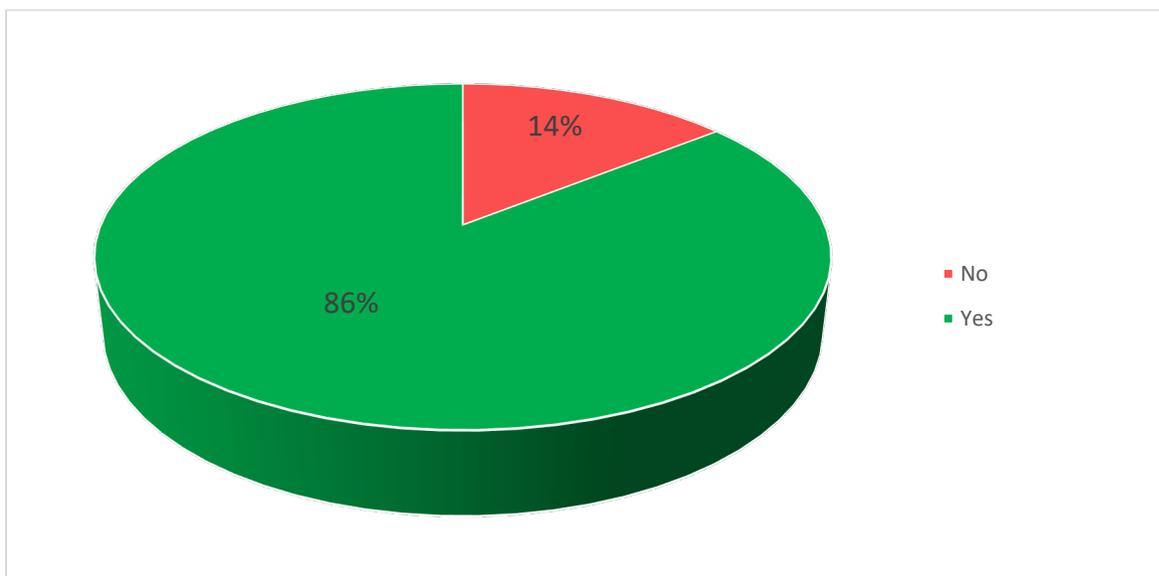


Figure 13: Did you find part-time work?

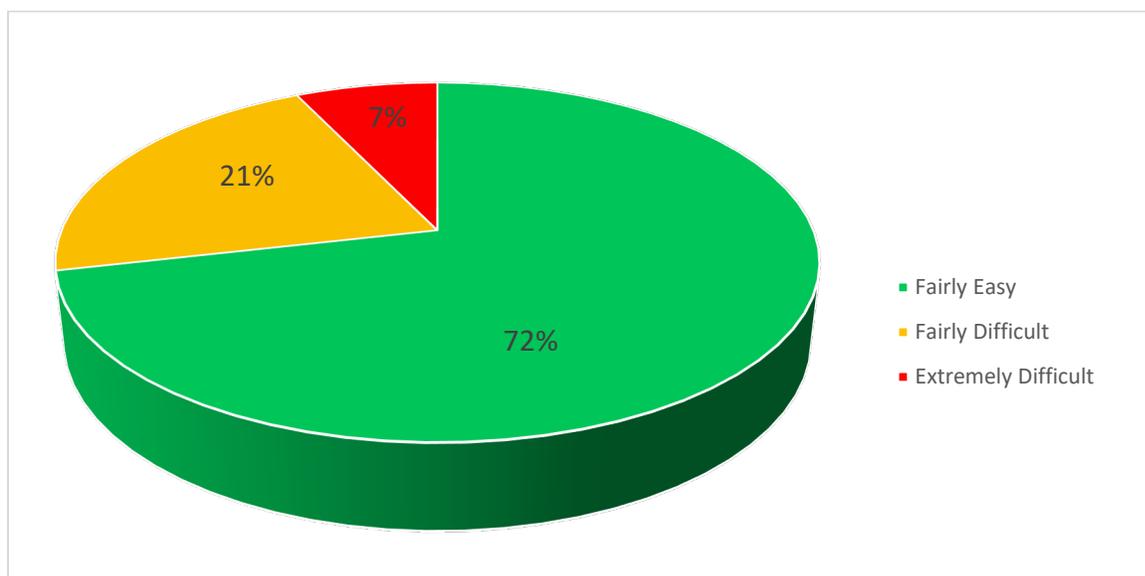


Figure 14: Ease of finding part-time work

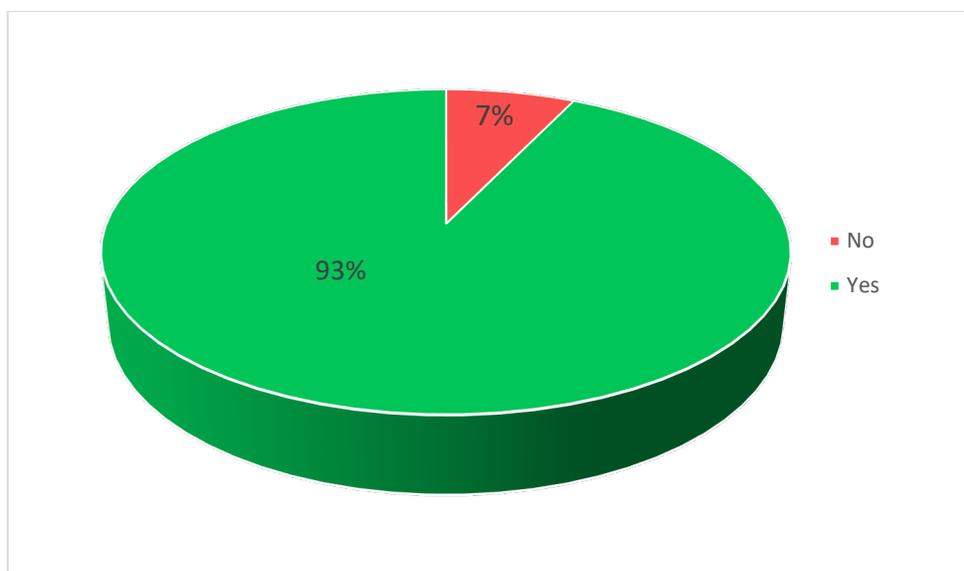


Figure 15: Interested to participate in paid co-op?

Housing

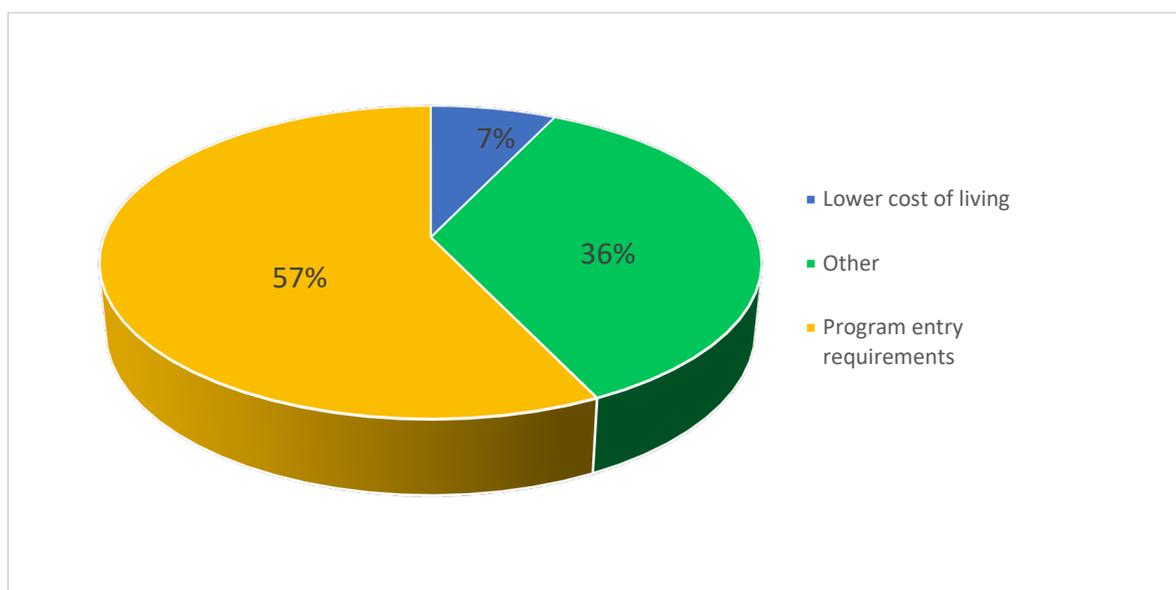


Figure 16: Main reason for choosing campus

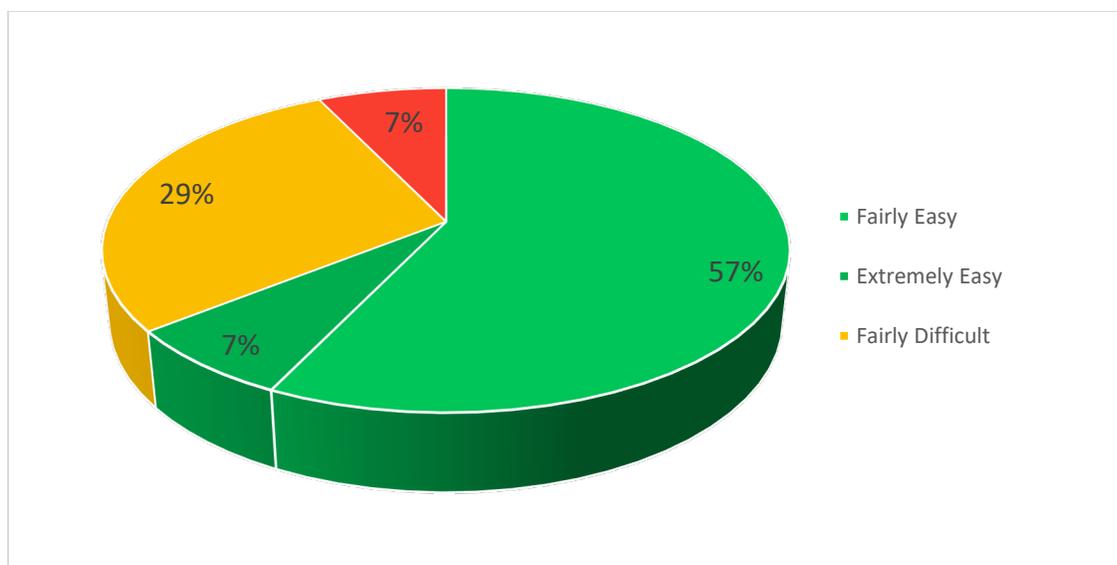


Figure 17: Experience in finding housing

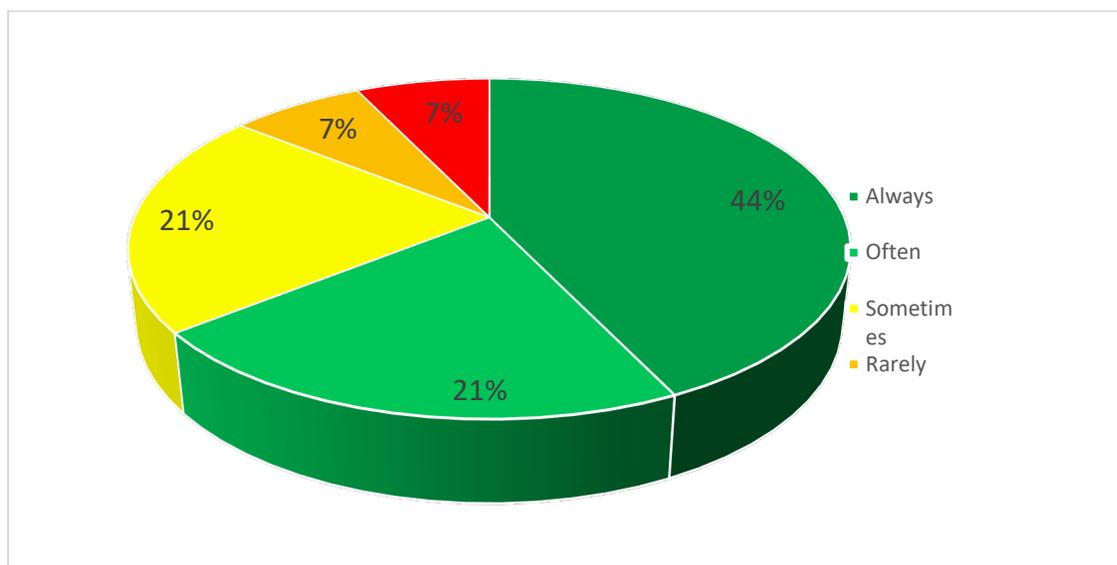


Figure 18: Support from Landlord

In terms of the campus choice, as shown in Figure 16, 57% of students chose to study at the Perth Campus due to program entry requirements and around 7% of students chose the campus for lower cost of living while the remaining 36% had other reasons which were not shared. When it comes to the major factors affecting the choice of an educational institution and a specific country abroad, housing would always be at the top of the list [18]. Therefore, student housing and the ease of finding a proper apartment/residence was one of the main aspects considered in this study. The results presented in Figure 17 highlight that 64% of students indicated finding housing is

fair to extremely easy whereas 36% think it is difficult to find a house. One of the students mentioned assertively that 'There is a lack of housing in Perth'. It should be noted that the limited rental options provided to students at the Perth Campus added to the challenges in finding accommodation.

Although most of the Practical Nursing students taking part in this study are living in Ottawa and commuting daily to Perth, they are not living on the Algonquin College campus in Ottawa but nearby the campus as reported by one of the students. Another student agreed and mentioned that they first get to the Ottawa Campus via OC Transpo then they take the shuttle to Perth. A recent study investigating the relationship between the academic performance of resident and non-resident students at a rural South African university highlights that living on campus is directly related to gains in social and personal competencies of the students which will correspondingly aid students to be more successful in their courses. A survey with over 1769 participants from both resident and non-resident students was considered. The data showed that the academic performance of resident students is better than that of non-resident students, and thus residing on campus is an advantage in the case of rural post-secondary institutes [19].

Moreover, the students were asked if the landlords, they contact during the housing search, were welcoming and if they provided the information and support needed. The results shown in Figure 18 highlight that 65% of the students confirm that landlords are supportive and helping to some degree, but around 14% think that landlords rarely or never provide support and advice during housing searches. A recent study in Canada highlighted a similarly tough situation in Halifax, where international students are struggling amid a shortage of affordable options [20]. Even with a high budget of around \$900-1200, a student is not able to find a one-bedroom apartment close to Dalhousie University. The figure below highlights the Canadian cities with the most shortage in terms of the number of beds for international students. Montreal is at the top of the list with a shortage of more than 50,000 beds for students, according to data from the Financial Post [21].



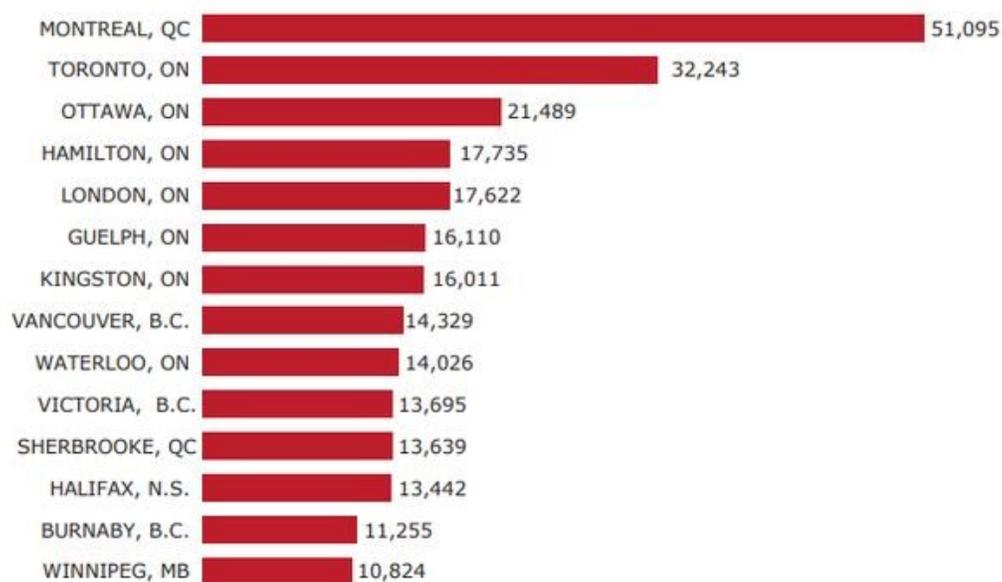


Figure 19. Financial post data via rein.

Choosing Perth and Future Prospects of Retaining International Graduates

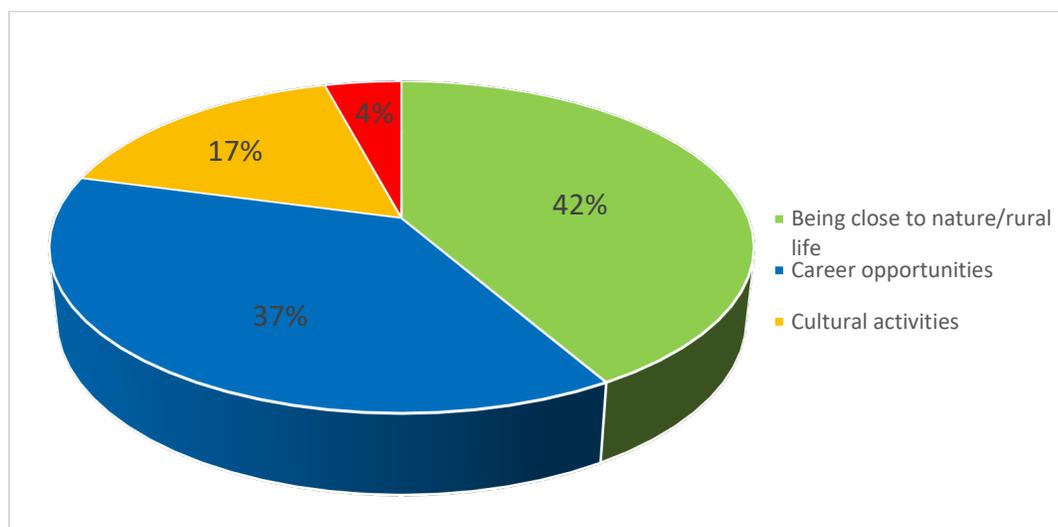


Figure 20: What will convince you to stay in Perth?

In terms of the commitment of the Practical Nursing students to stay and integrate into the Perth community after graduation, Figure 20 shows that students are hesitant in this regard. While 44% of students who chose to study at Algonquin College's Perth Campus are willing to stay within the

community if they could pursue a successful career in the field of nursing, 14% are not even thinking about the idea and they would rather leave after graduation. Interestingly, 42% would choose to stay in Perth to be close to nature/rural life and only 17% for the sake of cultural activities. One student mentioned that more housing information in Perth is needed to settle in the city. Another student stressed the importance of public transport by saying 'Housing alone will not help, public transport is a major concern, taxis are expensive though Perth has a lot of taxi services. A student also mentioned that there is not much Uber or Lyft in Perth and even there are no food delivery services in the city. In the same context, a student also commented that he was considering moving and living in Perth but there was no housing information provided on the website, and there is no public transport in the city.

It should also be noted that most of the students taking part in the study and who are pursuing a Practical Nursing diploma, are living in Ottawa, and taking the shuttle bus daily to Perth. One student for instance mentioned that 'I can say Ottawa is home.' On the other hand, another student highlighted a challenge regarding commuting between Perth and Ottawa, where getting ready in the early morning can be overwhelming as the shuttle leaves the Ottawa Campus at 7 a.m. One student, for example, mentioned that 'Only Perth Campus was open in terms of getting into the program.' That is the only reason she is now studying in Perth. Another student highlighted that she was late in selecting a campus for her study and then she got Perth. However, she also expressed her happiness with this decision. On the other hand, one student made an interesting comment saying that although they are in Perth around eight hours a day, with only three hours of study, they still did not have the chance to go around the city and discover its streets, attractions, and nature.



Overall Satisfaction

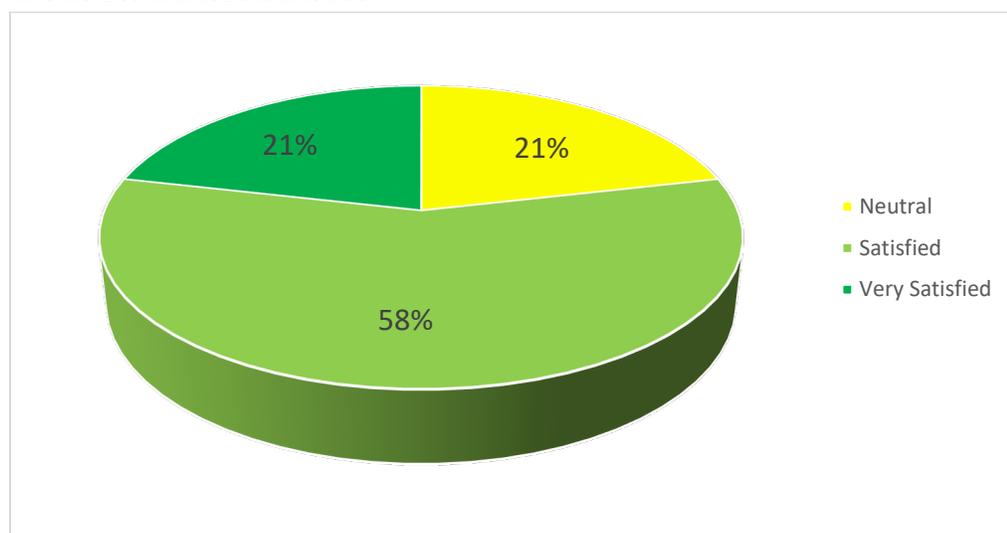


Figure 21: Overall satisfaction of educational experience in Canada

The last aspect investigated in this study was to cover the wide perspective and ask the students about their perceived satisfaction with their educational experience in Canada. Around 79% of students are overall satisfied with their learning experience, whereas the other 21% are neutral. None of the students reported issues with the educational experience in Canada. On the contrary, the majority valued their experience and supported their initial decision to move to Canada to pursue a diploma and some even mentioned staying further for a career. More than one student claimed that they love the place and the country. There were a couple of negative comments on the Canadian weather, but they were also followed up by gratitude and thankful notes on the opportunity to come to Canada and pursue a diploma.

Some students also highlighted the importance of networking and the help they get from others including older international students. One student mentioned that some of his friends and classmates were already in Perth before him and thus, they helped him with different things. Another student commented that 'I was the last one from my class to come to Canada', referring that there are many of his classmates and friends who have already started in Perth before him. Another student said that he met six other people from his hometown who had already moved earlier to Perth. On the other hand, some students mentioned that they did not know each other before but they got introduced to each other after an online class. One nice addition from a student taking part in the discussion was that they were 'Total strangers but now like a family. In addition, many of the students mentioned that they arrange different social events together including shopping, travel, and parties.

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Some students also raised some suggestions for effective integration and establishing a better learning environment. A student highlighted that being formal at the college will not work, instead, you should bond with teachers, and this will benefit you. In terms of building expertise, one Practical Nursing student highlighted that his wish is to get more practical experience from the clinical placements coming later in the program. Another student highlighted the care she received in Canada since arriving and expressed overall gratitude for the opportunity of studying in Canada and being a student at Algonquin College. She also mentioned that when she arrived in Canada, she had to quarantine herself because of COVID-19 rules and regulations. However, the college called her daily and asked about her status and needs.

Recommendations for Continued Improvement of the International Student Experience

Based on the investigation carried out in this study and the responses received along with the results and analysis, it is obvious that if international students are to be attracted to pursue their education at the Perth Campus, three major pillars are to be addressed and satisfied: transportation, housing, and jobs. The following recommendations are presented to improve the overall life quality and satisfaction of international students and correspondingly to encourage students to choose Perth as a first-choice campus to attend for study:

- A reliable and effective transportation system is a demand. This needs to be coordinated with the city council and the authorities. A bike-driven approach is not an option as this is only a temporary solution for some months in the year. So at least a short public transport network needs to be established linking the campus to the main city sites, malls, major streets, accommodations and services.
- Developing affordable housing projects directed towards international students needs to be addressed. The funding could be cooperative funding coming from the college and some sponsoring companies or stakeholders, majorly international successful businessmen. Such affordable housing will make it easier for students to find accommodation in Perth and thus will attract them to stay in the city.
- Guides and recommendations towards available part-time jobs and opportunities should be advertised by the college. This includes opportunities in shops, malls, restaurants and on-campus jobs.



The college also needs to ensure that students are comfortable not only outside the campus but also within the campus, this can be established via the following steps:

- Promote in-house services provided and directed towards international students.
- Promote engagement with the wider community through advertising cultural events, gatherings, parties, and trips to integrate internationals within the community and allow them to understand and comprehend the cultural and social aspects of the community.
- Regularly evaluate the performance and behaviour of administrative staff in helping international students and facilitating their integration within the campus.
- Provide regular training to professors and faculty members to establish fair rules and equal treatment in classes.
- Advise professors and teachers to integrate group work within their courses and lectures with groups comprising of both domestic and international students.
- Give international students a voice by forming an international students committee to represent them in meetings with college administration. This committee could also actively participate in holding events for the international students.
- Establish International Students' Day where all students can wear their national clothes, share home country dishes, and provide customized goods and gifts.
- Invite international graduates and alumni to share their successful experiences on the campus and in the wider community.



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