

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY REPORT 2022

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Algonquin College, Pembroke Campus



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

Studying in Pembroke as an International Student

A report on the experiences of International students studying at Algonquin College Pembroke Campus

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 key focus areas 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, its inclusive nature, relevance and quality of the surrounding environment, and future retention prospects of international graduates in these rural communities.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

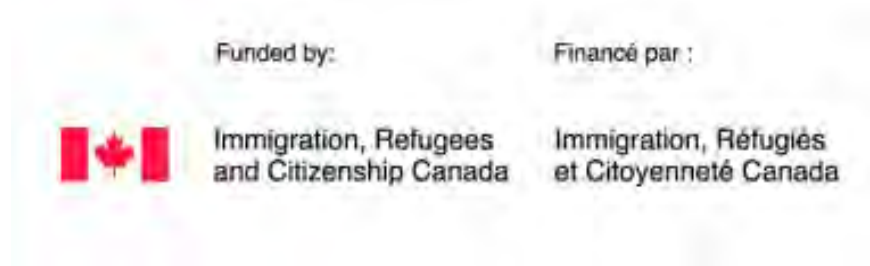
Thanks to Jamie Bramburger, Manager of Community and Student Affairs, Jodi Bucholtz, Manager, Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) and Shawna Enright, International Student Success Specialist, for their support and input in developing this report.

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ABOUT LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP – LANARK & RENFREW

Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) are funded by Immigration, Refugees 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, LIP staff conduct research to identify challenges preventing newcomers from fully participating in the community's economic, social, cultural, and recreational life. 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 planning and executing activities that support immigrants who settle in their communities.



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Executive Summary

The Canadian economy and the post-secondary education system rely on international students (Grewal, 2022). They play a valuable role in the Canadian economy, directly and positively impacting the nation's growth. In addition, international students significantly contribute to innovation and knowledge development and are a source of cultural creativity, notably in regions less marked by diversity. As such, international students are seen by many as some of the most desirable sources of skilled immigrants. This attraction is reciprocated as a sizable percentage of international students also see Canada as their top choice of destination for education. A report from IDP Connect (Krohn, 2021) shows that 39% of the 3,650 students surveyed placed Canada as their first choice for post-secondary studies abroad. However, our research has shown mixed opinions held by the international students attending Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus. Though sentiments on the programs, faculty, support, and administrative staff have been overwhelmingly favourable, many students have found themselves confronted with issues unique to their international status. Surveys and focus groups were held so that many of these students could share their feelings on the situations they encountered and present solutions to build a better international student community within the campus.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Affordable housing is one of the biggest concerns for international students at Algonquin College's Pembroke Campus. Many students struggle to find adequate housing solutions within the Ottawa Valley. Some were even taken advantage of by unscrupulous property owners; whose listings remain on the suggested housing. This needs to be addressed, particularly in terms of filtering and updating the suggested housing list to ensure that the reputation of the College is not attached to unethical property owners.
- Many of the international students also struggled with transportation. Within the Pembroke area, there is no public transportation. This has led students to walk long distances in uncomfortable temperatures or spend excessive amounts on taxis. Due to this lack of transportation, they could not participate as much as they wished in college activities and events. As a solution, the College could implement a shuttle service that would bring vehicle-less students to important key areas such as grocery stores, medical appointments, and sometimes to a bigger city like Ottawa.
- Focus group participants cited that having a dedicated and staffed international student support office, like the Ottawa Campus, will have a beneficial impact in helping them navigate both the college system and Canadian society. It could also attract a bigger international student influx to the county.
- Similarly, a mandatory orientation session on Canadian culture and society would be helpful. This session could include information about their healthcare plan, climate and weather, police services, social values, basic property owner/tenant laws, safety precautions and more. In addition, a campus tour could be organized where international students could learn where to print documents, where to find food, where to find the gym, what are the most meaningful programs, where to get vaccines and more.
- Networking, specific resume styles and referencing are major factors in getting a part-time or a full-time job. Hosting workshops to assist with job application, like tailoring their resume and writing cover letters as needed, would help students gain employment sooner within the community.

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The Survey and the Focus Group Discussion

Over the past seven months, the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) - Lanark & Renfrew and Algonquin College collaborated to create a survey that was rolled out to the international students at the Pembroke Campus. As many as 30 international students were invited to the focus group session, out of which seven (7) attended the focus group sessions. An email invitation to the online survey was sent to those students who could not attend the focus group session so they could complete it at their leisure. A further five students participated via the online survey. The actual sample size of this report is thus based on a total of information collected from 12 students - an overall response rate of approximately 40%.

Appendix A - The Qualitative Group Discussion - focuses on the qualitative responses of those students who filled out the online survey.

The participating international students represented in these findings studied in the following four programs:

- *Computer Programming*
- *Environmental Management and Assessment*
- *Early Childhood Education*
- *Practical Nursing*

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, as they affected many responses.

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. "People are very friendly, and the level of humanity is very high," said one student.

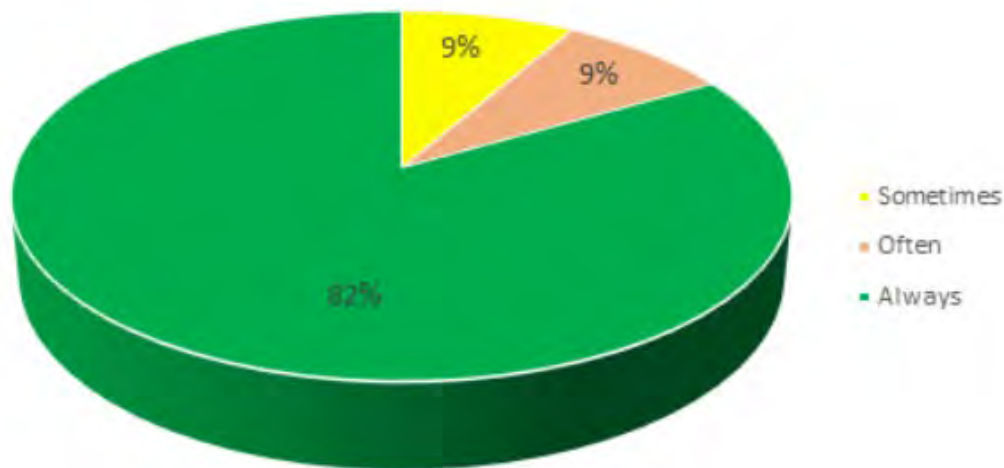


Figure 1: College is welcoming

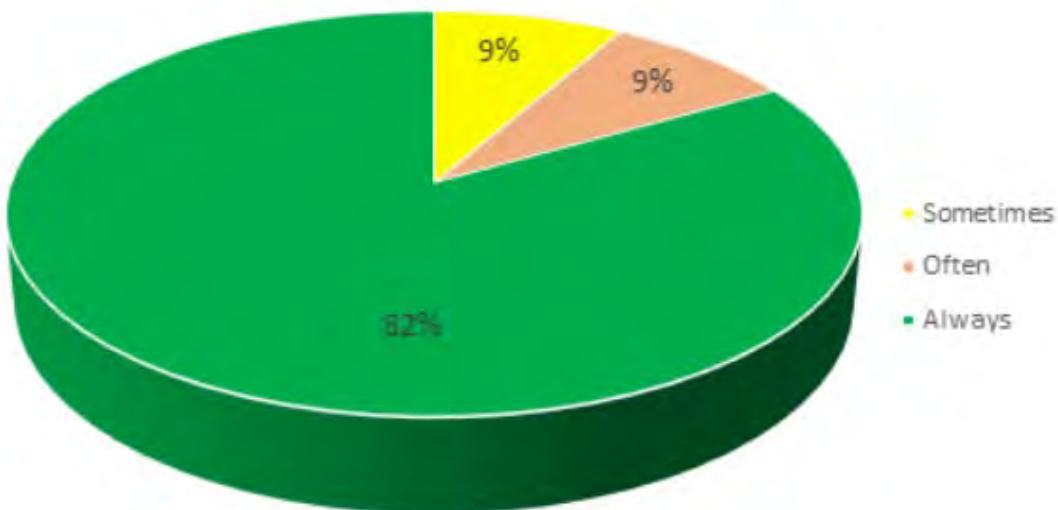


Figure 2: College is an accepting place

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It was found that 82% of students agree that a college is a welcoming and accepting place. In addition, they noted the friendliness of the faculty, particularly of program coordinators, to be a tremendously positive addition to their educational experience. "Everyone was nice; even the teachers were so friendly. I was not used to having friendly teachers, so I loved it a lot. That is one of the things I loved about being here. They are friendly and help you when you need something," said one of the surveyed students.

Moreover, while most did receive a warm welcome at the College, some felt frustrated by a lack of information or help regarding COVID-induced hardship. The students did not feel that they received concrete support but were given pieces of information on where to find help elsewhere.

Rules, laws, and regulations about international students were not adequately explained to students by college staff. As a result, many felt that they were on their own when acclimatizing to the Canadian lifestyle experience and would have preferred more support from the College. "It is kind of crazy all the lack of information out there," said one student.

The lack of transportation and affordable housing also makes people unwilling to consider programs at the Pembroke Campus. Some students felt grateful for the pandemic as they could study from Ottawa, where they had found accommodation. They would not have been able to find housing in Pembroke and would have had to withdraw from the College. "I felt kind of neglected. I got no support, and then I had to manage it myself," said a student.

International students also found themselves weighed down by healthcare issues. The current insurance is substandard and only useful in times of emergency. Routine healthcare became challenging as even getting a prescription for antibiotics became prohibitively expensive. In addition, those in need of dental care suffered.

Many felt lied to as they were told their healthcare needs would be met. "When I came here, we were told that everyone was eligible, but now we are told to pay more; otherwise, I cannot study, and I cannot work," said one student. In addition, the inability to stack different health insurances such as travel insurance on top of the mandatory one means that students are going without healthcare or prescription medication due to paperwork and red tape. "If they debriefed us better about what is included, if I knew this is the insurance, I would just grab all of the stuff that I need from my country."

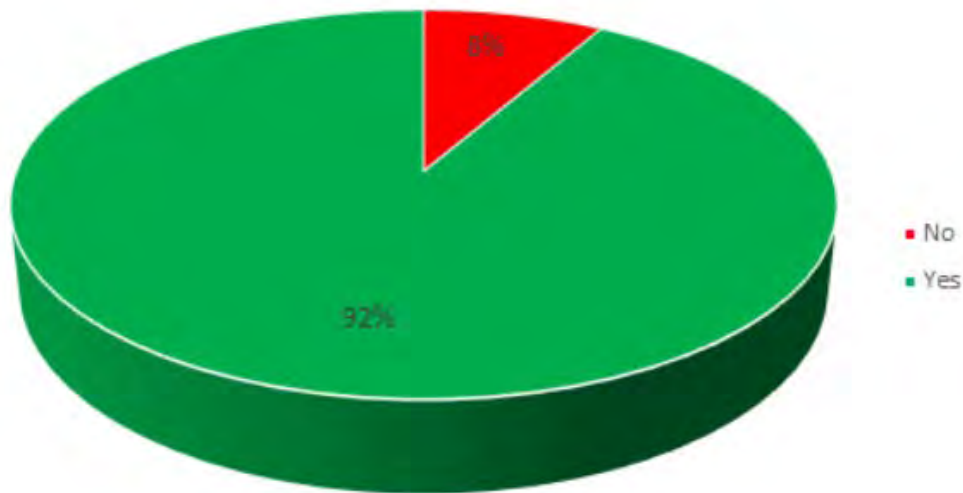


Figure 3: Did you feel welcomed in the community?

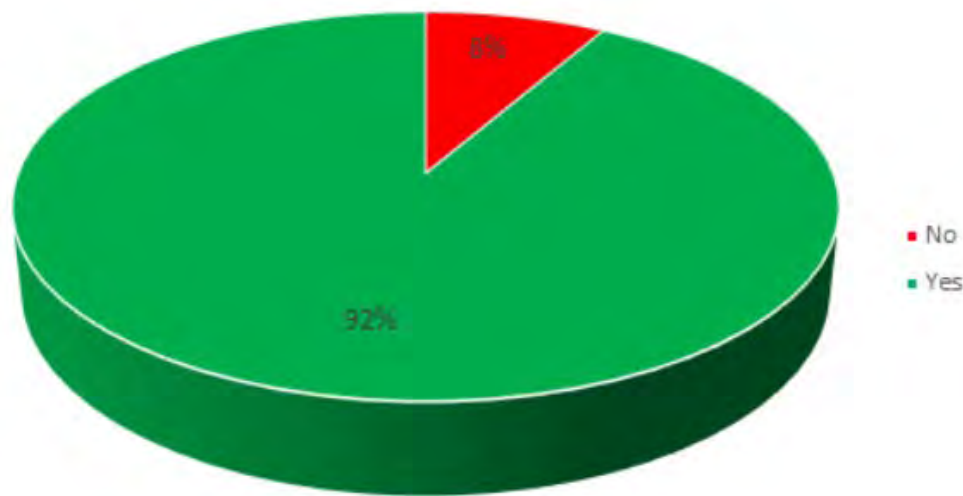


Figure 4: Physical safe on-campus

Most students (92 percent) found the Pembroke Campus to be a safe place, matching responses to how welcomed students felt while being among community members. However, that number lowered to 75% when asked if they felt physically safe off-campus.

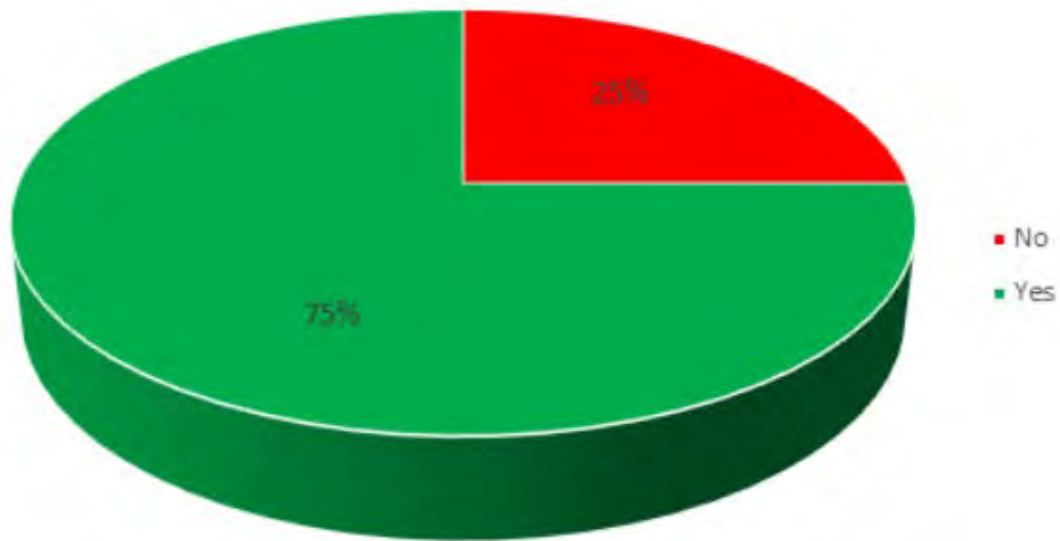


Figure 5: Physically safe off-campus

Incidents of unknown, strange men following some female students were recorded in the focus group, with one student admitting a deep discomfort going through Pembroke. "While I'm walking and someone was driving by, they were staring at me. They make you feel very uncomfortable, just like everyone is watching you, it's not the best feeling, but I got used to it."

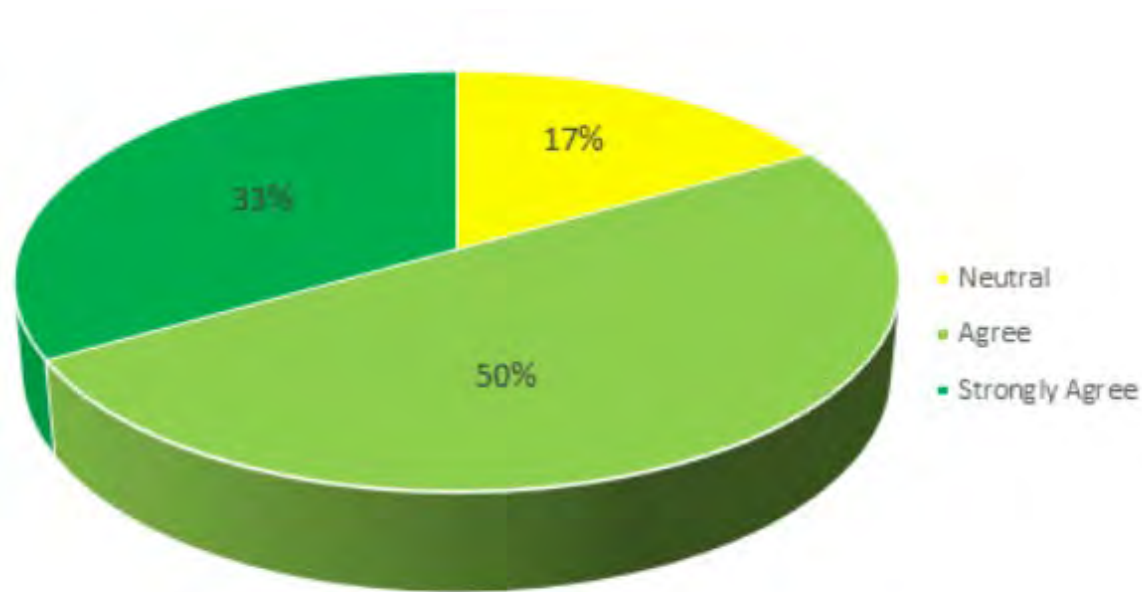


Figure 6: College has fair rules

Eighty-three percent (83%) of students agreed that the rules at the College were fair for everyone - with 33% strongly agreeing with this. There was no disagreement on the statement, though some remained neutral on the topic.

There was a lack of information from the College, particularly during the height of the pandemic. Many students were discouraged by it. "It is more like we pay a lot, so we expect that we can get real help in times of emergency, not just information where they say, 'You can go there, you can do this,'" said one student. Notably, there is also a lack of help regarding housing, which negatively affects students. .

Mistakes with tuition by college staff and a lack of transparency and details about necessary tools and equipment lead to increased hardship. "There was a day where the College texted us that they had some error in our tuition. So, we, basically everyone, had already paid their tuition, but now they are asking some more money for it."

Student Success and Satisfaction

Help was easy to access for about 75% of students. However, it was noted that students typically had to reach out for help themselves, but once they made a request, they usually received it. The campus Library was particularly helpful for student research. But to receive help, students had to search for it as it was not made clear where to find it. "I wasn't aware of what kind of documentation I needed to provide them with," said a student.

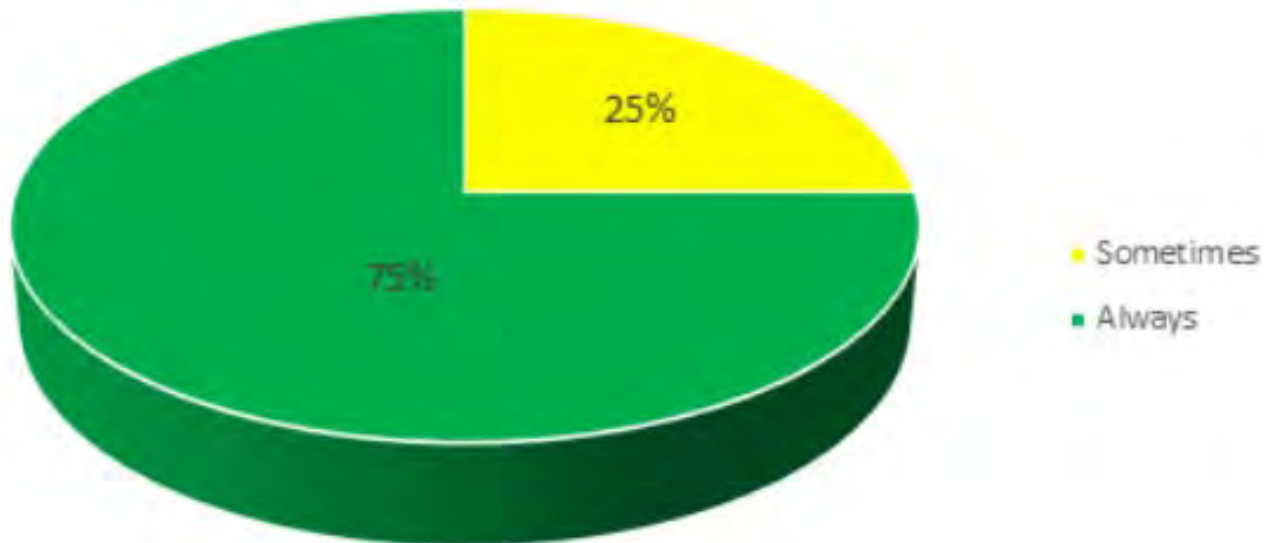


Figure 7: Availability of academic help

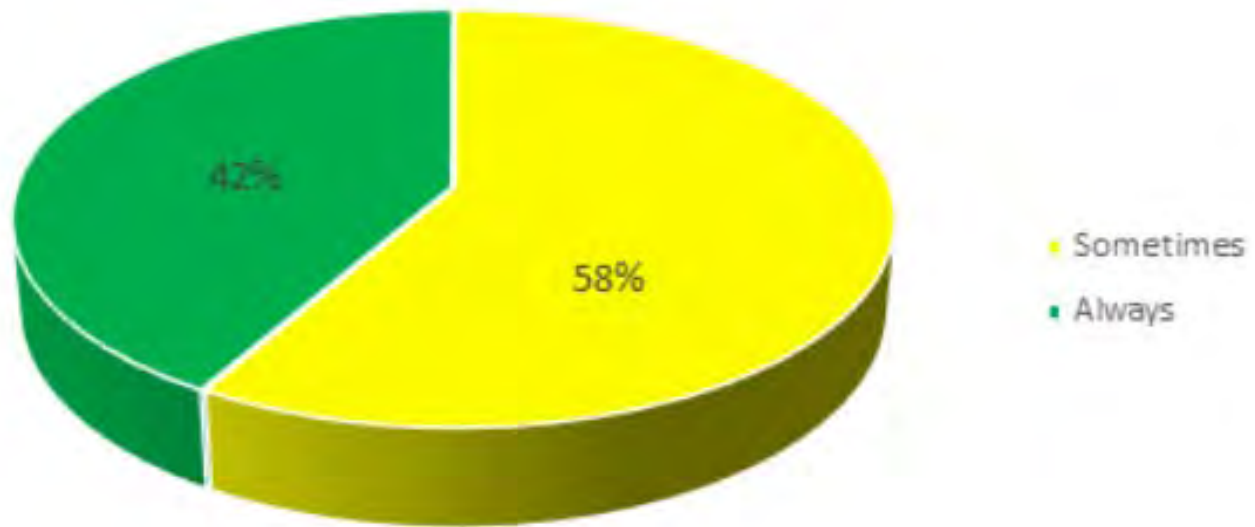


Figure 8: Assistance of staff in setting personal targets

While the students did find themselves supported academically, only 42% of them felt that the staff assisted them in their personal goals and plans.

It was pointed out that some of the College's staff, particularly Jaime Bramburger, routinely checked in, which was appreciated.

However, students in the focus group recommended that the college prepare an extensive information packet designed for international students on how to best acclimate to life in Canada.

This booklet could be provided along with the acceptance letter and cover various topics diverse topics that many Canadian-born residents take for granted. "In terms of weather, people who come here have never experienced such harsh conditions of both winter and summer so a little guidance from College on this will be good (..) Let the students know about the facilities of, let's say, 911 and police," said a student.

Transportation and New Effective Ideas

Many of the students did agree that it was important to get involved in clubs and activities at the College. Yet many students could not participate to the extent they wanted to due to issues with lack of advertising, class schedule conflict, transport, and part-time jobs interfering. "Even if there are clubs and stuff in school that we want to enjoy, there is no time," said a student. Some also felt that the Pembroke Campus did not have as many activities and clubs as they would have liked. "I tried joining clubs, but I did not find any that interested me," said one student.

Another comment on transport issues as going to the campus or elsewhere in the Ottawa Valley for an activity would be arduous as there is no reliable transport. It was pointed out that micro-activities such as handing out free ice cream were appreciated and something that can be easily enjoyed even while busy.

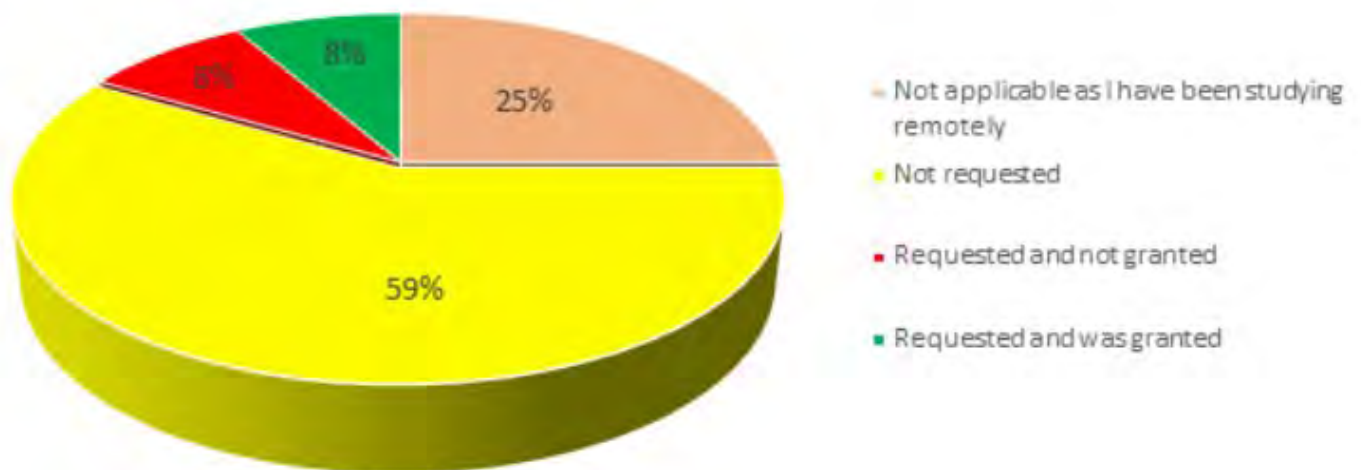


Figure 10: Requested religious/cultural accommodations

Most students (59%) either did not require special cultural or religious accommodation or chose not to ask for one. Some may have needed one if they had been attending classes in person, but it was not an issue as they were studying from home. Divided equally are those who asked for accommodation and received it (8%) and those who asked for accommodation and did not receive it (8%).

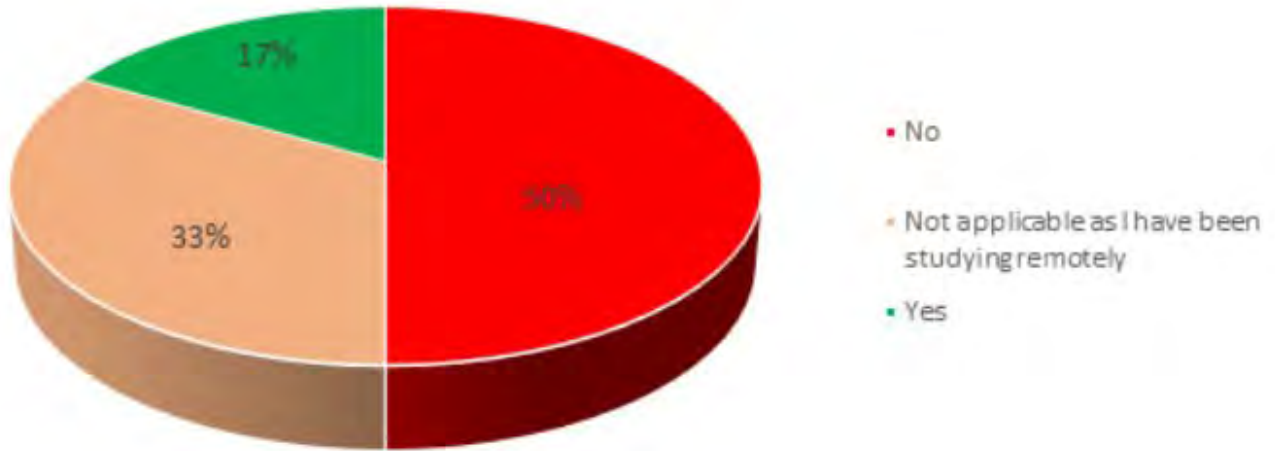


Figure 11: Taking part in cultural activities by Pembroke Public Library

The Pembroke Public Library did host multiple cultural events throughout the year, but many international students did not attend them, as only 17% attended an event at the library. This is partially due to a lack of transport, living elsewhere and lack of advertising. A lack of advertising and marketing was an issue for most events and activities, even for the students who had the time to participate.

Many students who would have wanted to participate found themselves unable to as they struggled to balance school requirements and a part-time job.

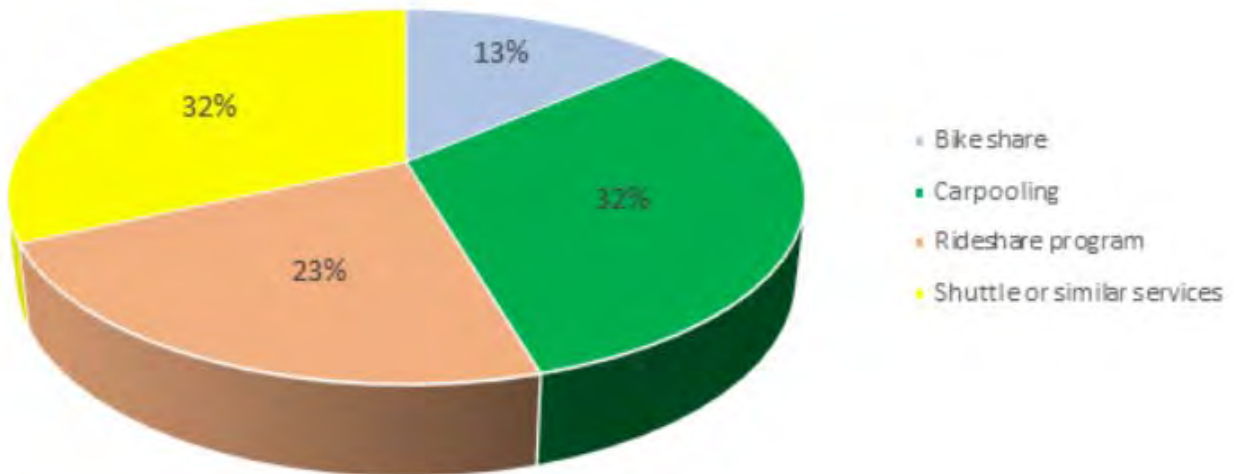


Figure 12: Effective transportation service



As noted several times by students throughout the focus group, transportation was a major issue. Some were "flabbergasted" by the lack of public transport in what is deemed a city. .

They found themselves walking long distances in less-than-ideal conditions or taking taxis that cost far too much for their budgets and often arrived very late. "To survive in Canada, you need a car, which is really weird," said a student. "If you don't have a car, you cannot go to a grocery store, and a taxi is kind of expensive, to be honest," said another. .

The lack of transportation stunted many students' abilities to enjoy activities on campus, find a job, get their placements, receive medical help, or reliably get anywhere.

Thirty-two (32%) percent agreed that official carpooling or a shuttle service would be an ideal solution. However, one respondent pointed out the dangers of communal transport, "I do not want to do carpooling because I'm a woman, and it's kind of dangerous."

Working While Studying and Expenses

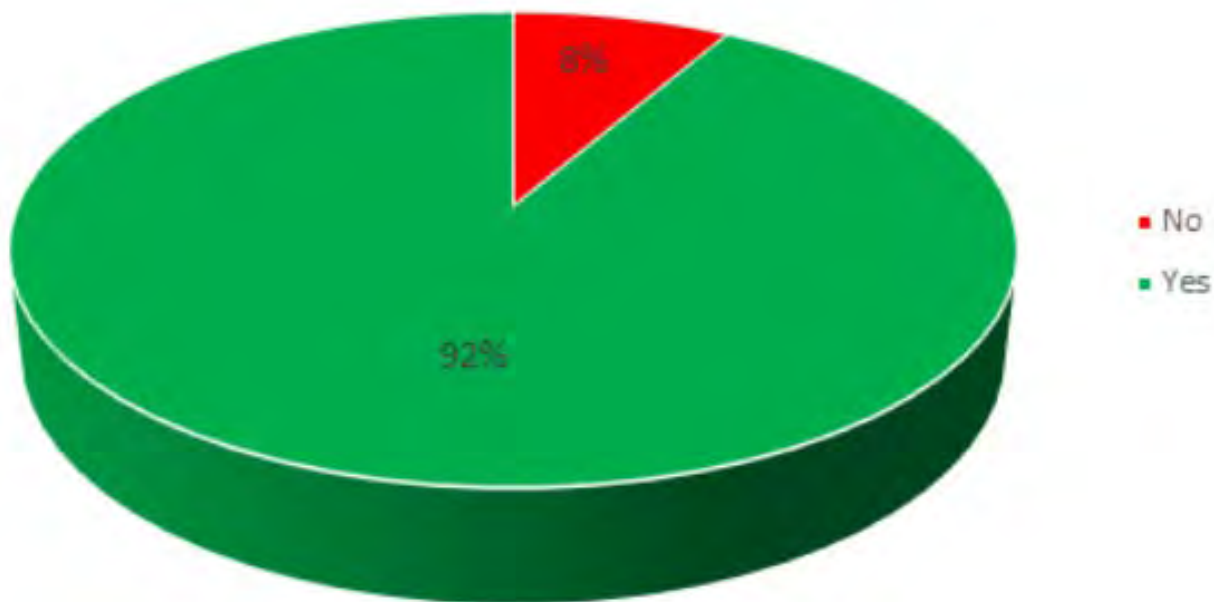


Figure 13: Did you find part-time work?

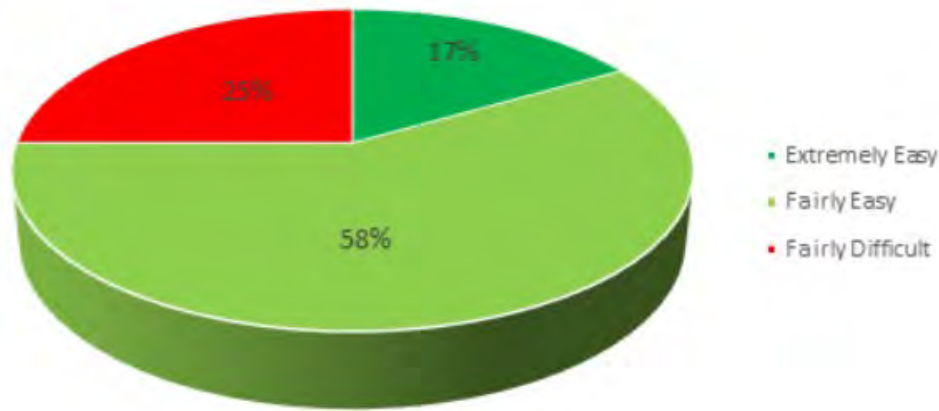


Figure 14: Ease of finding part-time work

Ninety-four (94%) percent of respondents found a part-time job either on-campus or off though it was remarked that they found the maximum of 20 hours a week stifling. In addition, a quarter of students (25%) found getting a job difficult.

There were also some cultural and communication barriers as jobs were available..available. Still, some students were unaware of how to get them and may need help with Canadian interview and resume styles. "It is just that they need resources on how to build a resume and how to apply and approach. Maybe little guidance with that will help. The College did not provide it," said a student.

To ensure post-education success, the College should ensure students are aware of the importance of Canadian work experience. "International students need to build their capacity for employment concurrently while they are studying, gaining local work experience" (Arthur, N. Woodend, J, Gust, L. Dyrda, A. Dang, J. 2022).

Choosing Pembroke and Future Prospects of Retaining International Graduates

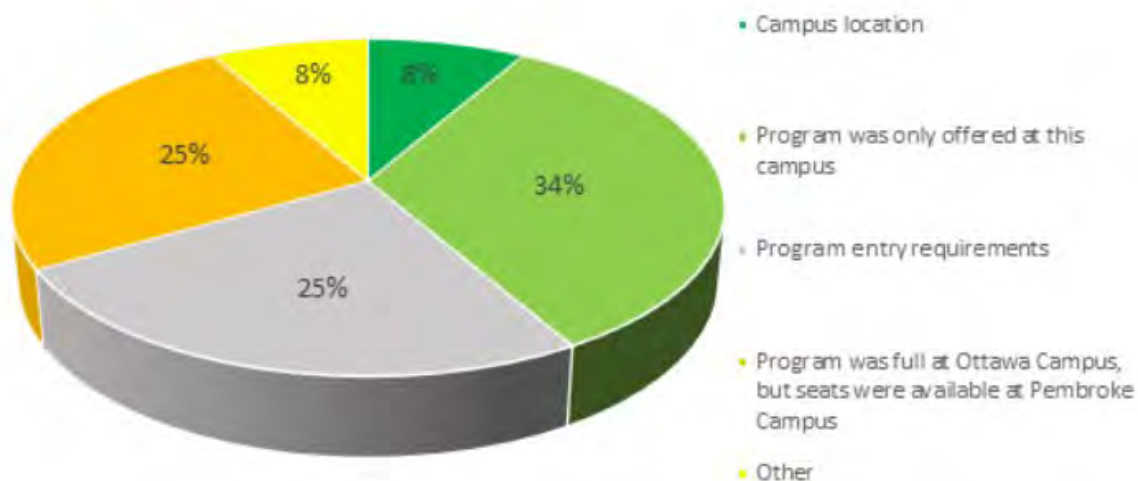


Figure 15: The main reason for choosing Pembroke Campus

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The question of why they chose the Pembroke campus was very divided. Thirty-four (34%) percent came to the College as it was the only location where the program was being offered, while 25% chose the program due to the entry requirements or because the program in Ottawa was full.

Only eight (8%) percent of students chose the Pembroke Campus due to its rural location, while another 8% had other reasons for their decision. However, some students were firm in their desire to stay in Canada and the benefits of a Canadian education. "I plan to stay here after I graduate, but even if I went back to Russia, to show that I worked in Canada would be a really good thing for my resume."

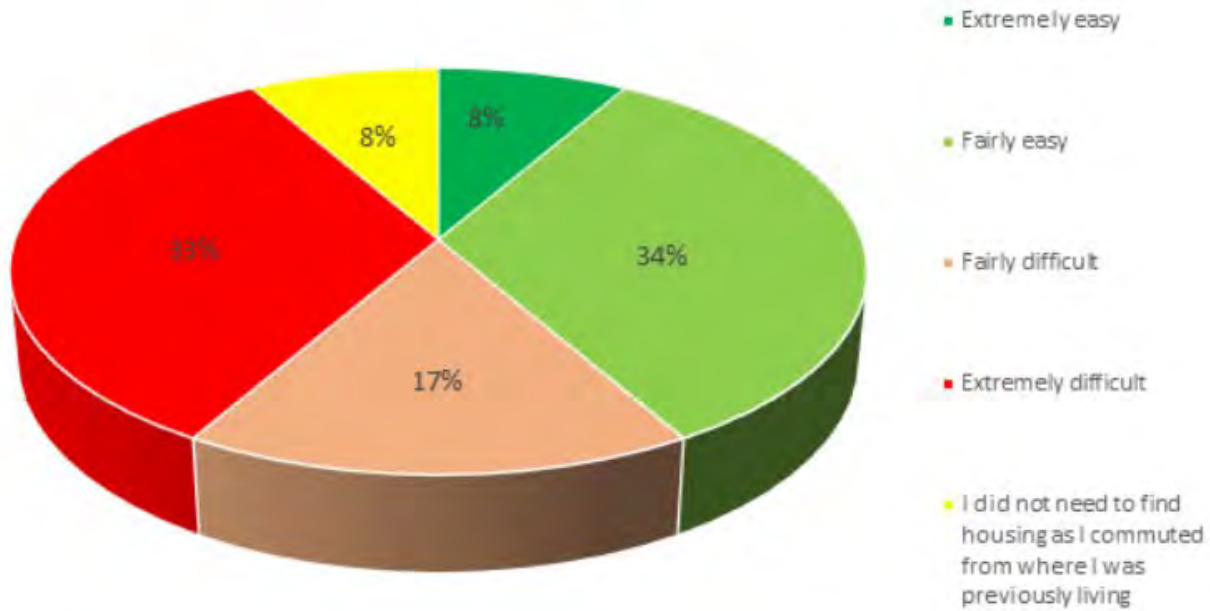


Figure 16: Experience in finding housing

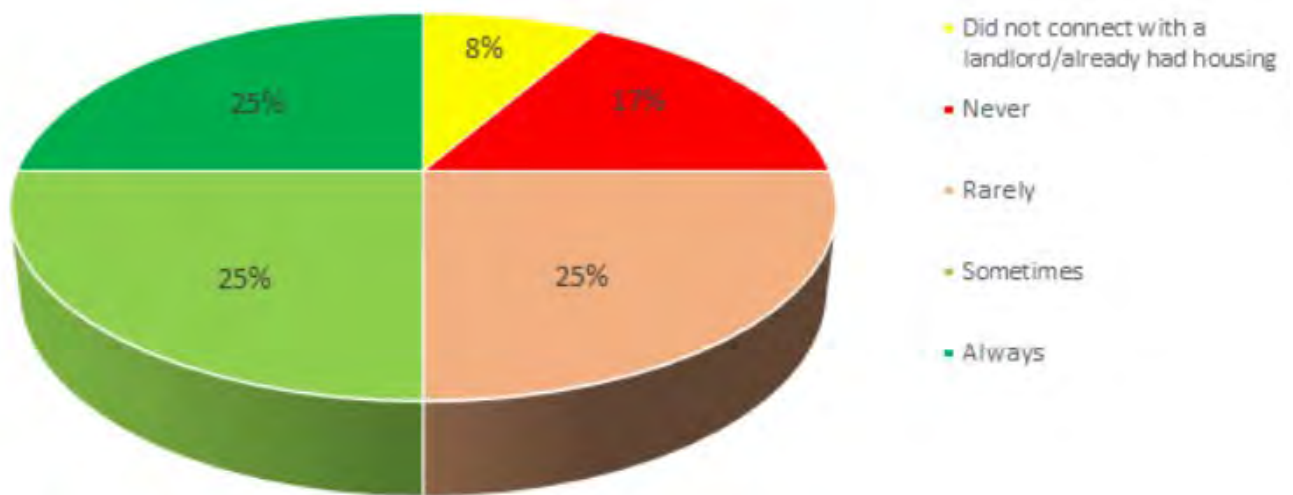


Figure 17: Landlords provided information and support

Finding housing was an extremely difficult endeavour for 35% of students. "Finding housing was pure luck," said one.

Many students credit the online aspect of their program for continuing their schooling as they could not find affordable housing in Pembroke, with some resorting to begging, pleading with property owners for help and couch surfing. The housing quality was also questioned many times, with one student defrauded by their property owner.

This property owner and their room listing can still be found on the housing suggestion list at Algonquin College. "She's scamming international students, and they didn't do anything about the issues (...) if you live with the landlord in one house, they can just bust into your room whenever she wants or kick you out of the house whenever they want," said the student.

Others found themselves struggling due to high rental costs. "It is so difficult that I have to compromise on my groceries and food things at times. Just so that I can pay my rent and all my other bills."

Many students are also unaware of their rights as tenants, which could lead to them being taken advantage of.

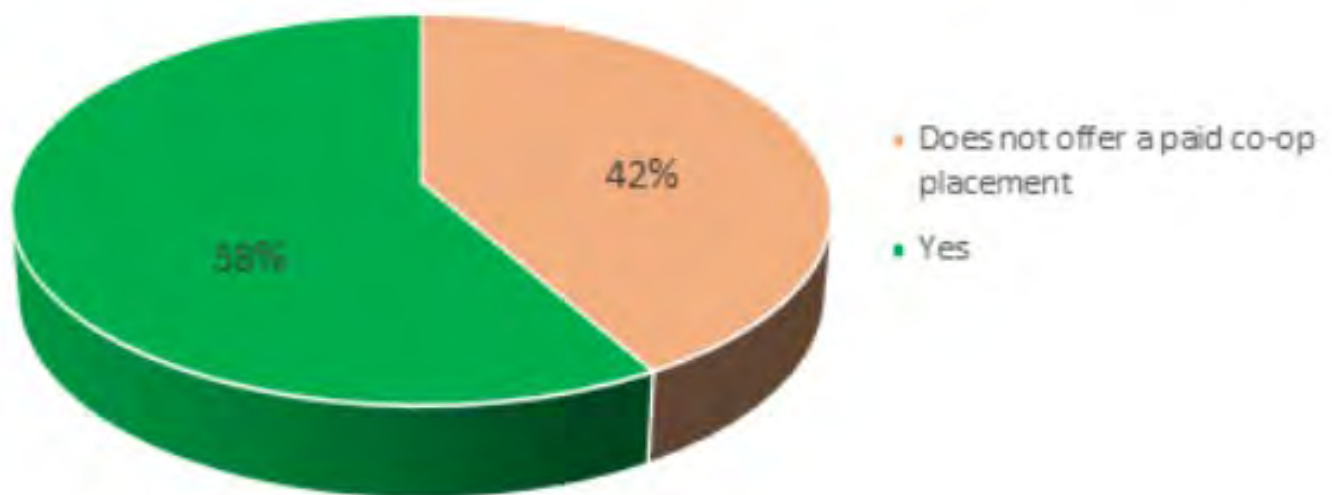


Figure 18: Planning to participate in the paid co-op?

Fifty-three (53%) percent of students would like to participate in a paid co-op, but it was pointed out during the focus group that getting a paid co-op was more difficult than anticipated. "It's really difficult to find a co-op position. There are postings on the Algonquin College website. But to be honest, it is not really helpful," said one student.

They could graduate without this co-op, but it was not an ideal situation. "When you cannot find a co-op position, you miss out. Because of this, I feel an important part of the program will be missed (...) We do a lot of practical stuff during the studies, but still, it is not job-like and having experience of the actual work in some position in some company would be great," said the student.

A few others found it unfair to take on many unpaid work placements and internships while balancing schoolwork and part-time jobs. "At least compensate us a little bit because we have a really, really long placement in a year. We have three placements in over two months, more than two months working for free I do not think that is really fair," said a student.

Seven (7%) percent refused to consider living in the area. Despite some negativity, some students expressed willingness to stay in Pembroke depending on some of the factors represented in Figure 19. The majority of these (39%) would stay in the area if they received a job offer. "In my situation, everything depends on the job. If I get a job in Human Resources, ECE (Early Childhood Education) or any job, I'll move." Eighteen (18%) percent of students would stay if they had strong enough relationships/friendships with residents.

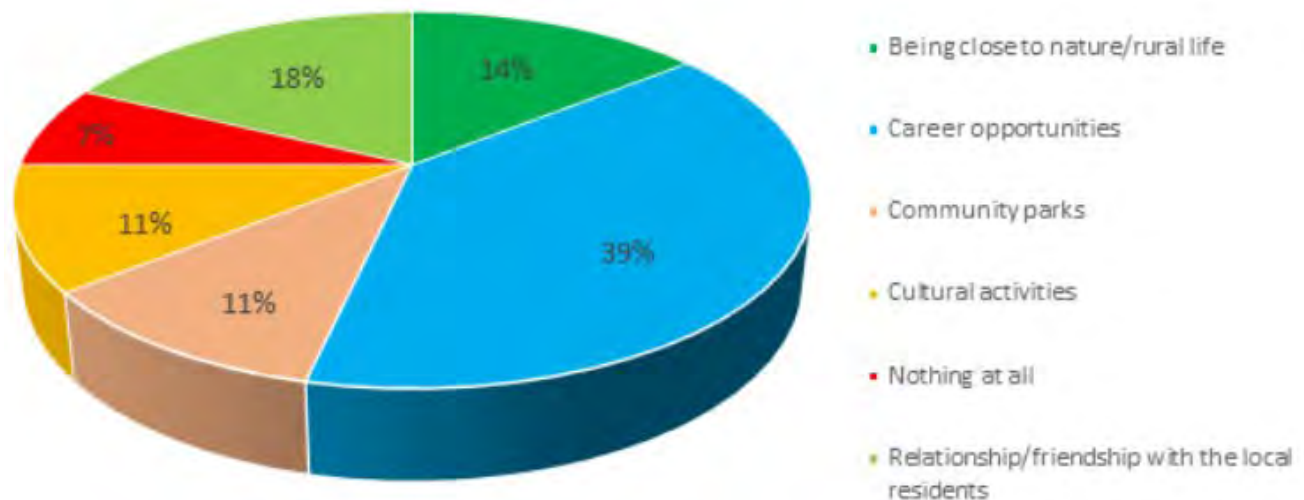


Figure 19: What will convince you to stay in Pembroke

Lastly, a significant majority of students (91%) expressed overall satisfaction with their academic experience in Canada.

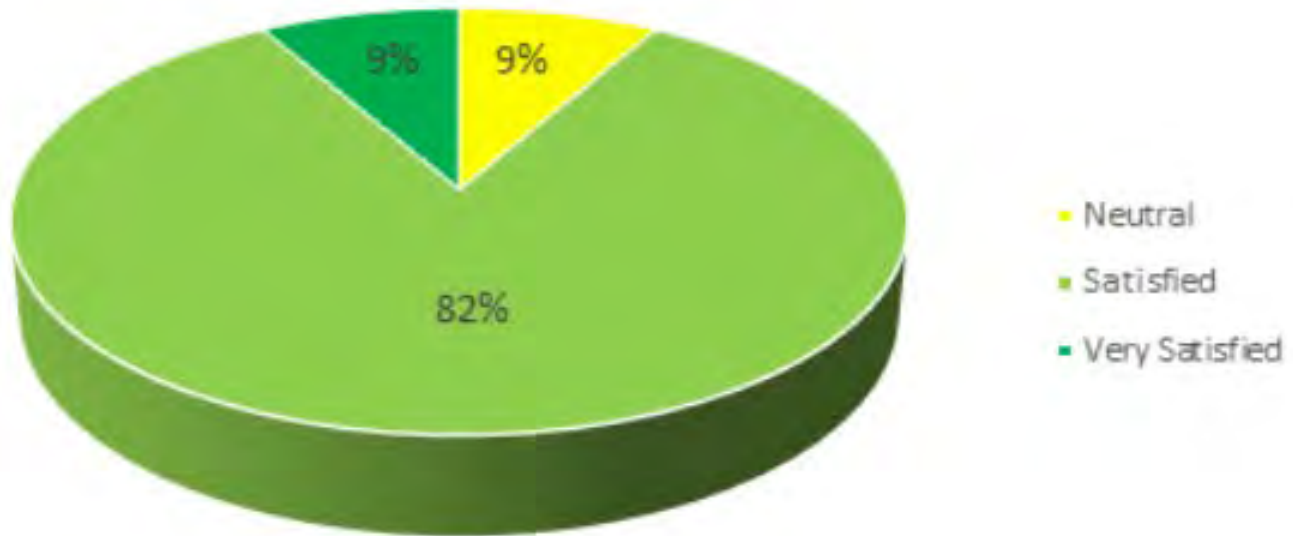


Figure 20: Overall satisfaction of educational experience in Canada

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Appendix A: The Qualitative Section of the Online Survey

In response to the question related to what the students wished they knew before starting their studies, the main theme was a lack of public transport in Pembroke. Three students expressed dismay at not knowing that Pembroke has no public transportation facilities. Two nursing students also highlighted their struggles with the program, with one of them emphasizing the need for an orientation for international students that is program-focused. Another student mentioned that he did not know that nursing school would not be easy and that he had to face many hurdles to succeed and achieve career goals in the nursing field. There was also a comment about wanting to know in advance about the fact that there is a difference between domestic and international tuition fees.

Regarding the question about wishing to have done something that they did not do during their studies at Algonquin College, most of the students expressed that there was nothing much that they wanted to do and could not, with one student mentioning, "I don't think there is anything that I have not been able to do during my studies at Algonquin College. I am satisfied with my performance related to college events or in academics."

However, one student expressed regret about not being able to help and guide more international students. In addition, a couple of students commented about not being able to participate in cultural activities or going on trips outside of Pembroke. .

Students seemed very grateful and appreciative when asked about the opportunities they have had being part of the College. For example, attending events and games at the college campus was the standout theme. Remote learning, being a peer tutor, collaborating with Local Immigration Partnership, and being part of placements and clinical co-ops were other highlighted opportunities. One of the students remarked, "Firstly, I feel lucky to be a student at Algonquin College and a nursing student. Secondly, being an international student, in the beginning, it was tough for me to catch up, but the ICHS [Introduction to Canadian Health Studies] course helped me a lot in understanding the education system in Canada."

Students were more expressive about the challenges they faced as international students. Communication issues and transportation were overwhelmingly major trends. Communication barriers and understanding a different culture, accent and system proved demanding. One student expressed her thoughts by saying, "Initially, it was difficult as the education system was totally different from my country, but the college faculty helps a lot in adapting to it very easily. It was difficult as sometimes I used to face communication barriers while dealing with the patients at co-op, but my instructor helped me a lot in improving it also."

There was a recommendation to the College as well, where it was mentioned that the College should use its resources to help students build stronger English language skills. .



Along with transportation as a recurring topic, students also voiced their concerns about the international student fees and lack of accommodation options. Another student also lamented about not getting proper attention compared to domestic students.

Interestingly, the students appeared very enthusiastic about getting an opportunity to provide guidance to new international students and orient them. Apart from advising new students to keep working hard regardless of the obstacles, there were recommendations for doing plenty of research before arriving and contacting the College for anything they need help with. There was another comment about the college staff being readily available to provide help: "Being an international student, it is a totally different journey with many ups and downs as we have to manage study and work at the same time. But if you remain focused and determined, then you can do it. Moreover, college faculty also helped a lot in difficult times and in making improvements where I feel like I was lacking."

The theme of struggles of finding accommodation and living situation was also recurring, with one student admonishing that after arriving, one should be prepared and be ready to face everything because "you will have to go through a lot of things."



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