




# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN WATERLOO REGION

IMMIGRANT SURVEY 2023 RESULTS



IMMIGRATION  
PARTNERSHIP  
WATERLOO REGION



The number of international students in Waterloo Region has increased dramatically over the last decade due to evolving immigration and international education policy in Canada and the recruitment effort of local post-secondary institutions.

Post-secondary and other educational institutions play a key role in attracting and supporting international students in Waterloo Region. The rest of the community is also essential in terms of welcoming, belonging and access to jobs, affordable housing and other things that impact international student experiences and decisions to stay long term and contribute to a thriving community for all.

This snapshot explores the experiences of international students living, working, and studying in Waterloo Region, based on findings from the 2023 Immigrant Survey.<sup>1</sup> It includes international student recommendations for community leaders on actions to help them and others realize their full potential. It is prepared by the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership to help governments, funders, post-secondary institutions, business leaders and non-profit organizations develop and implement responsive policy, programs, and services.

## Key Insights

- The major challenges experienced by international students in Waterloo Region include high rents, cost of living and finding work.
- International students continue to develop their skills and work on improving their language skills, educational and professional qualifications.
- International students experience discrimination when looking for a job, most often based on identity, language skills and immigration status.
- International students want community leaders to improve the availability of affordable housing, improve programs and avenues to connect with employers and jobs, provide easy ways to access settlement, immigration, and other services.

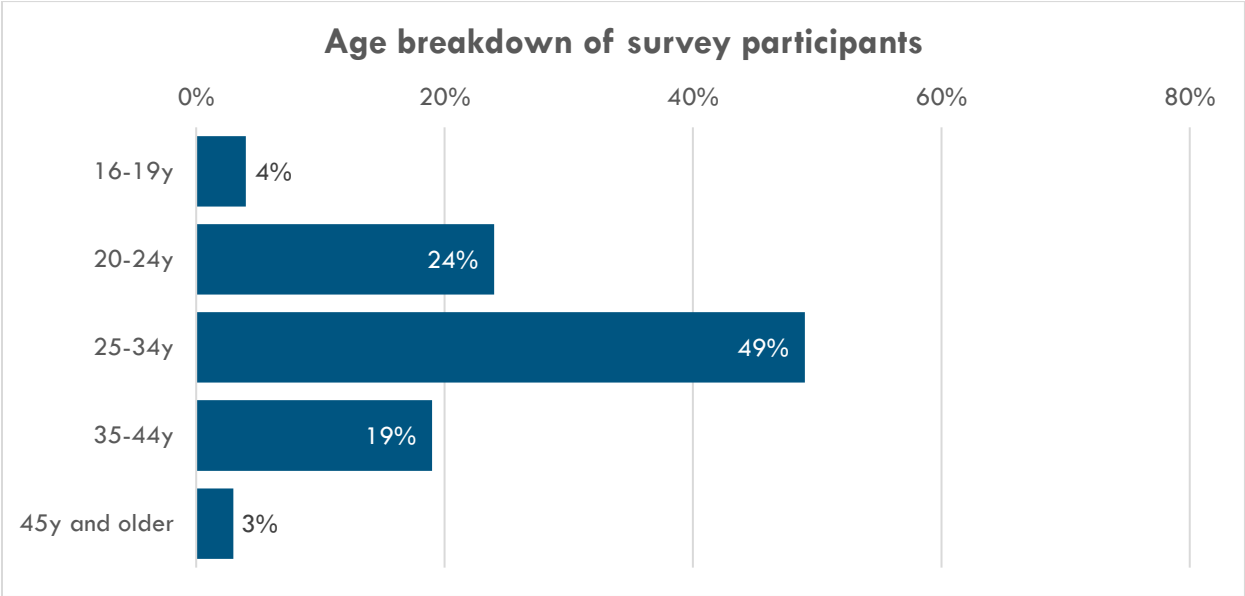
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<sup>1</sup> The term immigrant is used broadly in this report to include all who were born outside of Canada and now live, work, or study in Waterloo Region, including immigrants, refugees, international students, permanent residents, temporary residents or foreign nationals and people who immigrated and have become Canadian citizens. This profile highlights only larger differences for international students compared to the overall sample – typically at least 5 percentage points. See the last page of this snapshot for more information about the 2023 Immigrant Survey.

# Profile of International Students in Waterloo Region

International students are a young group of newcomers from many different backgrounds.

International students constitute a relatively young population compared to the overall sample of Immigrant Survey participants. Three-quarters of international student survey participants were between the ages of 20-34.



Source: 2023 Immigrant Survey

Among international student survey participants, **67%** had come to Canada in the past year.

Those who identified as South Asian were the largest group at 47%, while 26% of international student participants identified as Black and 10% identified as Latin American.

## Settling and Belonging in Waterloo Region

Many international students found Waterloo Region to be welcoming but nearly half felt fairly isolated.

Post-secondary institutions play a major role in attracting immigrants to Waterloo Region. Among international student survey participants, 81% indicated post-secondary institutions as the main reason they came to the region. Others were attracted to the Region because of jobs, a healthy local economy and the relative affordability of the Region compared to some other communities in Ontario.

Most international student survey participants regarded the Waterloo Region community as welcoming towards immigrants: 52% felt the community is quite welcoming, 36% felt it is somewhat welcoming and 12% felt it is unwelcoming.<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the perceptions of all immigrant survey participants.

Waterloo Region was also regarded safe by most international student participants: 76% felt extremely or very safe and 22% felt moderately safe. Students were more likely to feel extremely or very safe than the average for all survey participants (76%).

Two thirds of international students (68%) reported having a positive experience of settling in the region (slightly less than all survey participants at 74%). Similarly, 68% of international students reported feeling a strong sense of belonging in Waterloo Region, compared to 72% of all survey participants.

While most had a positive experience settling in this community and a strong sense of belonging, international students tended to feel more isolated compared to all survey respondents: 41% of international students felt relatively isolated or alone over the last 12 months compared to 26% of all immigrant participants.

Survey participants were asked about their likelihood of staying permanently in the region. International students were less likely to intend to stay permanently in the region: About 48% of international student participants responded that they intended to stay permanently in Waterloo Region compared to 62% of all survey participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Survey participants were asked how welcoming the Waterloo Region community was toward immigrants on a scale from 0 to 10. Quite welcoming was categorized as those that rated it 8 to 10, somewhat welcoming from 5 to 7, and not welcoming from 0 to 4.

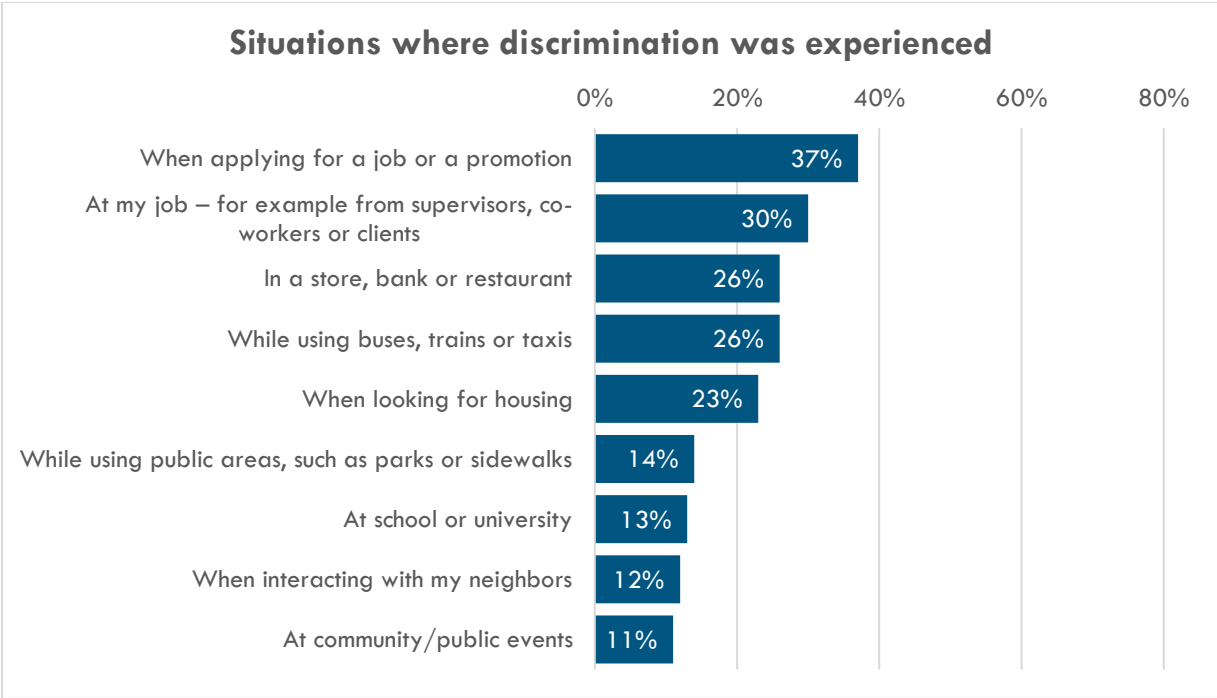
# Experiences of Discrimination

## International students experience discrimination as a similar rate to other immigrants in Waterloo Region

Among international student participants, 26% had experienced discrimination or had been treated unfairly by others in Waterloo Region in the past 12 months in Waterloo Region, similar to all Immigrant Survey respondents (24%).

When asked about the reason for discrimination, identity-based factors were at the top. For international student participants, 62% cited race or skin colour and 43% cited ethnicity or culture as the reasons for discrimination, followed by accent (32%). At 32%, immigration status was frequently cited as a reason for discrimination by international students, compared to 26% among all survey respondents.

Participants were asked to identify the situations in which they experienced discrimination. The most common were when applying for a job or a promotion (37%) and at their workplace (30%).

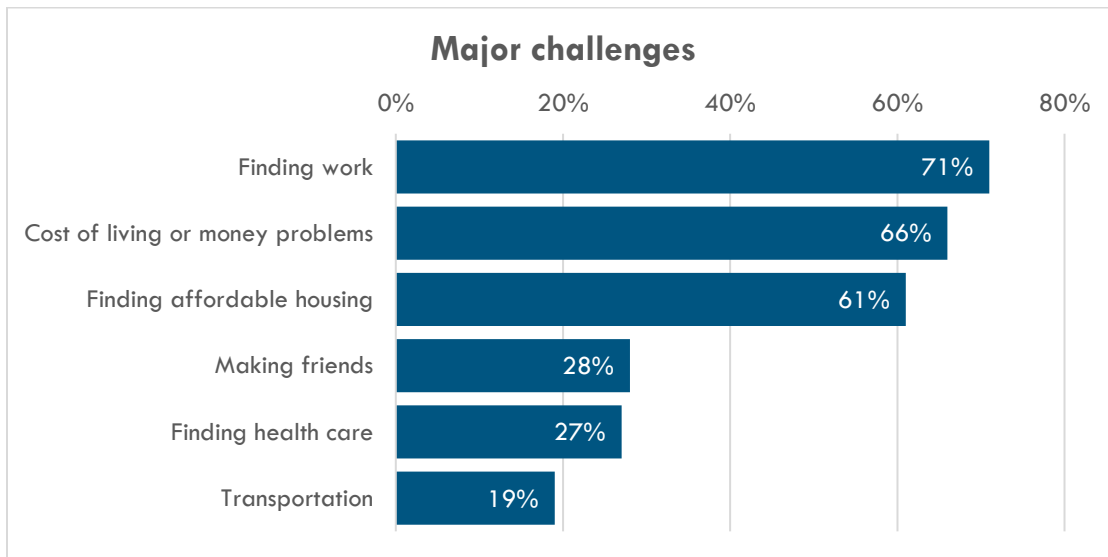


Source: 2023 Immigrant Survey

# Major Challenges Faced by International Students

Finding work, cost of living and affordable housing were the most common challenges for international students.

Additional major challenges were related to making friends, finding health care and transportation.



Source: 2023 Immigrant Survey

### From International student survey participants

“The first and foremost is make housing affordable for students because that is the first thing a person requires when he/she lands.

“There are hundreds and thousands of students coming to KWC in every intake and there are not much jobs in the market how will they manage their monthly expenses without a job?”

Other challenges cited by international students were learning where and how to do things, finding relevant programming in local community centers, arts and culture spaces, libraries, etc., and receiving public or social services (e.g. settlement services, government services, etc.)

The top challenges for international students were also felt by other newcomers and immigrants in Waterloo

Region. All immigrant respondents in the survey cited cost of living and money problems as the most important challenge (59%) and an equal proportion (49%) of all respondents mentioned both the challenges of finding work and affordable housing. Finding health care was listed by 37% of all immigrant respondents, making friends by 25% and transportation by 17%.

## Employment, Income and Housing

Many international students were either employed or looking for work as they pursued their studies. Income sufficiency and lack of affordable housing impact international students.

Nearly half of international student participants (47%) were working part time, full time or were self-employed and 49% were looking for work. Only 4% were not employed or looking for work.

Finding employment at the same level as their skills and experience was a major concern for international students. Among those who were employed, only 29% said that their job was at the same level as their skills and experience.

Fully 85% percent of international student participants shared that their income is not sufficient to meet their financial needs and the needs of their family. This was higher than reported by all survey respondents (67%).

When it comes to housing, half of international student participants (50%) were living in housing that was not affordable and/or suitable for them.<sup>3</sup> This is slightly lower than among all survey participants (58%).

Participants shared the concern that rent takes up to 50% to 70% of their income, which combined with high grocery prices makes the overall cost of living very challenging for a majority of international students.

## Accessing Services

Participants were asked to rate their experience of using community services in the last 12 months in Waterloo Region. International students overwhelmingly rated education positively, with 74% rating it as excellent or very good. Other services accessed and rated positively by international students were English language learning; police; transportation; recreation services; childcare; and local municipal government/bylaws. Conversely, international students were less likely to rate the following service areas positively: French language learning; housing, employment and/or skills training; and health services. International students rated these services in a similar order to all immigrant survey participants.

### From International student survey participants

“Part Time job is very difficult to find here for students”

“My entire salary is just for paying for rent and groceries, which means I can’t really afford the living expenses as I’m not saving any money every month after paying all the bills.”

“It’s expensive as I am an international student looking for a cheaper housing option.”

“The housing situation is really terrible; the prices have skyrocketed. Cannot find any good housing with the current minimum wage.”

“My housing meets all my requirements, but the rent is too high for me. I tried to find some cheaper places but as I am married. So, for couples I think there are limited options and also rent is high.”

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<sup>3</sup> Housing that is affordable and suitable is housing that has enough bedrooms, it is in good repair, and can they afford it with other living expenses.

## Community Contributions

International students in Waterloo Region contribute to the community in many ways.

When asked how they help create a thriving and prosperous community for everyone, international student participants frequently mentioned helping their neighbours and helping improve the natural environment (recycling, picking up garbage, planting trees, etc.).

International students also volunteer: 27% volunteer with community organizations, groups, or faith communities and 11% volunteer with youth sports (coaching, driving youth, etc.)

International students also continue to build their skills and strengthen the ways they can contribute to the community, through learning English, pursuing further education, building professional skills, etc.



# Changes International Students Would Like to See in Waterloo Region

Affordable housing and finding employment were the most important issues for international students in Waterloo Region.

Survey participants were asked what changes would help immigrants to reach their full potential in Waterloo Region. International students most frequently suggested more affordable housing (73%), followed closely followed by better programs for immigrants to find work (63%) and a central place for both employers to find immigrant workers and for workers to find employment (29%).

### From International student survey participants

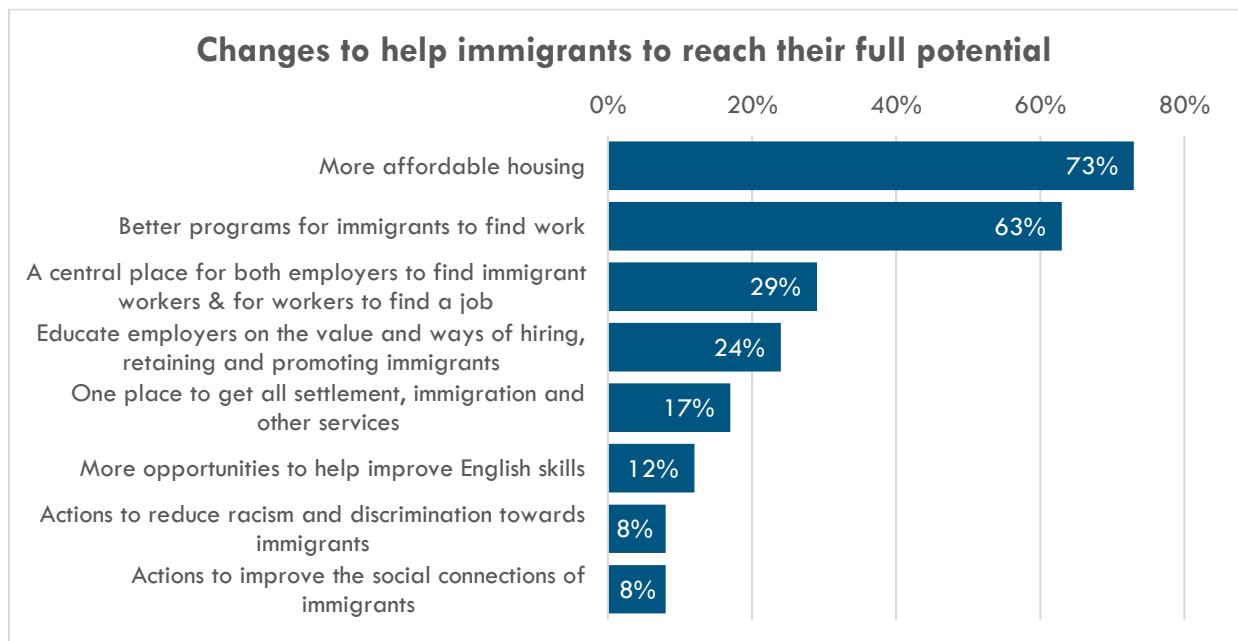
“Community leaders should reach out more to immigrants and international students in general, by hosting regular welcoming events.”

“There are services I can access if I need to, but I do not know about where to access them or how to access them”

“Food banks should serve students as they don’t have enough funds to cope.”

“More volunteer programs should be organized as I could see that they are selecting by reference. What if I don’t have any reference, I am not eligible to volunteer?”

“Community leaders can guide immigrants on job availabilities and how to get jobs because at many places they require references which is quite difficult for a new immigrant to provide.”



Source: 2023 Immigrant Survey

## Data Sources, Limitations and Cautions

The data for this snapshot comes from the Immigration Partnership's 2023 Immigrant Survey. This biannual, multilingual survey is for immigrants who live, work and/or study in Waterloo Region. It covers immigrant experiences on a range of topics impacting their ability to reach their full potential and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community for everyone. The survey was most recently conducted in June 2023 with 1,676 participants. Some international student participants completed the survey in March 2023 before they finished their winter school term.

In the 2023 survey, the majority of participants filled out the survey online. Participants reflected the whole range of immigrants living in Waterloo Region. Two thirds (67%) had been in Canada for 5 years or less, while the rest had been here for longer. More than half were permanently in Canada (57%) and 39% were here on a temporary permit. Most (93%) were living in Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, with 3% in the rural townships. Participants answered the survey in 11 languages and had 75 different first languages. English was the first language of 14% of participants, 77% spoke English well or very well and 9% spoke English poorly or not at all. In the survey, 76% of respondents identified as racialized; 59% were female and 40% male; 3% identified as LGBTQ+; 6% were living with a disability or chronic illness. Respondents, like immigrants overall, were highly educated: 75% had a Bachelor's degree or above. Almost two thirds (63%) were working (full/part time/casual/self-employed) and 26% were unemployed and looking for work.

Survey responses were disaggregated along many demographic lines and analyzed to uncover the varying experiences of different groups of immigrants. This profile highlights larger differences for international students compared to the overall sample – typically at least 5 percentage points. Because of small numbers for some subgroups, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Additional information can be found at [www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigrantsurvey](http://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/immigrantsurvey).

### How the Results Should Be Used

The Immigrant Survey provides a useful snapshot of the experiences of immigrants living, working or studying in Waterloo Region. It includes immigrants' own suggestions for community leaders and decision makers. It should be used to inform policy development, service planning and delivery, and advocating for changes to ensure immigrants and others can reach their full potential and contribute to a thriving, prosperous community for everyone.

Contact the Immigration Partnership ([ImmigrationPartnership@regionofwaterloo.ca](mailto:ImmigrationPartnership@regionofwaterloo.ca)) if you have questions about the data or suggestions for how it could be used to impact change across our community.

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership is collaboration of over 100 community service, business, municipal, post-secondary and ethno-cultural organizations, and residents working together to create the conditions for immigrants to succeed and help build a welcoming, dynamic community.



**For more information contact:**

Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership  
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[www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca](http://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca)

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