

WATERLOO REGION
**INTERNATIONAL
STUDENT**
SURVEY 2025

REPORT



IMMIGRATION
PARTNERSHIP
WATERLOO REGION



Waterloo Region International Student Survey 2025: Report

The number of international students in Waterloo Region has fluctuated dramatically over the last decade. Post-secondary and other educational institutions play a key role in attracting and supporting international students who bring key skills to Waterloo Region. The rest of the community is essential in terms of community 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.

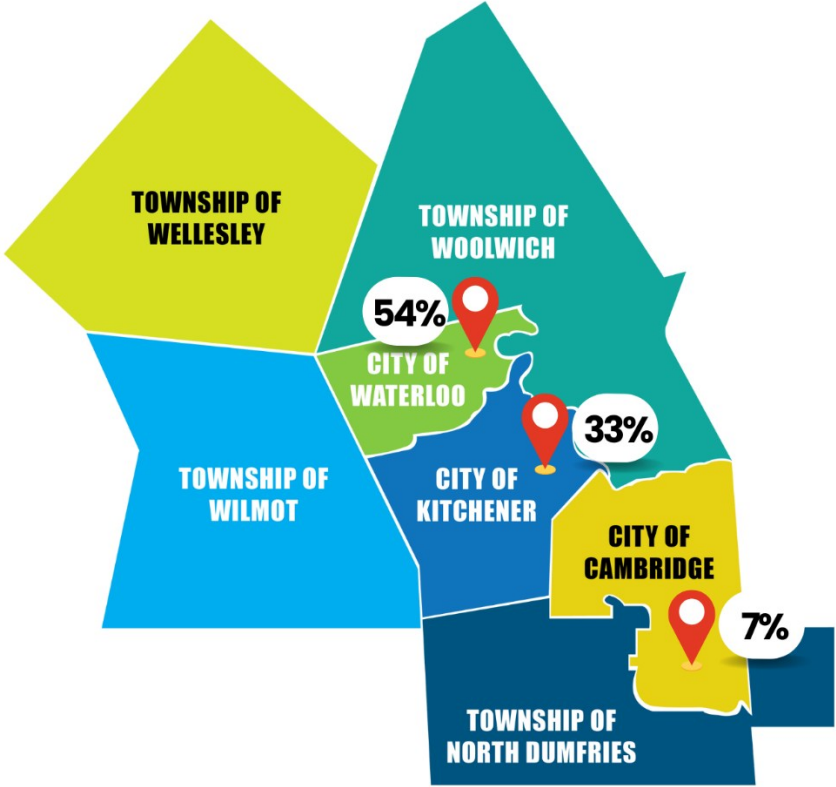
The 2025 International Student Survey offers an in-depth exploration of the lives of international students studying in Waterloo Region. Over 500 international students participated in this survey. They attended the region's post-secondary institutions — Conestoga College, University of Waterloo, and Wilfrid Laurier University. The survey was conducted by the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership and the International Migration Research Centre, in partnership with the three post-secondary institutions and the Town & Gown committee with municipal and student association representatives. The survey provides a detailed account of the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of international students. It is a roadmap for how Waterloo Region should optimize how international students are welcomed and integrated to be a global leader and a welcoming community.

Introduction

Three overarching themes emerge from the survey findings. International students generally report a positive settlement experience in Waterloo Region. This includes forming meaningful social connections and having a strong sense of belonging. Secondly, while academic institutions offer robust support systems, international students experience broader societal challenges such as high living costs, housing constraints, and building friendships and social networks. These broader pressures require attention from the community and local services for all residents. Lastly, there is a pronounced need for community engagement and collaboration between educational institutions and community facilities to nurture a supportive environment for international students to ultimately increase their likelihood of staying and contributing to overall prosperity in the region after graduation.

International students bring diverse experience to communities across Waterloo Region

The 507 international students that responded to the survey had a diverse array of cultural backgrounds: 46% were South Asian, 15% Black, 9% Chinese, and 7% Latin American. Their proficiency in English is very high, with 92% indicating they speak English well or very well.



Most live in Waterloo (54%) or Kitchener (33%) with smaller numbers living in Cambridge (7%), the rural townships or communities near Waterloo Region.

Cost of living and finding work are primary challenges for international students

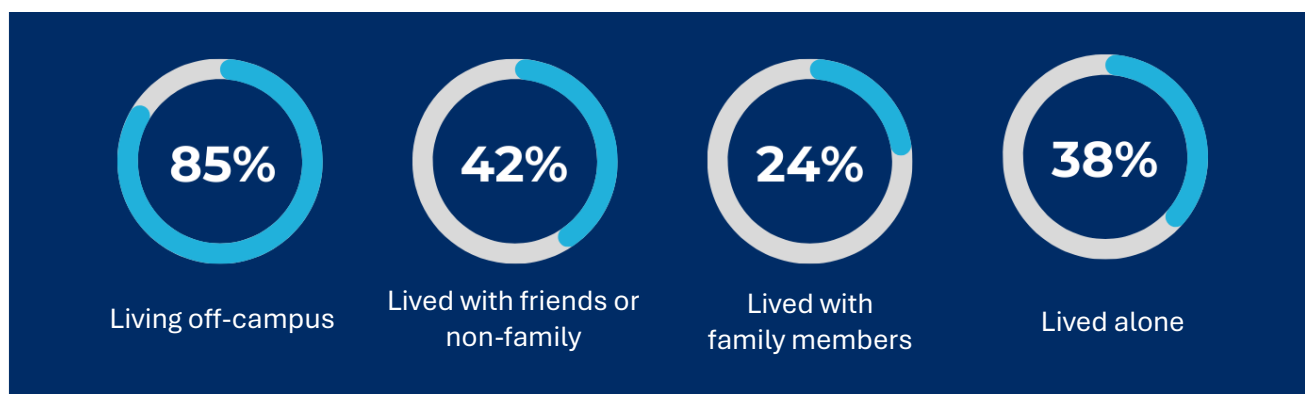
Despite meeting the Canadian government's requirements for financial self-sufficiency and often also being employed, the top challenge of international students who participated in the survey was cost of living, as it is for many others in the community. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of survey respondents felt their income wasn't enough for their needs.

Finding work was the second most common challenge of survey participants. Half (50%) were employed, and of those who were working, nearly half (49%) were in a job relevant to their field and 42% were satisfied with their job. However, a sizable proportion, 37%, were looking for work and others were in unsatisfying jobs or ones unrelated to their field of study.

Comparing responses of those who had been in Canada for 3 or more years to those in their first year in Canada, international students are more likely to be employed and in a relevant and satisfying job and to have sufficient income over time.

Most international students are in affordable housing.

Three-quarters of survey respondents (72%) indicated that their current housing was both affordable and suitable for them. However, the third biggest challenge for survey participants was finding affordable housing, as indicated by 53% of respondents. Among those not satisfied with their current housing, most mentioned it was unaffordable with some saying it was unsuitable or both.



Most student respondents were living off-campus (85%), and students most often lived either with friends or non-family (42%), with family members (24%), or lived alone (38%).

Many, though not all, students are socially connected and have diverse networks

Almost 60% of international student respondents said they are not isolated (10% saying not at all and 48% saying they were only somewhat or a little bit isolated) and respondents reported having diverse social networks. Social support systems included other international students (52%), friends from their cultural/linguistic community (40%), Canadian-born students (25%).

On the other hand, 41% of survey participants shared that they were isolated or alone a great deal or quite a bit, and 18% did not have good social support networks nearby. Making friends was the fourth most commonly mentioned challenge, reported by 37% of survey respondents.

International student social support systems and connection to Canadian students grows over time. Strong social connections with Canadian students grows from 19% among those in Canada for less than a year to 50% among those here for 3 or more years.

International students have a strong sense of belonging and settlement experience, but less strong experiences of welcoming



Two-thirds of respondents had a **strong sense of belonging** in Waterloo Region.

Two-thirds of survey respondents (67%) had a strong sense of belonging in Waterloo Region. This is similar to past surveys in Waterloo Region, including the 2023 Immigrant Survey (72% for all respondents and 68% for international students).¹ Similarly, two-thirds (67%) were satisfied with their experience of settling and integrating in Waterloo Region.



Nearly one third of respondents **experienced discrimination** in the past 12 months.

Among survey participants, 42% felt Waterloo Region was quite welcoming to international students, while 44% felt it was only somewhat welcoming and 15% felt it was not welcoming. This reflects a decline from the 52% of international students that felt the community was quite welcoming two years earlier in the 2023 Immigrant Survey.

Nearly one third (29%) of survey participants experienced discrimination in the past 12 months, and 23% did feel at home in this community.

¹ 2023 Waterloo Region Immigrant Survey collected the thoughts and experiences of 1,676 immigrants, including 341 international students. For more information see www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/ImmigrantSurvey.

Many international students plan to apply for a post-graduate work permit or pursue permanent residency



The Canadian government permits study and work permit holders to apply for new permits or permanent residency. Among 2025 international student survey participants in Waterloo Region, 68% of respondents plan to apply for a post-graduation work permit in Canada after their current study program ends, 29% plan to pursue permanent residency in Canada, and 23% plan to enroll in another program of study. Only 17% plan to leave Canada, with 11% planning to return to their home country and 8% planning to migrate to another country.² When asked about longer-term plans, 35% possibly plan to stay permanently in Waterloo Region and 18% did not plan to stay permanently.

Most international students access community services and resources outside of their academic institution

Though international students may not be eligible to access all community services beyond their post-secondary institution, 78% of respondents accessed some off-campus services and resources. The most common community involvement was attending churches, mosques, temples or other faith-based organizations (41%), local community/recreation centres, public libraries, etc. (40%), and off-campus health services (32%). Other services used in the past year included: housing search/supports (17%), groups related to hobbies, country of origin and/or culture (16%), off-campus emergency food assistance (10%), or immigration/settlement services (7%).

Finding health care was the fifth most common challenge for survey respondents. Half of those that accessed off-campus health services (55%) did so more than once in the past year. Transportation was the 6th most common challenge for international student respondents with 92% typically using public transit to get around, followed by walking/running or using an assisted mobility device, taxi/ridesharing, driving, or biking.

² Some figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding, or because respondents could select multiple options.

Academic challenges were less likely than general life challenges for international students

Survey responses show that the most frequent challenges for international students are not about being a student as much as they are about life challenges in general. Academic challenges were a top challenge for only one fifth of survey respondents (20%); less frequent than challenges related to cost of living, finding work, finding affordable housing, making friends, finding health care, and transportation.

Most international students are satisfied, and life improves over time in Canada

The majority of international student survey respondents, 82%, were relatively satisfied with their life overall (rating it at least a 5 on a scale from 0 to 10).³

The 21% of respondents who had been in Canada for 3 or more years were more likely to be employed and, in a job, relevant to their field of study, to be satisfied with their job and have sufficient income. They were more likely to have social support networks that included Canadian (non-international) students and less likely to be isolated.

On the other hand, a smaller yet significant proportion of survey respondents were experiencing larger or multiple challenges which negatively impacted their experiences of living here and potential retention and future contribution to overall economic prosperity. Almost one fifth, 18%, of survey respondents were without strong social support networks. They were more likely⁴ to have been in Canada for less than a year, more likely to live alone, to feel relatively isolated, and to say making friends was a top challenge. They were more likely to feel that Waterloo Region is not welcoming to international students, to have a weak sense of community belonging, and much less likely to have had a positive experience of settling in the region. They were less likely to have sufficient income or be in affordable and suitable housing. They were less likely to stay in Canada after finishing their current program and less likely to try to stay permanently in this community.

³ 31% of international student respondents were quite satisfied (rating of 8 to 10, on a 0-to-10-point scale) and 51% somewhat satisfied (rating of 5-7).

⁴ This profile highlights only larger differences for different groups compared to all international student respondents – at least 10 percentage points. See www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/InternationalStudentSurvey for more information about the International Student Survey.

Summary

The 2025 Waterloo Region International Student Survey shows that the overall experience of international students in the region is positive and improving over time. It also pointed to a number of challenges related to cost of living, finding work, finding affordable housing, making friends, and accessing services to be addressed.

There is a diverse selection of international students coming to study in Waterloo Region. Many are working in relevant and satisfying jobs, reporting a strong sense of belonging in Waterloo Region. Following their current program of study, a large proportion of respondents intended to continue their education or pursue work or permanent residency in Canada, with one third possibly planning to stay permanently in this community. While this is generally fairly positive, the results also show that respondents without strong social support networks face multiple challenges. They are more likely to live alone, to feel relatively isolated, and to say making friends was a top challenge. They were also more likely to feel that Waterloo Region is not welcoming to international students, to have a weak sense of belonging in this community, and much less likely to have had a positive experience of settling/integrating in Waterloo Region.

The survey found that the main challenges noted by international students are typically not about being a student or academics as much as they are about more general life challenges which includes access to affordable housing, the high cost of living, and employment. Community interactions and services beyond the academic campus were important for a majority of international students. This is a positive story speaking to the accessibility of community services and supports for international students in Waterloo Region. International students are major economic contributors,⁵ and it will be important continue to welcome and support this population.

Universities and colleges have a key role to play in providing on campus supports and information for international students about available community services, providing the resources they need to succeed and get connected to social networks when they arrive through campus services, clubs, and mentorship opportunities. Given that international student experiences overall are so intertwined with off-campus opportunities and interactions, the rest of the community has an essential role and responsibility.

Continued and deepening collaboration between post-secondary institutions and the broader community is essential to the success of international students. The results of this survey are, ultimately, a call for continued collaboration across the post secondary sector and the rest of the regional community to ensure international students have positive experiences of living here, develop strong social and economic connections and are retained to contribute to long-term community prosperity for all.

⁵ See: <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2022/index.aspx>

About the International Student Survey

The Waterloo Region International Student Survey was open in March 2025 to all post-secondary international students living or studying in Waterloo Region. This survey gathered data from 517 international student about their experiences of living in the region, challenges, strengths, and ideas for improvement.

The survey was conducted by the [Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership](#) and the [International Migration Research Centre](#), together with Conestoga College, University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, and the local Town & Gown committee.

The results will be used to guide how local organizations, and post-secondary institutions work together to improve services and living experiences for international students in Waterloo Region. It also provides important insights to guide individual organizational change across a range of sectors.

The results also suggest areas where additional research would be beneficial to understand the interplay of various factors impacting international students in Waterloo Region. Further research about housing, income, connectedness and service use can more deeply explore why students responded the way they did and their unique experiences on an individual level.

Information about the International Student Survey, including the research methodology and insights can be found at: www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/InternationalStudentSurvey.

Building community through immigration

For more information:

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