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Report on the CSU *Return to Campus – Student Experience Survey*

Fall 2021

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Introduction & Overview:

The Concordia Student Union (CSU) is the student association representing all 30,000+ undergraduate students at Concordia University and is accredited as such under the [Act respecting the accreditation and financing of student associations](#) (CQLR, c. A-3.01). Therefore, the main purpose of the CSU is to represent and advocate for the needs and concerns of students, as detailed in its mission statement¹. Student representatives are elected in the CSU elections by the undergraduate student body each year, and all additional appointments of undergraduate students to University Committees must equally go through the CSU.

As we find ourselves almost at the end of the Fall 2021 semester, still living through a global pandemic, Concordia students at large are continuing to experience a myriad of different feelings surrounding the return to campus. In order to be able to represent this variety of concerns and interests adequately, the CSU created and ran the *Return to Campus – Student Experience* Survey to collect feedback from students on their experiences and concerns regarding Covid-19 procedures and the return to partial in-person instruction and university activity.

The survey was posted on the CSU’s social media accounts and was open to all Concordia students for a limited time in October 2021. The survey consisted of 25 questions; however, certain questions were conditional to the responses to other questions. Therefore, there was a range of 19 and 25 questions that students could respond to, based on if they answered yes or no to certain questions (e.g. if a respondent is an international student or if they are taking any in-person classes). All of the questions were optional.

This report contains an analysis of the responses to this survey, summarizing students’ experiences. The data gained from this analysis will be used to inform advocacy projects and to provide recommendations to the University on how to better provide support and maintain safety for students, both for the duration of the pandemic, and for the future more generally.

Overall, the survey responses showed that—while many students expressed some positive feelings about being back on campus, learning in-person, and having more social interactions with their classmates again—many students also expressed concerns regarding the adequacy and efficiency of the safety measures, support services, and accommodations offered by Concordia University to students in these still strenuous times.

Demographic Information:

Questions pertaining to demographic information were included to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what level of study respondents are pursuing, as well as which faculty they are registered in. Further, the demographic questions gave information on how many respondents were taking in-person classes and where students were located for the Fall 2021 semester.

¹ <https://www.csu.qc.ca/about-us/our-mission/>

Of the respondents, 94% are studying at the undergraduate level and 6% at the graduate level. With 64% of respondents noting that they are registered in the Faculty of Arts & Sciences, that faculty is overrepresented in comparison to the official enrolment breakdown according to which it makes up 42% of students². In opposition, students in JMSB and Fine Arts are underrepresented at respectively 12% and 4% of respondents. With 21% of respondents being from the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Sciences, the share of respondents is almost equivalent to the 22.8% share it makes up in enrollment numbers³. For the future, it will be important for the CSU to do more outreach to students in JMSB and Fine Arts, so as to have responses be representative of the Concordia student body.

In order to assess the representation of domestic and international students, the survey asked respondents for their student status. Of responding students 66.7% are Quebec residents, 11.7% are out-of-province Canadian students, and 21.6% are international students. This distribution is almost equal to the distribution noted in Concordia's 2020-2021 student enrollment numbers⁴, with only out-of-province Canadian students being slightly overrepresented.

Since international students have been facing particular challenges during the pandemic, following this question, respondents who marked their status as international were asked two additional questions. The first question asked them if they were currently in Montreal, which 95.8% of respondents answered with yes and 4.2% with no, showing that by October, most international students filling out the survey were already in Montreal. As the survey was only shared by the CSU, it is likely that these numbers do not represent the actual number of international students who were not able to be in Montreal by that time, as they are the ones most likely not to be aware of the CSU. For the future, a survey such as this should look at further outreach to international students specifically through the International Students Office or other channels. In order to gain a greater understanding of the barriers present for international students returning to campus, the question was asked "If you are an international student who was not living in Montreal for the past academic year, how has your experience been preparing for the return to campus in September? Have you faced any problems pertaining to this, and/or are there any outstanding issues surrounding the return to campus you would like to see addressed?". The responses fell into the following four primary categories: no issues, visa and re-entry issues, housing issues, and vaccination access. Some examples include:

"Visa issues!!! Real lack of clarity around whether or not I needed to be in person. Back in March when they said we needed to be here, only to reverse that decision once it was too late and travel plans had already been made. I want relocation costs to be reimbursed."

² <https://www.concordia.ca/about/fast-facts.html>

³ <https://www.concordia.ca/about/fast-facts.html>

⁴ <https://www.concordia.ca/about/fast-facts.html>

“Availability of eligible vaccines in my country. High cost of hotel quarantine. Travel restrictions.”

As these examples show, students expressed their frustration surrounding the lack of clarity and consistency in the information Concordia provided about when students would be required to be in person, as well as at the increased cost of travel due to quarantine requirements and other restrictions. Having clearer communication around the number of classes that would be happening in-person, as well as around travel restrictions would have been helpful for many international students. Further, there should be an increase in resources offered by support services such as the International Students Office as some students expressed concern about the length it took to receive responses to urgent questions.

Experiences with the Health and Safety Guidelines:

The most pressing point of concern for students returning to campus as expressed in the survey were the health and safety measures put in place by Concordia to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In order to assess students’ feelings on the sufficiency and perceived efficacy of health guidelines and the resulting level of comfort in regard to in-person instruction, students were asked a variety of questions on the Covid-19 regulations and directives implemented by the University.

Students were first asked, “Do you feel safe on campus regarding Covid-19?”. Of the 111 respondents, 24% of students indicated they do not feel safe on campus, 35.7% of students indicated they do feel safe on campus, and 40% of students indicated they feel somewhat safe on campus.

When students were asked “Which of the health and safety guidelines implemented by Concordia make you feel safe on campus in regard to Covid-19?”, the main concern of student respondents was surrounding the University’s lack of enforcement of safety mandates. Overall responses fell into five primary categories. These categories are as follows:

- mask mandate and sanitization
- campus security
- capacity limits
- all precautions listed
- none of the precautions listed.

Mask wearing and sanitization were by far the most frequent response, with 68 out of 92 students indicating that the mask mandate and sanitization was the guideline that made them feel the safest, as illustrated by these examples of responses:

“Masks are the only measure that are being adequately enforced. The distancing measures + capacity limits are not being upheld or enforced, and unless security happens to pass by, those spaces feel very unsafe.”

“Masks give me some level of security...social distancing just doesn't happen (not just here - anywhere (ex: metro, street) - it's not realistic)...capacity limits have a neutral effect on how safe I feel I appreciate the promise of masks at the entrances. I very much appreciate that not everything is constantly being sanitized; I want a good immune system and I believe that controlled exposure helps me stay healthier.”

This was followed in popularity by the response that “all precautions listed” increase students’ feeling of safety.

Students were then asked, “Which of the health and safety guidelines implemented by Concordia or lack thereof make you feel unsafe on campus in regard to Covid-19?”. Out of the 90 students who responded:

- 4 said they generally feel unsafe despite safety guidelines
- 43 said the lack of enforced social distancing
- 7 said the lack of vaccine passports/mandate
- 21 said the lack of enforcing mask-wearing
- 2 said the lack of proper sanitization and cleaning
- 1 said the lack of testing requirements
- 1 said the lack of security and enforcement regarding mandates
- 3 said in-person activities in general
- 1 said lack of air filtration in university buildings
- 5 said they do feel safe overall

Student responses indicated uncertainty in regard to the efficacy of certain measures, as well frustration regarding the improper enforcement of measures like incorrect mask use and social distancing which many students say is not observed within classrooms. Students overall do not seem confident in the support provided by current safety measures, as shown in the following example that lists reasons for why the students do not feel safe:

“See[ing] people not following health and safety guidelines being followed. Masks not covering the nose, people do not wash hands in washrooms, classroom being full capacity with no distance between students.”

Many other students indicated that the lack of social distancing present in campus spaces and specifically in classrooms is creating a sense of anxiety and fear for students attending in-person courses. Students also often noted that the absence of social distancing and the accompanying stress of sitting in densely occupied classrooms is greatly distracting them during their learning. This is supplemented by confusion regarding the university’s contingency plans in the event there are cases on campus, as well as uncertainty around the way the University is conducting contact tracing and communicating cases to students:

“The lack of social distancing in classes is also appalling. I was initially enrolled in two in-person classes but decided to drop one of them because I did not feel safe in the classroom. The class in question was MARK 201. It was comprised of over a hundred students, and there was absolutely no social distancing in the JMSB classroom; there wasn't even enough space to attempt to social distance. Once class started, there were about two empty seats left. Prior to attending that class, I had barely left my house, and sitting in such a packed room was incredibly anxiety-inducing. I even tried to email the teacher to discuss the possibility of attending the lectures remotely, but she never answered me, and so I switched out of the class. The university's response to reported cases is also worrying. There was been next-to-no transparency regarding contact tracing or the procedures put in place to protect students who might be at risk. The last email I received from Student Communications says "EHS will notify you if you are deemed to be at risk, and let you know what to do next, e.g., monitor symptoms, get tested, self-isolate, or a combination of these actions. Given class sizes, you may receive the same notification a number of times." To me, that is not reassuring in the least. They should not have waited until three weeks into the term to share that information--they should have made it available a long time prior to the start of the term--and they should be a lot clearer about what the information means. Are classrooms in which someone tested positive supposed to keep going on as usual? If the university only asks students to monitor their symptoms, there's a big chance they'll miss asymptomatic cases of the virus and enable the spread of Covid-19.”

Vaccinations:

In order to gather a sense of how many students are vaccinated, students were asked, “Are you fully vaccinated against Covid-19?”. In response, 95.5% of students said they were fully vaccinated, 2.6% of students stated they had received one dose of a vaccine, and 1.7% stated they were not vaccinated at all.

Social Distancing:

Across survey questions, the university's lack of social distancing enforcement and classroom overcrowding are extremely prevalent as high concerns amongst students. Many respondents indicated it has affected their feelings of safety and has caused anxiety that is distracting to their learning and taxing on their mental health. Many students strongly stated that they are uncomfortable or feel unsafe attending in-person activities and courses because social distancing is not properly maintained within the University. To the question “Is social distancing observed in your in-person classes?”, 55% of responding students said social distancing is not observed in in-person classes, 13.4% of responding students said social distancing is observed, and 29.8% of responding students said social distancing is somewhat observed, showing that most classrooms are not socially distanced.

Additional measures to ensure safety on campus

Since students strongly stated that there is a need for the University to improve safety measures and prioritize the enforcement of these directives to create a safer and more comfortable environment for in-person activities, the following section summarizes students responses to what additional measures they would want Concordia to implement to ensure safety on campus in regard to Covid-19.

The vast majority of responses indicated that students want the university to expand and maintain online options for courses as many feel anxious and unsafe due to the number of students in classrooms and university spaces as well as anxiety around using public transportation during the pandemic. Further, many students expressed fear surrounding the possibility that they will get sick and be penalized for not being able to attend classes in person.

The second most prevalent response from students when asked what additional measures they would like to see implemented was that the university should mandate vaccines for faculty, students, and staff, or employ the use of vaccine passports and require rapid testing for those who are unvaccinated.

Across multiple responses, students indicated they feel unsafe with the number of students in classes and would feel more secure if they could be sure everyone was vaccinated or tested. One student response stated:

“It is not fair that those who are immunocompromised are forced to choose between in-person courses and safety. The onus should be on those who can be vaccinated to be vaccinated, and if Concordia does not mandate this, we will eventually be forced back online as winter comes and cases rise.”

This response illustrates the gravity of feelings of risk students are facing, feeling as if they are forced to choose between their education and their safety and the safety of those around them.

The third most frequent response from students regarding additional measures by the university was calls for proper and enforced social distancing during all in-person activities, specifically within classrooms. Multiple students indicated that social distancing is not observed within their classes and that they are uncomfortable with the number of students in their in-person classes.

Rapid Testing on Campus:

The survey also asked students directly how their feelings of safety would be impacted by rapid Covid-testing on campus. This suggestion garnered mixed responses. To the question, “If Concordia were to offer rapid testing on campus, would you be inclined to get tested regularly?”, 41% of responding students stated they would not be inclined to get tested regularly, 30% stated they would be inclined to get tested regularly, and 31% stated they would maybe be inclined to get tested regularly.

As a follow-up to this question, students were asked “If Concordia were to offer rapid testing on campus, would that make you feel safer?”. In response, 28% of students replied they would not feel safer if rapid testing was offered on campus, 46% replied that they would feel safer if rapid testing was offered on campus, and 25% replied that they might feel safer if rapid testing was offered on campus.

This shows that, while not all students would be inclined to get tested regularly, Concordia offering on-campus rapid testing would still make the majority of students feel safer on campus.

Experiences with & Accessibility of classes:

In-Person Classes:

The next section was only available to students who indicated taking at least one in-person class as it focused on the in-person learning environment.

Many of these students brought up issues regarding the lack of online course options. Additionally, accessibility concerns were another heavy focus of student answers throughout the survey. Numerous responses indicated that students feel uncomfortable with in-person courses that do not have online course options or components because they either feel unsafe attending in-person activities or are worried about the disruption that could be caused by an outbreak of cases in a classroom and the ramifications that would have on their courses.

One aim of the survey was to gather information on the accommodations already offered in their classes. In response to the question “Are any of your in-person classes providing an option to attend the class online? (i.e., live-streaming through Zoom, uploading recordings of in-person lectures)” 52% of students stated that their in-person classes are not providing the option to attend class online, 45% stated that their in-person classes are providing the option to attend class online, and 2% stated that some of their in-person classes are providing the option to attend class online. This shows that some professors are already providing additional remote options, even though they are not required to, but it also shows that there is a need for more courses to offer remote options.

When asked “Overall, what has your experience been in your in-person classes this semester so far?” student responses fell into one of five primary categories. Out of 86 respondents, 41% indicated a positive overall experience attending in-person classes, 22% indicated that their experience has been negative, 22% indicated having mixed feelings toward their experience, 11% indicated their experience has been stressful, and 2% indicated their experience is the same as it was pre-pandemic.

In particular, student experiences often surrounded the desire for online options for courses due to the anxiety surrounding their safety and comfort, as well as due to the fear that they will miss course work and lectures if they become ill. Others expressed distress regarding the number of students attending in-person activities and the lack of clear protocol for students in the event of an outbreak. For instance:

“I wish professors would have online options for in-person lectures if people feel unsafe coming to class. Also, I think profs forget that transitioning from all online to back in person is difficult and have not been all that understanding.”

“I was only able to attend one in-person session before I had to stay at home for the past two weeks and missed all in-class portions of the class.”

“It's been difficult. First, I get very nervous about being in crowded places as it's been a while since we were last in person and because I do not think the measures in place to protect students from covid are enough. Additionally, we have not been told what to do if someone in our classes has been exposed to covid, what are the next steps? How will we be notified? In the covid training it just said they will let us know, but how? How soon would they let us know? What will happen if we did get exposed to covid? Does the whole class quarantine? Does the class move online? I feel like we need to be given more details. Overall, it's definitely a difficult transition back to school. I'm hoping things get better through the semester.”

Online classes:

In order to gain insight into the accessibility of online courses for students, the question “If your classes are online, are instructors/professors recording their classes and making them accessible to students?” was asked. In response, 40% of students say their online class instructors are recording lectures and making them accessible to students, 10% stated their online class instructors are not recording lectures and making them accessible to students, and 29% said some of their online classes are recording lectures and making them accessible to students (while 20% responded they were not attending courses online and therefore the question did not apply).

Accommodations:

In regards to the accommodation measures at the university, students were asked “Are there any accommodation measures you would like Concordia to implement for students?”. The most common response from students was that they would like the University to implement was the recording of lectures. Student responses asking for the recording of lectures were followed in popularity by requests for increased online course options, the implementation of pass/fail grade options for the semester, the implementation of vaccine passports, and better overall flexibility/increased access to accommodation respectively.

In regards to online course components, many students indicated they would benefit from the recording of lectures and other online course material as this would help students from missing course components due to health issues as well as allow students who do not feel safe attending in person or are immunocompromised to continue pursuing their education.

Responses included:

“Students who have children, older people and children living at home, chronic conditions, or high levels of stress about covid-19 should be able to stay home and watch the recording or live sessions.”

“Make it mandatory for professors to provide more online resources (recorded lectures,..). Removes the stress of missing class for health reasons. Provide a way for exams to be done in case they are missed due to covid or medical reasons”

Pass/Fail Grading Options:

Since the CSU had heard from many students about their discontent at the removal of the pass/fail grade option, the survey aimed to get more insight into experiences with the option last year, as well as into the reasons students are in favour or against it. Students were asked, “If you were enrolled in courses last year, what was your experience with the Pass/Fail option?”. In response, students overwhelmingly stated that the pass/fail option was greatly helpful and should be reinstated (78% of responses). This included students who stated that they themselves did not use it but believe it is helpful for other students, and to reduce stress generally during the semester. 15.85% of respondents indicated not having used the option without disclosing any other feelings towards it. Only three respondents expressed that they did not think the Pass/Fail option should exist or that it was not helpful. One student indicated that they were unaware of the effects that pass/fail notations would have on their academic careers in the future but that they still thought it was helpful. The following response displays the need for increased information and clarity surrounding accommodation measures such as grade options:

“I'm not sure I quite understand its repercussions, but I think it was a good option for students who knew what they were doing. Last year brought along unexpected challenges and I think people needed this support and understanding.”

Overall, the responses indicated that the vast majority of students believe it is a helpful option for students that decreases stress throughout the semester. Regardless of if they used it or not, having the option greatly increased students' confidence in being able to get through the semester without major impacts on their mental health stemming from academic stress. The availability of the pass/fail option had a positive effect on their overall mental health and reduced stress throughout the semester. For instance:

“I did not make use of the Pass/Fail option, but it was incredibly reassuring to know it was available to me and to other students.”

“I did not take one but the option of it being a possibility helped to make things less stressful.”

“The pass/fail option was amazing and super helpful. It also eased my worries. But I am very disappointed that they got rid of the pass or fail system now that we're back in

person. It's a difficult transition to being stuck at home online all the time, to suddenly being thrown back into in-person classes with very crowded areas. The people I have spoken to have shared the stress and their difficulties in transitioning to in person. It's affecting people's concentration, motivation, and therefore grades. Which is why I am confused as to why they have gotten rid of the pass and fail option. Things are still difficult, people are nervous about covid, if someone ends up getting covid and miss some school as they recover, therefore their grades quite possibly suffer, I think it's unfair that we do not have access to the pass and fail option anymore."

Further demonstrating the importance of pass/fail options for students are the responses to the question "do you want Concordia to bring back the Pass/Fail option for this semester?". To this, 79.6% of students said they would like Concordia to reinstate the pass-fail option for the semester, 8% said they are unsure, and only 12% said they would not like the option to be reinstated. When asked specifically, "how would a Pass/Fail option help you this semester?" 11% of respondents said it would be helpful for their GPA, 37.9% of respondents said it would be helpful for stress, 24% of respondents said it would be helpful overall, 12.65% of respondents said it would be unhelpful to them, 3.7% of respondents said pass/fail does not apply to them. Students also noted the stress of the ongoing pandemic and of hybrid classes and concentration issues resulting from it, as well as financial constraints as reasons for which they wanted to see the return of the Pass/Fail option. Students stated:

"Concordia's argument that because things have returned partially to in-person modes of learning means we are back to normal and therefore the pass/fail option is unnecessary is tone-deaf. This is not the new normal, this is still a crisis- a public health crisis, a mental health crisis, and a crisis time for the University as an academic institution. Offering the pass/fail option does not reflect poorly on Concordia or decrease their legitimacy, it does the very opposite in showing that they understand that these circumstances are still untenable for many (and in many cases, are worse now than they were last year)."

"I have increased financial constraints because of covid and I need to work more during the semester. It would help to have a pass/fail option to help reduce the stress of a part-time job and full-time courses."

"Both online and in-person, I pay attention and do the best I can, but it's been challenging and I'm worried it will affect my academic standing. Having Pass/Fail as an option this semester--regardless of whether I use it or not--would be helpful; it would make me feel supported by the university, and help ease some of my (many) worries."

Student Perceptions on Communication from the University:

Since any measures and guidelines on campus safety, as well as accommodations, need to be properly communicated in order to be efficient, another goal of the survey was to assess student experiences with communication from the university during the pandemic. The question “How do you feel about the information provided by Concordia University regarding the return to campus? Has it been sufficient and consistent?” was asked. Of the responding students, 33% said the information provided by the University has been insufficient, 13% said the information has been inconsistent, 38% said the information provided has been sufficient, and 15% said the information has been just okay. Thus, over 60% of student responses indicated that the information provided by the University was either inconsistent, insufficient or just okay, with most students indicating that there is a lack of clarity in the information given which shows that there is a clear need for improvement on communicating to students. Some stated that they felt as though decisions were not relayed to students in a timely manner, information was not easy to find, and that they were unsure about what they should expect from their learning environment. Some examples of responses include:

“I feel like they send out a lot of emails, so yes it's consistent, but it's always the same information. I think they need to tell students more, such as backup plans, what should we do if there is a large outbreak of covid on campus. There are thousands of students on campus, walking around, interacting with each other, if someone gets covid and manages to spread it around, what are the school's plans?”

“No. I had no idea what my class experience would be until I showed up for class. Feel like I was asked to make a decision about my health and education with little information”

General Student Comments:

At the end of the survey, students were given space to write their questions, comments, or concerns regarding the return to campus overall. The most prevalent content of these comments was asking for the university to provide more online course options and material, to provide greater overall accessibility and accommodation for students, to reinstate the pass/fail grading option. Further, many students indicated the general ongoing stress due to the pandemic. Responses from students included:

“I don't understand how Concordia is contact tracing or if it something to even worry about. Also, what would the procedure be if things were to go back online in the future?”

“I do not feel 100% safe on campus. We are often paired in group work so we need to sit by each other to complete tasks. I really wish we had to have vaccine passports for class. As it is I just have to hope my classmates are being responsible and it does not sit well with me that I need to trust them with my health without proof.”

“Giving students the option to come on campus would be ideal. Teachers could live stream their in-person lectures. Unless the classes are labs that require in-person instruction, there is no reason to obligate students to risk their health to come to campus when many, if not most, subjects can be taught online.”

Conclusion & Recommendations:

Based on the responses provided by students in the survey, the CSU has compiled a list of recommendations to Concordia University that would improve the experiences of students during these times. The recommendations are split up into the categories of accommodations, safety measures, communications, and recommendations concerning international students specifically. We understand that, as of the time we are compiling this report, it has been over a month since the survey was conducted and that student experiences may have developed over the course of the semester. However, having been in ongoing communication with many students and having received feedback on specific issues from students through the November 2021 CSU By-elections, we believe that these recommendations are still incredibly relevant to reduce student stress during the ongoing pandemic (and beyond). Especially with the advent of the new Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus, we are still in a highly uncertain situation where we are not sure what the next semester will hold on a public health level. Therefore, we call upon Concordia University to implement the following recommendations.

Accommodations:

- The University should reinstate the pass/fail grade option for the remainder of the 2021-2022 academic year and provide clear information to students regarding its use and possible repercussions.
- The University should increase, not decrease, options for students to attend courses remotely, both through the expansion of courses offered fully online, as well as through the expansion of courses offering live-streams or recordings of in-person lectures. This was the most common theme of responses across the whole survey and was also reinforced through a referendum question in the CSU By-elections in which 5638 students (95.6% of those voting) voted in favour of increased remote options.

Safety Measures:

- Students have strongly stated that there is a need for the university to improve safety measures and prioritize the enforcement of these directives to create a safer and more comfortable environment for in-person activities. Throughout the survey, many students indicated they are uncomfortable or feel unsafe due to the lack of enforced social

distancing, specifically within classroom settings. The issue of lowering classroom occupancy and ensuring individuals adhere to social distancing protocols came up in the responses to most questions and is a large priority for students.

- In terms of university health planning, students are concerned with the procedure and contingency plans in place for students who partake in in-person courses becoming sick with COVID. Many students are worried about the possibility of transmission in classrooms and are concerned about the lack of information regarding contact tracing and case tracing available from the university. The university should expand its contact tracing services and provide clear information to students on the protocols, functions, and procedures of these services.

Communications:

- The university should improve the clarity and consistency of its communications to students, making sure important information is easily accessible and understandable for all students. Students' perception of the information provided by the university as insufficient contributes to their stress and feelings of uncertainty regarding their safety returning to school.

International Students:

- In line with the recommendation on communications, throughout the survey, international students often expressed their frustration at the lack of clarity and consistency in the information Concordia provided in regard to international students' issues. They were also concerned about the increased cost of travel due to quarantine and other restrictions. The University needs to ensure international students are well-supported by providing timely and direct information, as well as increasing access to support services such as the International Students Office since students often have to wait weeks before receiving responses to their questions.