

Racialized Students and International Exchanges: Encouraging Participation and Positive Experiences

Abbreviated Report of the Working Group on Reaching Underrepresented Students April 2025



The **Reaching Underrepresented Students working group** (RUG) was established by the Vice-Provost, Global Engagement in 2021 in partnership with Vice-Principal (Culture, Equity, and Inclusion) to identify gaps and barriers in university policies, procedures, and practices that may discourage students from underrepresented groups participating in or benefiting from the international exchange program.

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[Queen's will] implement the Reaching Underrepresented Groups project to understand and address barriers to learning abroad participation for racialized students.

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Global Engagement Strategic Plan 2023–2028, Objective 2.3: Global Learning

Purpose of the Study

Queen's University has entered into exchange agreements with many international partner universities that allow Queen's students to attend classes for credit at another institution for one semester or longer. During an exchange a student pays tuition to Queen's and is responsible for travel and accommodation costs.

Exchange programs are intended to help students develop academic, intercultural, and personal skills, enrich their experiences as students, and enhance their future employment opportunities. Research demonstrates that students from less-advantaged backgrounds may benefit most from exchange programs. Anecdotal evidence suggested that at Queen's such students do not participate in exchanges at a rate proportionate to better-advantaged students, and do not always have as positive experiences when they do participate.



The RUG working group focused on the three undergraduate faculties that send the large majority of Queen's outgoing exchange students abroad: **Faculty of Arts and Science, Smith Engineering, and Smith School of Business**. The working group surveyed the three faculties' exchange offices to understand the offices' similarities and differences and how they approach service provision to racialized students.



WORKING GROUP GOALS

Determine whether racialized students are underrepresented in Queen's undergraduate exchange programs.

Gather information about the experiences of racialized students at all stages of participation in the exchange program, including students considering applying, who had decided not to participate, who were preparing to go on exchange, and who had returned from an exchange.

Assess the information provided by racialized students about their exchange decisions and experiences and whether they encountered barriers in university institutions, policies, and procedures.

Formulate recommendations to improve racialized students' participation in and satisfaction with the exchange program at Queen's.

METHODOLOGY

The working group held focus groups that allowed racialized students to share their experiences with the exchange program. Applications to participate in these focus groups were made by 214 students. When deciding which applicants to invite to participate, the working group aimed for diversity in the applicants' faculties and stage of experience with the exchange program. The working group also aimed for diversity in responses to voluntary questions about intersecting factors, including gender, sexuality, religion, household income, disability status, first-generation and citizenship status, and dependents, may contribute in complex ways to a racialized student's identity and experience.

Thirty-three students participated in 9 focus groups of no more than 4 students each in November and December 2022, facilitated by a racialized graduate student and an assistant hired by the working group. Three focus groups were attended by students who had returned from international exchanges, and the other 6 groups were each attended by a mixture of students who were considering applying, who had considered applying but decided against it, who had been offered an exchange and declined, and who were preparing to go on exchange. A number of participants were international students. Questions asked in the focus groups were designed by the working group in consultation with the RUG Advisory Board, the Human Rights and Equity Office, and the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

In addition, in a post-focus group survey the working group asked the focus group participants and the other applicants to respond to questions about services provided by exchange offices, and they received 77 responses.



FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS' DECISIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The working group considered students' comments about a number of factors that may have an impact on racialized students' exchange decisions and experiences. These factors influenced the students' attitudes to exchange and their perceptions about university policies, procedures, and practices. The working group assessed whether the faculty exchange offices take these factors and their impact on students sufficiently into account when planning and delivering services.



Family Involvement and Influence

Only about 5% of Queen's undergraduate students come from Kingston, and for many students university is their first time living away from home. Families therefore often have a considerable influence on the decisions of students considering an exchange. At least one of the parents or guardians of 209 of the 214 applicants to the focus groups was born outside Canada, and in many cases this fact had some bearing on how families perceived exchange programs.

Some students experienced resistance from parents who may have moved to Canada, in part, to provide access to a better education for their children. Some parents told students that an exchange would be a distraction and that there would be opportunities to travel after graduation. Parents worried that their children might struggle to fit into a new community, when for many racialized students studying at Queen's already means navigating an unfamiliar culture as a racial minority.

Some first-generation students saw an exchange as an opportunity to connect to their parents' culture. This opportunity could be made more accessible to first or second-generation Canadians by diversifying exchange destinations.

FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS' DECISIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Race and Racism Abroad

For many racialized students, racism and the expectation of discrimination on exchange is a major concern, although some students reported that living in Kingston, where 87% of the population identify as not a visible minority, has prepared them for potential discomfort stemming from their racial identity.

Some students reported that racialized students would benefit from identity-specific advice from people who have participated in an exchange and that faculty offices could produce identity-specific resources. Some students mentioned that the reality of living in certain destinations can be misunderstood or misrepresented by staff who do not understand how the experiences of a racialized student in a specific country might be different from those of white students.

Racial identity has a significant impact on how many students who are racialized find community, at home and abroad. While an international exchange is intended to be an opportunity for discovery in new and possibly uncomfortable situations, it is natural for students to think carefully about their choice of destination. Students who have experienced racism in Kingston and elsewhere would welcome identity-specific information that might help them decide, in their specific circumstances, whether to go on exchange, and to choose a destination where they would likely feel comfortable and make community connections.



FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS' DECISIONS AND EXPERIENCES



Sexuality

Race is not the only factor that determines whether a student might feel safe and welcome abroad. Racialized students may seek information to help them select a destination likely to be inclusive and safe for students with diverse sexualities.

Religion

A majority of the applicants identified with one or more religions or religious denominations. Opportunities to practice their faith safely and connect with a faith-based community while abroad were key factors for some students. This information is often not provided on university fact sheets.

Professional Pressures

Some factors that affect students' exchange decisions are specific to their academic department. For example, close to 85% of undergraduate Commerce students participate in an international exchange, which is far above the university average. In that program an exchange is seen as an almost essential part of a student's education and professional development. Students reported that Commerce exchanges are often perceived as particularly important for racialized students, particularly those who are international students, as a means for them to find common ground with peers and future colleagues.

OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The working group reviewed the data collected during the study about the institutional obstacles reported by students and made the recommendations highlighted below.

Finances and Costs

For many racialized students, racism and the expectation of discrimination on exchange is a major concern, although some students reported that living in Kingston, where 87% of the population identify as not a visible minority, has prepared them for potential discomfort stemming from their racial identity.

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Recommendations

- Provide greater clarity to students about the costs of exchange opportunities.
- Offer workshops to help students research costs and financial aid.
- Provide more financial support to racialized students with financial need.

Students mentioned that a new financial incentive could be designed to encourage participation in exchanges by racialized students with financial need. This initiative would align with other recently established financial awards including the DREAM and PROMISE scholarships. Exchange offices could also create paid positions for racialized students to write blogs during their exchange and act as ambassadors and provide testimonials about their experiences after their return. This initiative would not only provide financial support to students but also help address the need identified below for more identity-specific advising about exchange opportunities and experiences.

OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversity of Exchange Partnerships

Most Queen's students go on exchange to Europe, Australia, or China. By diversifying their partnerships, faculties would not only provide more options for all applicants, but open opportunities for racialized students who do not find existing partners suitable or attractive. This approach might also increase options for students who would like to go on exchange to a specific destination to connect with their heritage.



Recommendation

- Continue to diversify exchange partnerships.

Exchange Application Timing

Most students agreed that the application process encouraged or even required them to research potential destinations thoroughly, which prompted them to ask important questions and reflect on their options and preferences. However, some students found it challenging and stressful to work on a detailed exchange application while preparing for exams, particularly those for whom English is an additional language.

Exchange offices might consider reviewing the timing of the application process to consider whether adjustments could be made to take into account academic demands.

Recommendation

- Review the exchange application timeline.

OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Promotion and Resources

The students who participated in the study tended to assume that the university's exchange programs are primarily designed for what they described as the generally wealthy and white student population. Some students reported that racialized students need to work harder to seek out and succeed in applying for exchanges. Some felt that the experiences of students who are not white are not fully considered in communications about planning for an exchange and that more information could be provided to help them decide whether a particular exchange would be comfortable for someone in their specific circumstances.

Exchange offices frequently offer sessions and workshops to help promote exchanges and provide support to prospective applicants and returning students, and the Queen's International Programs Office's [Identity Abroad](#) webpage is an excellent resource, but many students were not familiar with these resources. The exchange offices should not only ensure students are aware of these resources but take a targeted approach to developing additional resources.

Students recommended a new 'hands on' workshop to provide students with the tools they need to make well-informed decisions based on their unique identity and circumstances. Such a session could demystify the exchange program and alleviate some of the confusion and isolation felt by many racialized students who consider and participate in the exchange program.

Recommendations

- Provide more information about available resources.
- Develop targeted information relevant to people with marginalized identities.
- Develop a workshop to demystify the exchange application and preparation process.

OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Involve Former Exchange Participants and University Community Partners

Faculty exchange offices often invite former exchange students to relate their experiences to prospective participants. However, racialized students are often not given an opportunity to connect with advisors who share their ethnicity or who have had similar life experiences. Many students mentioned that it would have been helpful for them to receive advice from former exchange students with whom they had more in common. It was suggested that exchange offices hire racialized exchange program alumni as peer advisors and/or recruit racialized students to share their experiences in blogs or other social media while on exchange.

Related ideas included faculty offices partnering with clubs offering support to racialized students on campus, as their members might include former exchange students, and with units such as the International Centre and the Yellow House, whose staff have the expertise to offer services to racialized applicants for a student exchange.

In addition, faculties might consider requiring or strongly encouraging students who return from exchange to provide a report about their experiences. Submitting such a report could be a condition of an award or funding package for racialized students. This information would, of course, be useful to all potential participants. Faculties could also develop a mentorship / buddy program matching former and future exchange students.

Recommendations

- Encourage continued and increased engagement in the exchange process by racialized former exchange students and community partners.
- Obtain and share more written alumni exchange reports.

OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide More Services for International Students

A significant number of applicants to the focus groups were international students, and it seems there is significant interest in exchanges among this community. More consideration could be given to the challenges such students face when accessing exchange opportunities and to providing them with information specific to their situation. While faculty exchange staff cannot provide legal advice about matters such as visas, they could be better educated about how international students navigate the exchange process. Useful resources and sessions could be developed covering issues such as visas, currency conversion, language, and the possibility of going on exchange to a student's home country.

Recommendations

- Develop exchange resources specifically for international students.



OTHER EXCHANGE / INTERNATIONAL STUDY MODELS TO CONSIDER

In the post-focus group survey, students were asked to comment about global education models that might be alternatives to the traditional semester-long international exchange. Some of these programs exist at Queen's, while others could be variations of existing programs. Many of the responses reflect the concerns of study participants about cost, the need for more support for exchange applicants and participants, and the need to help prepare racialized students for the challenges of studying abroad.

Embedded Programs: Exchanges of 1-2 weeks

This model can allow students to engage in an experiential way with course material, particularly for courses with an international focus. Such opportunities allow students to build rapport with peers and allow less confident or experienced students to travel in a supported way. However, such a brief experience abroad could limit students' ability to immerse themselves in the culture of the destination, and costs might be prohibitive for a short experience. Such programs might be best at the end of a term or immediately before a full exchange at the same destination.

Faculty-Led/Collaborated Programs

A group of students travel with a professor for an exchange of 2 months or less. The faculty member teaches, in some cases, with colleagues from a host university. This model enables students to network and make connections with peers at Queen's and the host school. The presence of a supervising instructor provides a supportive environment for less experienced travelers. However, this model might limit a student's ability to fulfil other academic obligations, and students expressed concerns about the cost of a short-term option.

Collaborative Online International Learning

A 'virtual' exchange, in which a class partners with a group at a university abroad for a joint collaborative virtual course. This is one of the most accessible international learning opportunities, providing networking and cultural exchange opportunities with no travel, accommodation, or visa costs. However, many students are tired of online learning, and this is only a replacement for an in-person exchange in a very limited way.

OTHER EXCHANGE / INTERNATIONAL STUDY MODELS TO CONSIDER

Blended Programs

A portion of a course is taught online before the student travels to the exchange host. For many students, actual travel is an essential part of a global education, despite its associated challenges. Blended programs can allow students to make connections and acquire useful skills and knowledge before travelling, which may help prepare them for cultural adjustments on arrival.

Culture-Specific Programs

Exchange programs are open to students based on their racial or ethnic identity. Students were intrigued by this idea but had questions. They felt this model could provide a positive opportunity to learn about one's culture in a way that is not possible in Kingston, in a safe environment, while fostering community. There were questions about the exclusivity of such an exchange and how it might be administered – would it segregate communities? For many students a global education should involve learning about unfamiliar cultures.



ONGOING ACTION ITEMS (MAY 2025)

Recommendations related to Finances: Building on the success of the Student Ambassador program and existing Identity Abroad resources, student-authored timely updates and Instagram takeovers about their experiences, including the highs and lows, and blog posts will be implemented for Fall 2025. Information about the cost of exchange has been incorporated into information sessions and materials.

Recommendation to Diversity of Exchange Opportunities: Queen's has significantly diversified offerings for students, including recent linkages in Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Mexico and Latin America. These new partnerships have been profiled in information sessions and resources for Queen's students. A campaign to highlight and further promote the new partnerships will be launched Summer 2025.

Recommendations related to Application Timing: The timing of the application was reviewed; exchange applications across the university (with the exception of Smith Commerce) will all have the same deadline in January 2026. Students will be advised in outreach sessions to be mindful of the timelines for applications, advised to begin early with their research so that they can ask questions and receive answers long before the deadline. An information session for first year students who are thinking about exchange will be introduced Fall 2025, building on successful participation in Majors Night where there is high interest. This is also an opportunity to promote exchange for non-traditional destinations.

Recommendations related to Helping Students Prepare for Outbound Exchange: Continue to highlight resources for students in all information sessions. IPO Identity Abroad resources are now cross-referenced by each faculty international office. These resources will be also featured on the monitor display outside the IPO. Learning outcomes have been introduced for outbound student exchange, in collaboration with CTL. Classroom visits in select courses will be re-introduced in Fall 2025 to promote these resources to help students make informed decisions about outbound exchange locations and a specific workshop will be offered if there is student interest. Resources, specifically for international students considering an exchange, will be added with the assistance of QUIC. A post-study abroad module has been developed for release Fall 2025.

Recommendations related to engaging former international exchange students/community partners: The Peer Advisors program recruits racialized students to share their experiences on outbound exchange. Further work on these recommendations is being implemented (connecting prospective outbound students with students from that institution at Queen's) and should significantly enhance preparation for prospective outbound students, in consultations with university partners is underway.



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