# Academic Engagement of Recent Immigrant Adult Students (RIAS) in Postsecondary Education: A Case Study of Ontario Colleges and Universities

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Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
An agency of the Government of Ontario

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**Cite this publication in the following format:**
Lum, L. and Grabke, S. (2012). *Academic Engagement of Recent Immigrant Adult Students (RIAS) in Postsecondary Education: A Case Study of Ontario Colleges and Universities.* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Published by:

**The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many recent immigrant adult students (RIAS) are highly trained in their source countries and anticipate finding suitable employment upon arriving in Canada. (In this study, RIAS are defined as individuals over 24 years of age who have been living in Canada as permanent residents or citizens for less than 10 years.) There is mounting evidence, however, that in recent years the process of obtaining meaningful employment has become significantly more difficult for RIAS in particular. As a consequence, increasing numbers are turning to the Canadian postsecondary education (PSE) system to obtain more credentials and work experience as a means of gaining better access to employment. However, current research suggests that after entering universities and colleges, newcomers such as recent immigrants face a number of unexpected barriers to educational success, including lack of proficiency in either of Canada's official languages; non-recognition of foreign transcripts and prior work experience; financial constraints; and insufficient knowledge concerning how the Canadian PSE system operates. With increasing numbers of RIAS attending Ontario PSE institutions, there is growing concern that their learning needs may not be met, leading to decreased academic and employment success. Unfortunately, it appears that most PSE institutions have not identified RIAS as a group with unique learning needs. Academic success in PSE requires that students be fully engaged and that they have access to resources that enhance engagement. There is a paucity of research concerning the degree to which RIAS are engaged in both academic and non-academic components of Canadian PSE. Although all PSE institutions provide a variety of student services, there is no evidence that RIAS utilize them or that any particular benefits accrue in terms of promoting academic and social integration to even those RIAS who do use student services. This multi-institutional research study was conducted with the financial support of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). The study objectives included the following:

- developing a preliminary scale to measure RIAS engagement, consisting of academic and non-academic involvement in PSE,
- describing the demographic and institutional factors that influence RIAS engagement within their academic environment,
- identifying the unique immigration challenges of RIAS in PSE programs,
- identifying service needs and utilization patterns of RIAS, and
- developing recommendations for educational policy and service delivery changes within the Ontario PSE system.

The study also included exploration of the following research questions:

1. To what extent do RIAS become engaged with the academic community at the PSE institutions that they choose to attend?

2. What demographic and institutional factors influence their degree of academic engagement of RIAS?

The study was conducted in two phases:

- A survey was launched across five Ontario PSE institutions during the 2009/10 academic year. The goal was to capture the level of student engagement, along with the experiences, barriers and challenges of RIAS. In total, 426 participants who identified themselves as a RIAS completed the survey.

- A series of six focus groups were scheduled with participants who completed the survey, in order to gain further insights into some of the challenges that RIAS face. Fifty-six RIAS participated in the focus groups.

The participants in this study were mostly female (65 per cent), and 60 per cent of the total sample had prior education from their home countries. Fifty-nine per cent of the sample was enrolled in university programs in Ontario, and the remainder were enrolled in college programs. The majority (66 per cent) had resided in Canada for five years or less, and a majority also sought Canadian PSE as a means of entering the labour market.

To assess academic engagement, a RIAS academic engagement scale (RES) was developed and tested. RIAS were shown to be moderately engaged in the academic components of their education, but the ways in which they experienced academic engagement differed from the way non-RIAS PSE students experienced this engagement. RIAS academic engagement also changed over the course of the year, and based on the survey results, consisted of two dimensions: (1) improvement in English language ability and (2) perceived academic achievement. A third component, positive classroom experiences, was also demonstrated to have strong potential as an additional dimension of differences between the experiences of RIAS and non-RIAS students.

Several factors were identified by RIAS as creating challenges to academic success. These included having to balance academic and work demands, as well as meeting personal family responsibilities. During this study, the Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale – which had previously been tested on a non-student immigrant population – was demonstrated to be effective in measuring distress associated with the new immigrant experience. The major challenge to successful social integration was the lack of adequate English language skills. No significant institutional differences in student engagement or immigration distress were identified. Many RIAS reported more difficulties with the English language, and no significant differences were found between ethnic groups.

The qualitative research corroborated the themes identified in the survey phase of the study. Although RIAS were engaged with the academic components of PSE, they had minimal involvement with the larger college or university community. Additional issues that were raised included the desire to have more interaction with their professors, more discussion time in the classroom to review course material, and increased e-mail communication to ask questions not answered in class. RIAS also indicated that they would like more opportunities to build mentorship relationships with their teachers and to establish other social networks in order to increase their chances of employment in the future. In order to enhance their social integration skills, RIAS also cited the importance of having greater opportunities to form social networks

among themselves, which could take the form of the university or college providing club space or lounge space on campus for RIAS. More interaction with local students and multicultural groups was also identified as being important.

All the PSE institutions that participated in this study provided many types of student services, with most available for the general student population and a few specifically targeting immigrant students, but few, if any, focused on RIAS. This study illustrated the low degree of utilization of any of these services by RIAS, largely due to their lack of awareness that the services existed. In order for these services to be more beneficial, more institutional effort needs to be made to increase student awareness and utilization of them. Students participating in the study also cited improved language services and financial support as major priorities.

The study also identified some of the unique challenges experienced by RIAS and the different ways in which they perceive student engagement. Despite these challenges, the majority of RIAS saw themselves as achieving moderate levels of success within PSE. More research is needed to further develop the RES and to identify educational strategies designed to reduce the effects of distress associated with being RIAS with regard to their engagement both within the classroom and within the larger academic community. Student services, equivalent to those that are currently available to international students, need to be further developed in order to help RIAS to better integrate into Canadian PSE.

## INTRODUCTION

Many recent immigrant adult students (RIAS) are highly trained in their source countries and anticipate finding suitable employment upon arriving in Canada. There is mounting evidence, however, that the process of obtaining meaningful employment has become significantly more difficult. As a consequence, increasing numbers of new citizens are turning to the Canadian postsecondary education (PSE) system as a means of obtaining the required human and social capital (Anisef, Sweet, Adamuti-Trache & Walters, 2009; Anisef, Sweet & Frempong ,2003). Results from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) indicate that 67 per cent of recent adult immigrants show interest in further education. Although they did not originally intend to pursue PSE, obtaining a diploma or degree has become a popular means of acquiring credentials that are recognized in the Canadian labour market (LSIC, 2005). For unemployed immigrants, PSE participation might be the most important gateway to eventual social integration.

A positive response by PSE institutions is essential in helping these students make successful transitions, both within PSE institutions and within Canadian society at large. While institutional responses are important to consider in exploring educational experiences among recent immigrants, it is also crucial to examine other structural dimensions that facilitate or impede social inclusion – such as gender, visible minority status, language proficiency and the availability of organizational resources. Despite the fact that institutions noticed increasing numbers of RIAS enrolled in PSE as a result of participating in this study, there is growing concern that their learning needs are not being met. Preliminary research findings suggest that after entering universities and colleges, newcomers face a number of unexpected barriers to educational success, including the following: lack of official language proficiency; non-

recognition of foreign transcripts and prior work experience; financial constraints; and insufficient knowledge concerning how Canadian PSE operates (Anisef, Sweet, Admuti-Trache, & Walters, 2009). Taken together, these factors create a context that may be unfavourable to full academic engagement.

Academic success in PSE requires that students be fully engaged and that they have access to resources that enhance engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2006). Academic success at the PSE level has been attributed to many factors, but the factor cited most frequently is student engagement or involvement. Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). This is based on the premise that consistent involvement with specific academic activities will lead to improved learning. The very act of being engaged also often contributes to a productive and satisfying life following graduation. Kuh (2003, p. 4) proposes that students who are involved in educationally productive activities during their PSE "develop habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development." The current Canadian and American research on minority and immigrant PSE students reveals an incomplete picture of their academic experiences. There is also little known about how RIAS view academic engagement or about the factors that may influence their academic success. This research focuses on gaining a better understanding of the perceptions of RIAS and the associated challenges – from initial enrolment to successful completion of their educational programs. It is crucial for these students to learn in an environment where they are not marginalized because of limitations that are common to many of them, such as their imperfect language skills or a lack of understanding of Canadian culture.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study examined the degree to which RIAS are engaged in two types of PSE (college and university) in Ontario. For the purposes of this study, engagement is conceptualized as an active process, consisting of student involvement with their learning experiences, which is also influenced by institutional and demographic factors. This perspective is consistent with the current literature on student engagement. RIAS are enrolled in both colleges and universities, with a preference for colleges (Anisef, Sweet, Admuti-Trache, & Walters, 2009). Ontario colleges offer many programs, centres, and services specifically designed to help immigrants. They also offer a variety of applied training and co-op/internship placements and are more likely to educate students for specific jobs. This approach helps immigrants find employment opportunities shortly after graduation. Universities offer education in broad transferable skills but not usually specific training for employment. Although some universities have started to offer more bridging programs for internationally educated professionals, few programs are tailored to adult immigrants. Student engagement alone cannot predict the long-term integration of immigrant students or their employment outcomes, but it *can* offer students the opportunity to learn and benefit from social interactions within the micro-community of an academic institution. The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

- To what extent do RIAS become engaged with the academic community at the PSE institutions that they choose to attend?

- What demographic and institutional factors influence their degree of academic engagement?

Specific *project objectives* included the following:

- developing a preliminary scale to measure RIAS engagement, consisting of academic and non-academic involvement in PSE,
- describing the demographic and institutional factors that influence RIAS engagement within their academic environment,
- identifying the unique immigration challenges of RIAS in PSE programs,
- identifying service needs and utilization patterns of RIAS, and
- developing recommendations for educational policy and service delivery changes within the Ontario PSE system.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the report provides a brief overview of the literature discussing historical and current conceptualizations of student engagement in North American PSE. The objective of the review was to identify whether the literature provides any insights into the needs of non-traditional students, such as RIAS. (Kasworm [2003] defines "traditional students" as young, middle-class, full-time, and typically Caucasian students.) The review revealed differing views of student engagement, which have evolved over time. Despite the dramatic increase in the enrolment of non-traditional students in PSE, there is a paucity of literature discussing the unique needs of these students. The current review provided the conceptual foundation for the development of a non-traditional model of student engagement and a survey instrument designed to measure it.

## Understanding Student Engagement in PSE

The concept of student engagement is not new and has been extensively discussed in the educational literature in North America throughout the past three decades. Concepts similar to student engagement were identified by Pace, Chickering and Gamson in the 1980s. The concept of "quality of effort" – which came from research into student outcomes from higher education – was proposed by Pace in 1980 (see Pace, 1980). He suggested that quality of effort and educational activity in relation to specific aspects of the educational experience are related. While institutions can provide resources and conditions that give students opportunities to learn, learning is dependent on students making use of such opportunities. The provision of resources is thus necessary, but not sufficient, for learning. While institutions are accountable for providing learning opportunities, the ultimate responsibility for learning rests on the students. The "seven principles of good practice" in undergraduate education came to be among the most widely cited concerning higher education pedagogy (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991) as the focus shifted

from the individual student to include teacher activity. Unlike the "quality of effort" theory noted above, the seven principles focus on actions and conditions that can be brought about by staff and institutions. These include specific educational activities, such as the following: encouraging student-faculty contact, encouraging cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations and respecting diverse talents. It is readily evident that all of these activities might be important to student engagement.

During the past decade, the organizational perspective on student engagement was also introduced. The continued interest in engagement has its roots in a long-held concern about the linkages between institutional resources and educational quality (Coates, 2006) and about the expansion of American campuses and growing questions about their continued effectiveness in creating engaging learning environments. Researchers have focused on student engagement because it represents aspects of student behaviour and institutional performance that can be modified by PSE institutions, whereas many other factors – such as the pre-college characteristics of students – are typically beyond the direct control of either the student or the PSE institution (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek, 2006). High levels of student engagement tend to be associated with a wide range of educational practices and conditions, including purposeful student-faculty contact, active and collaborative learning, and institutional environments perceived by students as inclusive and affirming, where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayaek (2006). The organizational model recognized the complex interaction between students, their learning environment and educational outcomes.

## Defining Student Engagement

The way in which student success, often equated with student engagement, has been defined and studied has also evolved over time. The literature reveals a multitude of approaches to this subject, where higher education researchers attribute success to variables ranging from student background characteristics (e.g., demographics and pre-college academic performance) to the quality of interaction with faculty, student services and peers (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2006). The exploration of student engagement can be traced to the following three key studies, each emphasizing different elements:

1. One of the most widely cited theorists examining student engagement, Tinto (1987, 1993) proposes that successful academic and social integration are primary factors in student decisions to persist with or withdraw from college. According to Tinto (1993), student involvement is essential for integration into the college environment, and integration increases the likelihood of persistence. Therefore, Tinto's definition of student engagement includes broader concepts of social and cultural factors within the learning environment, but he also argued that engagement would involve assimilation into a new culture.
2. A model developed by Astin (1984) takes into account the effect of various institutional practices and environmental characteristics on student engagement. While acknowledging the importance of personal motivation, Astin (1984) was more concerned with the active participation of students and the energy they invest in their

college experience. The notion of "involvement" was part of a broader perspective, and education was viewed as a service, rather than an industrial production line. The industrial analogy breaks down, he argued, because institutions do not produce students in the same way that factories produce products. Coates (2006) challenged Astin's concept of engagement. Coates argued that students arrive at institutions as fully functioning people and, while they may be influenced by their college experience, they are not produced like a manufactured product (2006). He argued, in contrast, that education can be better understood using a service model. According to this perspective, education is a process of receiving individuals and providing a service intended to enhance or add value to their experience as those individuals learn by interacting with educational activities.

3. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defines student engagement as the "time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (as cited in President's Commission on Student Engagement and Experience, 2006, p. 7).

More recently, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayaek (2006, p. 44) stated that student engagement contains two critical features: student involvement and institutional responses. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation. Although engagement researchers have employed diverse terminology to describe their definitions of engagement, they share the same view that student success is influenced by the nature of their involvement in university and college.

The strength of these relationships is not always consistent in the research, because a student who has limited student engagement may nevertheless receive a high GPA. However, most of the literature reported a positive relationship between engagement and enhanced academic abilities, school performance and persistence rates among students (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 186).

Overall, student engagement is a broad phenomenon that encompasses students' in-class and out-of-class experiences and continues to evolve, based on the changing needs of student populations. It has been linked with issues concerning belonging, motivation and community, as well as with the finances and pragmatics of student learning. Other definitions of engagement include the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes (Coates, 2006). A review of the literature illustrates that the concept of student engagement contains multiple factors. More recently, educational researchers and theorists have interpreted student engagement in more complex and multifaceted ways, most likely as a result of the increased challenges in providing effective PSE in North America.

## Student Engagement: The Adult Immigrant Perspective

Much of the literature on student engagement presents a unitary model of involvement that cannot be seamlessly applied to non-traditional students such as adult immigrants. This research gap is reflected in policy recommendations that ignore non-traditional students as well. As with most adult learners and minority students, the circumstances of immigrant students differ in many ways that are not accounted for in conventional engagement or student success models. The engagement literature concerning minority students may provide insight into the experiences of recent immigrant students, given that the majority of recent immigrants to Canada are from ethnic and racial minorities outside of Canada. In fact, according to the 2001 Census, three-quarters (73 per cent) of immigrants who arrived in the 1990s were from visible minority groups, though for the purposes of this study, the term "minority" includes RIAS from both visible and non-visible minorities.

A bicultural model of engagement, in which students are competent in navigating both their native and North American institutional cultures (especially those that affirm their cultural identities) is therefore desirable for immigrant students, as it is for minority students. Guiffrida (2006) emphasizes the importance of "home social systems" (families, friends and other members of their home communities) in the lives of minority students, especially with regard to the maintenance of cultural identity (p. 457). Work on adult and minority student participation, coupled with literature on newcomers, is useful in understanding the ways immigrant students experience their postsecondary studies. In Canada, adult immigrant students enrolled in PSE possess unique characteristics, different from those of traditional students. Many immigrants who seek postsecondary training have already completed a degree in their source country, such as the large proportion of immigrants who responded to the LSIC and declared an intention to pursue further schooling despite holding a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2005a, p. 24). Thus, many of these students are older than traditional postsecondary students (i.e., the 18-24 age cohort) at the time of immigration and can themselves be considered adult learners.

Other characteristics shared by immigrant and adult learners include family responsibilities, off-campus residences and employment, and social networks outside the PSE institution (Kasworm, 2003; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The pattern of campus involvement among immigrant students thus tends to closely mirror that of other adult learners, where outside communities are the primary locus of social interaction, health care, counselling, etc. Moreover, time spent on campus engaging with fellow students, faculty and campus services may have a primarily academic focus for immigrant students in the same way that it does for adult learners.

Differences between immigrant students and traditionally underserved groups stem in part from the fact that immigrant students possess a "dual frame of reference," whereas non-immigrant minorities generally do not. The former can compare whatever struggles they face in their host country to the often more difficult conditions "back home," while the latter have no such opportunity and often lack hope that their circumstances will improve (Ogbu, 1991, p. 11). Immigrant students possess a stronger sense of personal agency and tend to interpret economic, political and social barriers as temporary difficulties that can be surmounted through their own efforts, especially through education in the host country. They attribute barriers to employment to their status as "foreigners," language deficiency or foreign credentials (ibid.).

Gibson (1993) explains that schools are seen by immigrants as being "one arena where minorities have the opportunity to compete on a more or less equal footing with members of the majority group regardless of family background" (p. 361). Immigrants tend to view educational participation as providing a means to social integration.

Variances in cultural identity frameworks among minority groups can inform their approach to education. Non-immigrant minority youth can hold the view that "school learning and the acquisition of proficiency in the dominant language and culture symbolize behaving like those who have historically oppressed them" (Gibson, 1993, p. 366). They can also feel pressured by their peers to resist engagement in school. Conversely, immigrants do not feel compelled to choose between school success or group loyalty; they do not perceive educational engagement as a threat to their identity or culture but instead view it as enhancing their ability to participate in mainstream society, as well as in their own community (Ogbu, 1991, p. 7). Ogbu (1991) characterizes this divergence in approach as follows: "the immigrants see the cultural/language differences as barriers to be overcome in order to achieve their long-range goals of employment, good wages and other benefits, rather than as *markers of social identity to be maintained*" (p. 20, italics his).

In contrast, Cummins (1997) is critical of Ogbu's dichotomous characterization of voluntary and involuntary minorities. He points to the research of Brathwaite and James (1996), for example, finding that African-Canadian immigrant students experience high dropout rates and, on average, lower levels of academic success despite holding high aspirations (Cummins, 1997, p. 412). Although he contends that Ogbu's model should not be taken as a rigid distinction, it can be useful if perceived of in dynamic terms that allow for the incorporation of socioeconomic factors where relevant. The model is especially constructive if "conceived of as a theoretical construct that highlights important patterns of how power relations operating in the broader society find their way into the structures and operations of schooling" (ibid., p. 413).

In summary, work by Gibson and Ogbu comparing immigrant and non-immigrant minorities implies that the worldview held by many immigrants enables newcomer students to adopt attitudes and strategies that are conducive to success in school. While non-immigrant minorities may not apply the same approach to educational engagement due to their distinct perceptions of their relationship to the mainstream, both groups must contend with an institutional culture that may be at odds with their own. In order to achieve postsecondary success, it is important for both groups to maintain a connection to their native culture through engagement with family and community or through programs that affirm their ethnic identities.

The literature suggests that an immigrant's positive view of education – as discussed by Gibson and Ogbu – appears to be relevant to RIAS. Anisef, Sweet, Admuti-Trache, & Walters (2009) concluded that having recent PSE education promotes long-term successful employment outcomes for adult immigrants. Despite this, little is known about the immediate challenges of adjusting to student life in a new country and its effect on RIAS academic performance. The literature has predominantly highlighted the economic perspectives of labour market integration without addressing the role of education. Some attention to this issue can be found in psychology research concerning the settlement experiences of adult immigrants to the United

States, and some of these results may also have relevance for RIAS who have characteristics similar to those who were the subjects of these previous studies.

Demographic and migration factors such as age, gender, education and employment have previously been demonstrated to affect the economic adaptation of immigrants (Ferrer and Riddell, 2008). Aroian, Norris and Chiang (2003) concluded that immigrants experience greater degrees of psychological distress than their local counterparts and that women do so to an even larger extent than men. Recent immigrants – and those who were unemployed and older – were found to be more vulnerable. Factors that contributed to distress included gender-role changes, employment outside of the home and increased autonomy in decision making. Aroian, Norris, Tran and Schappler-Morris (1998) proposed that successful adaptation to the experience of immigration (or coming to feel at home in the resettlement country) involved the dual task of mastering resettlement conditions and resolving losses left in the homeland.

### Conclusion

The preceding review of the literature indicates that the concept of student engagement in PSE organizations has been studied over several decades in North America. Despite the widespread use of student engagement measures as an indicator of organizational effectiveness, there is growing recognition that these measures may not adequately reflect the needs of an increasingly internationalized student body. Lerer and Talley (2010) concluded that the NSSE benchmarks, at least in the American PSE context, fail to address the unique characteristics of non-traditional students such as mature adults and immigrant students. Nor do they explore the institution's ability to address their needs. They suggested that the educational goals of non-traditional students cannot be ignored in light of the dramatic increase in the numbers of students who enroll part-time or who are adults and/or of multinational backgrounds.

This conclusion could be similarly applied to the Canadian PSE system. The literature concerning the ways in which being a recent immigrant impacts student engagement and ultimately academic success in PSE has been limited. Although some references were identified that discussed the needs of international students, the educational experiences of RIAS in Canada have not been explored. In addition, there are no reliable student engagement measures that specifically address the needs of these non-traditional students. This study seeks to incorporate key findings from the immigrant and settlement literature in the development of a new measure of student engagement for this particular population.

## METHODOLOGY

This research study utilized both quantitative and qualitative measures to gain an in-depth understanding of RIAS' perceptions of student engagement and to identify factors that may influence their degree of success within PSE. The first phase included a survey designed to develop objective measures of RIAS academic and non-academic engagement and to identify factors that may influence their levels of engagement. The second phase included a series of focus groups that provided an opportunity for survey participants to further discuss their PSE experiences.

This section of the report provides a description of specific methods used for the collection and analyses of both the quantitative and the qualitative data. A discussion of the results is included in subsequent sections of the report.

## Survey Phase

Survey data were collected from September 2009 to June 2010 in Toronto, Ontario, and the total sample consisted of 426 participants. The survey targeted multicultural and multidisciplinary RIAS currently enrolled in three types of educational programs:

1. college diploma programs,
2. general university degree programs and
3. specialized professional bridging programs.

Selection criteria for study participants included the following:

1. enrolled, on either a full-time or a part-time basis, in an undergraduate university or community college program in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA),
2. 24 years or older,
3. landed immigrants, permanent residents or Canadian citizens and
4. resident in Canada for no longer than 10 years as either a permanent resident or a citizen.

International students were excluded, since the focus of the study was on new adult immigrants who were either citizens, permanent residents or landed immigrants. International students are usually temporary residents, tend to be younger than RIAS and have access to targeted services, for which they pay additional fees. Despite the fact that many RIAS may already possess some PSE credentials from their source countries, their service needs are most likely to be greatest within undergraduate programs, because of their unfamiliarity with the Canadian PSE system. All graduate students have access to a greater number of specific services designed for their academic needs – services which are generally not available to undergraduates – so RIAS enrolled in graduate programs were also excluded from this study.

Participants were recruited using several methods. Posters and newspaper advertisements were circulated to student clubs and key campus sites, inviting RIAS to participate in the study. Recruitment was also carried out by visiting classes that were most populated by RIAS. The response to both methods was minimal. The most effective method was to recruit from a sample of RIAS that had been identified by each of the participating institutions. Each PSE institution participating in the study identified varying numbers of RIAS, and the largest group of RIAS was located at one of the universities. The numbers may not accurately reflect the exact numbers present at each of the sites, since the students were not required to self-identify, and they were difficult to locate within existing institutional databases.

An eligible partial sample of 2,500 full-time adult immigrant students was invited to participate in the study via e-mail. The students were then sent two additional follow-up and reminder e-mails about their potential participation in the study. RIAS were asked to attend a one-hour meeting to complete a structured, self-administered questionnaire (Appendix A). Demographic data were

collected using survey items previously developed for a study of internationally educated professionals enrolled in bridging education programs in Toronto (Lum, Bradley, & Rasheed, 2011). The instrument is found in Section 1 of the survey in Appendix A.

The data was collected in person, in order to ensure a higher response rate and a greater degree of questionnaire completions. This method can also "provide the researchers an opportunity to help explain or clarify particular items or study purpose" (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 430). Many of the participants required assistance in interpreting the instructions for completing the questionnaire, as well as explanations of the terminology. Participation in the study was voluntary, although a $20 honorarium was offered to assist with the cost of local travel.

### Focus Group Phase

Follow-up focus groups were conducted to further explore some of the themes arising from the survey. Participants were recruited from the original sample of RIAS who had completed the survey. Approximately half the sample indicated interest in participating in face-to-face focus groups. All of these participants received e-mail notices inviting them to participate. Voluntary participation was emphasized, and each participant received $25. The original sample consisted of RIAS who were represented by students of both gender and from a variety of countries. Six focus groups (three university and three college) were conducted, with a total of 56 RIAS (25 university and 31 college participants). The audiotaped focus groups were conducted by two trained research associates over a period of 90 minutes each, and they were conducted in June and July 2010 across the five PSE institutions as follows:

- University A – 9 participants
- University B – 7 participants
- University C – 9 participants
- College A – 7 participants
- College B – 8 participants
- College C – 10 participants

The focus group questions attempted to explore the experiences of RIAS regarding specific thematic issues, including the following:

- students' experiences of student engagement, if any, in their countries of origin and in Ontario;
- past and current academic achievement;
- the socioeconomic, cultural, racial and gender contexts in which they were living at the time of the focus group discussions;
- what it means to be an RIAS participating in PSE; and
- perceptions of their academic service needs.

The focus group questions and demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Analyses of the focus group data were conducted using the following procedure. A constant comparison method was used to develop a comprehensive and systematic coding scheme across the focus group narratives. White and Marsh (2006) suggest that the researcher should read through the narratives and scrutinize them closely to identify concepts and patterns. Some patterns and concepts may emerge that had not been expected but are, nevertheless, important to consider. In reading through the narratives, key phrases and text segments that correspond with the research objectives are often identified. But in addition, other phrases that seemed important, unexpected and similar are compared with existing categories and constructs that emerged during the focus group discussions. The overall research process may suggest new questions that were not anticipated at the beginning of the analysis.

In this study, the major themes were organized under the broad heading of "Challenges to Student Engagement," and Nvivo (v. 9), a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to code the text and identify key words and develop thematic codes. Themes focused primarily on academic integration issues, age and adult student differences, poor awareness of services, barriers to understanding a new educational system and barriers related to understanding Canadian PSE practices. Although the thematic codes have been separated for the purposes of preparing this report, it is important to emphasize that RIAS – like all students – experience student engagement holistically and that these themes must therefore be interpreted from a holistic perspective. In order to avoid imposing filters on the data, the participants' speech and grammar were not modified. This would also have imposed an academic lens onto the narratives of the participants (Markham, 2005).

# SURVEY RESULTS

## Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

The sample of survey respondents consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in five Ontario PSE institutions. The response rate varied from institution to institution, and the college response rate was considerably higher than the rate for universities (see Table 1). The reported response rate does not accurately reflect the actual numbers of RIAS who were enrolled in these institutions; the actual enrollment may have been higher, but this information was not available at all sites. The table highlights the number of individuals contacted and how many responded from each of the five institutions. The overall response rate, that is, the weighted average response for both colleges and universities students was 18 per cent.

**Table 1**
**Samples of RIAS participants studying PSE institutions**

| PSE Institution | Number of RIAS Contacted | Number of Participants | Response Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| University A | 1,500 | 148 | 10% |
| University B | 200 | 103 | 52% |
| **University sample** | **1,700** | **251** | **15%** |
| College A | 80 | 64 | 80% |
| College B | 150 | 80 | 53% |
| College C | 100 | 31 | 31% |
| **College sample** | **330** | **175** | **53%** |
| **Total** | **2,030** | **426** | **18%** |

*Although 2,500 students were eligible to participate, only 2,030 were contacted within the sampling timeframe.

As shown in Table 2, the RIAS sample was dominated by 65 per cent who were female and had emigrated from Asian (South Asian, Southeast Asian and West Asian) countries. (A more complete breakdown by geographic region is provided in Appendix B.) Approximately half the respondents (53 per cent) were married. In addition (not shown in Table 2), the age of participants ranged from 24 to 53 years, with the average being 33 years of age.

Participants' residency period in Canada ranged from being new arrivals up to the 10-year limit for eligibility to participate in the study. Of those, two-thirds (66 per cent) had resided in Canada for 5 years or less, with the majority of these being from the community college sample. The average length of residency in Canada for the total sample was 54 months. The annual household income of the participants ($n$ = 282) who completed this question ranged from less than $10,000 to more than $100,000. One third of participants reported an income below $20,000. An overview of many of the demographic characteristics for each type of PSE institution is displayed in Table 2.

The highly multicultural nature of the current population of students in Toronto PSE institutions is reflected in this sample, with participants having immigrated to Canada from a variety of geographic regions and countries (see Appendix C). The country of origin variable was created using an approach similar to those used in obtaining Canadian Census data and the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC). Country of origin was grouped as Asian, European, African and "Other," in order to accommodate some of the small numbers of participants from individual countries. Appendix C provides a description of the different regions and source countries.

Participants from Asian countries made up 64 per cent of the sample, while the second-largest groups of RIAS originated from Europe (14 per cent), Africa (12 per cent) and Caribbean and Latin American countries (9 per cent).

**Table 2**
**Demographic characteristics of respondents**

| Characteristic | College Respondents | University Respondents | Total* | %** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 123 | 153 | 276 | 65% |
| Male | 53 | 97 | 150 | 35% |
| Single | 27 | 130 | 157 | 37% |
| Married | 127 | 97 | 224 | 53% |
| Other (divorced, sep.) | 22 | 21 | 43 | 10% |
| Age (average 33 yrs.) | 135 | 164 | 299 | 70% |
| **Region of origin: Non-Asian** | 49 | 103 | 152 | 36% |
| European | 33 | 28 | 61 | 14% |
| African | 45 | 6 | 51 | 12% |
| Caribbean and Latin American | 16 | 26 | 42 | 10% |
| **Region of origin: Asian** | 127 | 145 | 272 | 64% |
| South Asian | 19 | 19 | 38 | 11% |
| Southeast Asian | 90 | 91 | 181 | 42% |
| West Asian | 36 | 17 | 53 | 12% |
| **Time in Canada:** | | | | |
| a. 5 years or less | 136 | 146 | 282 | 66% |
| b. 6 to10 years | 39 | 103 | 142 | 33% |

* Number of total responses varied due to missing data.
** Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

### *Previous Education*

RIAS who responded to the survey were enrolled in a variety of academic programs. They also tended to identify themselves as an academically successful group, since the majority self-reported achieving A and B grades in their programs. Most participants (90 per cent) also anticipated completing their degree or diploma successfully. The majority of the sample reported having educational credentials from their source country. Over 60 per cent of the total respondents had completed some education beyond high school and obtained a diploma or baccalaureate degree. A smaller number had graduate degrees. The majority of those who had a graduate degree – a master's degree in particular – were found in the college sub-sample. Table 3 displays the highest level of educational preparation for both the college and the university students who participated in the study.

**Table 3**
**Highest level of education from source country**

| Description | College | University | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High school or equivalent | 11 | 65 | 76 | 18% |
| Some trade/vocational (no diploma) | 9 | 10 | 19 | 4% |
| Trade/Vocational certificate | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1% |
| Apprenticeship certificate | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0% |
| Non-university certificate or diploma from a college, school of nursing, technical institute or other such educational institute | 23 | 25 | 48 | 11% |
| University transfer program | 1 | 7 | 8 | 2% |
| University certificate or diploma below bachelor's degree | 20 | 13 | 33 | 8% |
| Bachelor's degree | 60 | 52 | 112 | 26% |
| University certificate above bachelor's degree | 6 | 0 | 6 | 1% |
| First professional degree (medicine, veterinary medicine, dental, optometry, law, divinity) | 1 | 8 | 9 | 2% |
| Master's degree | 33 | 12 | 45 | 11% |
| PhD | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1% |
| Other | 5 | 52 | 57 | 13% |
| Total* | 176 | 249 | 425 | 100% |

* *N* = 425 due to missing data.

### *Enrolment Status*

While the majority of the participants were enrolled in their program part-time, there was a significant difference between those in college and those in university. Of the college students, only 36 per cent were studying full-time – in comparison to 63 per cent of the university students. Some of the college participants (22 students) were enrolled in the part-time ESL program in preparation for entering their program. It is not possible to investigate whether these differences were due to the program of study, as only half of the participants completed that survey question.

### *Self-Reported English Language Ability*

Participants in the survey self-reported on their English language skills, which included reading, writing and speaking. On a scale where 1 = poorly and 4 = very well, students indicated that their reading skills in English were significantly better than their writing skills. On a scale where 1 = I am never understood to 5 = I am always understood, participants scored their speaking skills much higher than either their reading or writing skills. Their perceived differences in language ability did not appear to be influenced by the amount of time spent in Canada.

**Table 4**
**Self-reported English language abilities**

| | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| How well can you read in English? | 3.35 | 0.72 |
| How well can you write in English? | 2.85 | 0.89 |
| How well are you understood when speaking English? | 4.14 | 0.71 |
| English Language Total | 3.44 | 0.62 |

*N* = 423; SD is usually reported with mean scores to provide information about the degree of variability of responses.

Table 4 highlights the fact that, overall, students report being competent in their reading, writing and speaking skills. For each category, the standard deviation is less than 1, suggesting that the students were relatively homogeneous in terms of their perceived language ability. However, these results were based on students' perception of their English language abilities, not on the results derived from a standardized test.

### *English Language Training*

In addition, to self-report data on English language comprehension, the survey asked RIAS participants about the sources, both formal and informal, of their English language training. Students were able to choose multiple options, and overall, only 6 per cent reported that they had no formal or informal English language training (see Table 5).

**Table 5**
**Sources of formal and informal English language training**

| | Yes |
|---|---|
| Learned English speaking with friends, neighbours, etc. | 57% |
| I taught myself using books, tapes, CDs, etc. | 49% |
| English was taught as part of my education or certification program | 48% |
| ESL classes (English as a Second Language) | 48% |
| I took specific English classes in my home country | 33% |
| Completed higher education/postsecondary education in English | 30% |
| LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) | 25% |
| I completed my primary and secondary schooling in English | 25% |
| None | 6% |
| ELT (Enhanced Language Training) programs | 3% |
| Sector Specific Technical Language (STLC) programs | 0% |

*N* = 426

In general, most students had some formal and informal English language training, either prior to their arrival or while in Canada. The degree to which these sources have prepared them for academic, professional and social interactions in their postsecondary institutions is less clear. There was no difference in responses between RIAS who had resided in Canada for 5 years or less and for those who had lived here for 5 to 10 years.

### *Summary*

In summary, the survey sample represented a group of RIAS who were predominantly female adult students with prior education who had settled in Canada with their families within the previous 10 years. They had emigrated from a variety of countries, but the largest groups were of Asian background and, in particular, from countries in Southeast Asia. University RIAS tended to have enrolled in full-time studies, whereas college RIAS were largely part-time. Most of the students perceived themselves to be proficient with the English language as a result of both formal and informal language training.

## Academic and Non-Academic Activities

This study also examined some of the daily academic, professional, personal and social habits of RIAS. Table 6 indicates that most RIAS spend a significant amount of time preparing for class, including studying, commuting to class and – time permitting – socializing outside of class. It appears that few are working, and most are not involved in community activities or events. This helps to create a snapshot of a RIAS student's typical week.

**Table 6**
**Hours spent by RIAS on academic and non-academic activities**

| | 0 Hrs | 1-10 | 11-20 | 21-30 | 30+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preparing for class | 0% | 28% | 31% | 22% | 17% |
| Working for pay on campus | 66% | 6% | 2% | 2% | 1% |
| Working for pay off campus | 45% | 11% | 12% | 8% | 8% |
| How many hours night shift | 48% | 11% | 8% | 3% | 4% |
| Commuting to class | 5% | 71% | 19% | 2% | 1% |
| Relaxing and socializing | 7% | 68% | 19% | 4% | 1% |
| Providing care for children or dependents | 24% | 21% | 19% | 19% | 12% |
| Participating in co-curricular activities | 59% | 26% | 3% | % | 0% |
| Volunteer work | 64% | 21% | 2% | 0% | 0% |
| Religious activities | 52% | 35% | 2% | 0% | 1% |
| Cultural activities | 58% | 29% | 0% | 0% | 1% |
| Involvement in the community | 59% | 28% | 1% | 0% | 0% |

*N* = 426

### *Summary*

Major weekly activities consisted of four types: preparing for class, commuting, socializing and caring for others. All of the RIAS reported preparing for class, but the amount of time spent varied considerably. Some spent 6 hours or less per week, and others spent more than 30 hours per week. The majority (84 per cent) spent 1 to 15 hours commuting each week. Sixty-eight per cent spent 1 to 10 hours a week relaxing and socializing, and a few spent between 11 and 30 hours. For some (30 per cent), caring for others occupied 16 to 30 hours or more. Approximately 80 per cent spent less than 6 hours a week on external social activities such as co-curricular, volunteering, religious, cultural and community involvement. RIAS participation outside of the classroom and involvement in the outside community appears to be limited.

### *Challenges to Academic Success*

Identifying the major barriers to RIAS's academic and personal success was another objective of this study. These challenges include those that have both a direct and an indirect impact on RIAS's ability to succeed in their studies. The majority of the sample reported experiencing at least three academic challenges, which concerned managing competing personal and academic demands, financial and time constraints, and caring for family. Balancing school and other commitments and personal family responsibilities were most commonly cited. Costs associated with being a student, time devoted to paid employment and lack of confidence, as well as providing care for dependents, were reported less frequently than concerns with balancing personal and academic responsibilities. The types and frequency of challenges experienced by college and university RIAS are displayed in both Table 7 and Figure 1.

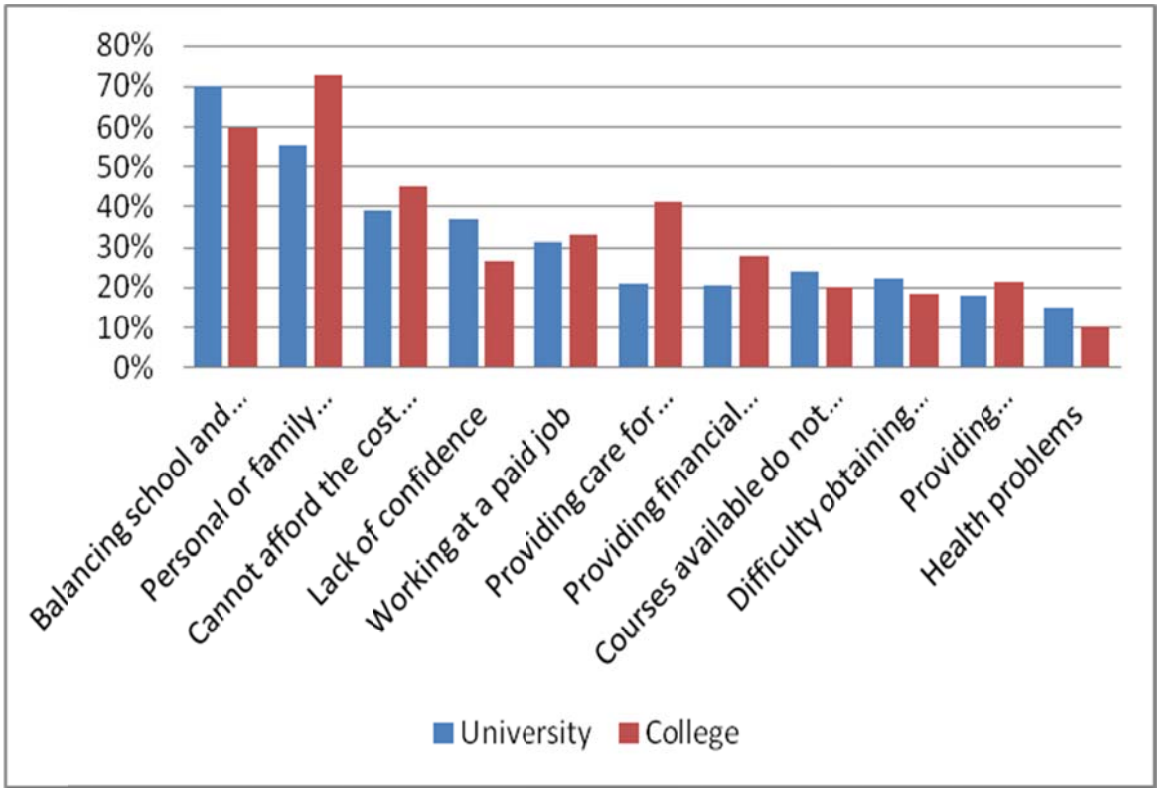
**Table 7**
**Frequency of commonly reported academic challenges**

| | University | College | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Balancing school and other commitments | 176 (70%) | 105 (60%) | 281 (66%) |
| Personal or family responsibilities | 140 (56%) | 128 (73%) | 268 (63%) |
| Cannot afford the cost of tuition/books/computer | 98 (39%) | 79 (45%) | 177 (42%) |
| Lack of confidence | 92 (37%) | 47 (27%) | 139 (33%) |
| Working at a paid job | 82 (33%) | 57 (33%) | 139 (33%) |
| Providing care for dependents in Canada | 53 (21%) | 73 (41%) | 126 (30%) |
| Providing financial support for dependents in Canada | 52 (20%) | 47(27%) | 99 (23%) |
| Courses available do not match my needs | 58 (23%) | 34 (19%) | 92 (22%) |
| Difficulty obtaining student loans such as OSAP or other loans | 57 (23%) | 32 (18%) | 89 (21%) |
| Providing financial and social support for family back in my country | 45 (18%) | 36 (20%) | 81 (19%) |
| Personal health problems | 35 (14%) | 18 (10%) | 53 (12%) |

*N* = 420

RIAS experience some of the common challenges of being PSE students, but Table 7 and Figure 1 illustrate that they also have additional challenges. There also appears to be no significant difference in the experience of college and university students. The major challenges for RIAS included struggling with both personal/family responsibilities and balancing school commitments – a very difficult position that few of the more "traditional" students experienced. These challenges may be more acute in light of the fact that RIAS have additional family responsibilities associated with being new immigrants and facing settlement issues. These results also point to the fact that, in order to be successful, RIAS need to gain a better understanding of the new academic and social systems in which they are engaged, as well as becoming aware of the academic expectations and expected workloads in their PSE programs.

**Figure 1**
**Differences in challenges reported by college and university students**



***Data for Graph:***

| | University | College |
|---|---|---|
| Balancing school and other commitments | 70% | 60% |
| Courses available do not match my needs | 23% | 19% |
| Lack of confidence | 37% | 27% |
| Cannot afford the cost of tuition/books/computer | 39% | 45% |
| Difficulty obtaining student loans such as OSAP or other loans | 23% | 18% |
| Personal health problems | 14% | 10% |
| Working at a paid job | 33% | 32% |
| Providing financial and social support for family back in my country | 18% | 20% |
| Providing care for dependents in Canada | 21% | 41% |
| Providing financial support for dependents in Canada | 20% | 28% |
| Personal or family responsibilities | 56% | 73% |
| Other | 17% | 11% |

### *Summary*

RIAS are enrolled in a broad range of academic programs within the Ontario PSE system, at both colleges and universities. The majority of these students have had prior experience with equivalent PSE education in their home countries, and college students tend to possess more graduate education than university students. The greatest challenge to achieving academic success for both college and university RIAS appears to be related to balancing the demands of being a student and meeting personal or family obligations.

## RIAS Student Engagement Measures

A third objective of the study was to examine the engagement levels of RIAS, using both traditional measures and measures developed specifically for this population. Since there are few, if any, pre-existing scales that measure RIAS engagement in particular, new scales were constructed for this study. Student engagement was conceptualized to include both academic dimensions (such as classroom experiences) and non-academic dimensions (such as participation in the broader academic and local community).Although the NSSE instrument does contain questions about students' citizenship and ethnicity, no distinction is made between RIAS and those who have resided in Canada for longer periods. In addition to questions concerning student engagement and service use, other questions in the instrument employed in this study were adapted to assess the unique perspectives of RIAS. These new scales consist of questions derived from relevant and reliable pre-existing scales, such as the NSSE (2005), the International Student Involvement Scale developed by Grayson (2008) and the educational section of the LSIC (2005) for items pertaining to education and English language skills.

## Traditional Student Engagement Measures

The participants were asked questions typical of those found in engagement surveys of university and college students across North America. These 19 items were designed on a four-point Likert scale, where 1 = Never and 4 = Very often. To investigate whether the survey items could be reduced to two constructs, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Analyses of these items were performed using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation. Initial attempts to develop a clear factor structure were not successful, as the items did not load cleanly, and identifiable factors were not evident. Four iterations of the factors analysis were conducted, each one dropping the item with the lowest communality, and this eventually resulted in a five-factor structure. However, when internal consistency analysis was conducted on these factors, only one of the five resulted in a Cronbach's alpha value over 0.70. Considering the challenges in developing a factor structure, the number of items that were dropped and the low internal consistency of resulting factors, it became impossible to use the items in a condensed form. The inability to convert these items into NSSE-like items supports the finding that RIAS's experience of "student engagement" may not be the same as typical North American college and university students.

Table 8 shows descriptive statistics for all 19 items – from the highest- to the lowest-scoring items. The data reveal the elements of the educational experience in which students participated the most and the least.

**Table 8**
**Academic and campus engagement items**

| Items | Mean (/4.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas | 3.23 | 0.89 |
| Used e-mail or other electronic means to communicate | 3.02 | 0.89 |
| Worked with other students on projects during class | 2.90 | 0.92 |
| Put together ideas or concepts from different courses | 2.89 | 0.91 |
| Worked harder than you thought you could to meet standards | 2.88 | 0.89 |
| Used an electronic medium | 2.86 | 0.97 |
| Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions | 2.84 | 0.87 |
| Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare an assignment | 2.71 | 0.96 |
| Included diverse perspectives | 2.69 | 1.00 |
| Made a class presentation | 2.64 | 0.95 |
| Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework | 2.59 | 0.88 |
| Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor | 2.39 | 0.88 |
| Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others | 2.20 | 1.06 |
| Had serious conversations with students of a different race | 2.09 | 1.04 |

| Items | Mean (/4.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Tutored or taught other students | 1.97 | 0.94 |
| Came to class without completing readings or assignments | 1.96 | 0.87 |
| Talked about career plans with a faculty member | 1.94 | 0.90 |
| Discussed ideas from your readings or classes | 1.86 | 0.85 |
| Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions | 1.57 | 0.80 |

*N* = 426; Standard Deviation (SD) provides information about the degree of variability of participant responses.

The learning activities reported most frequently consisted of those that involved working on assignments or projects that required integrating ideas, exploring different perspectives with other students and participating in class discussions with peers or instructors. Involvement in critical analyses of ideas and interactive communication also appear to be essential components of RIAS engagement.

### *RIAS Academic Engagement (RAE) Scale*

As some of the traditional engagement questions did not fit the RIAS being studied, an additional 10-item survey was developed with items to measure academic dimensions. The descriptive results of these items are exhibited in Table 9. These 10 items were all posed using the same Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. To investigate whether these survey items could be reduced to two constructs, additional factor analysis was conducted, using the same process as was used with the traditional engagement measures. The analysis produced a clean, two-factor scale of five items or questions each. Factors consist of varying numbers of scale items representing key dimensions of the composite measurement scale. The two factors were named “English Language Development” and “Perception of Academic Achievement.” The first factor accounted for 49 per cent of the variance and the second, an additional 13 per cent. To ensure that each of these factors was reliable, internal consistency statistics were calculated, using Cronbach’s alpha value. The first factor, English Language Development, had an alpha value of 0.80, and the second factor, Academic Achievement, had an alpha value of 0.88, both well above generally recommended guidelines (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).Table 9 shows the individual means and standard deviations for each item, as well as for the Academic Achievement Factor (M = 3.70, SD = 0.74) and the English Language Proficiency Factor (M = 3.90, SD = 0.89).

**Table 9**
**RIAS Academic Engagement factors and items**

| | Mean (/5.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| ***Perception of Academic Achievement*** | 3.70 | 0.74 |
| I have increased knowledge this year | 4.07 | 0.92 |
| I have developed intellectually this year | 3.83 | 0.92 |
| Overall, I am satisfied with my academic program | 3.70 | 0.99 |
| I have achieved my educational goals this year | 3.50 | 1.03 |
| Overall, I feel that I am getting the grades I expected | 3.41 | 1.12 |
| ***English Language Development*** | 3.90 | 0.89 |
| I have had a lot of opportunity to write in English | 4.10 | 1.06 |
| Overall, I feel I have improved my ability to understand English | 4.04 | 1.02 |
| Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to write English | 3.84 | 1.05 |
| Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to speak English | 3.80 | 1.11 |
| I have had a lot of opportunity to speak English in my courses | 3.71 | 1.18 |

*N* = 426

The factor loadings for the RIAS Engagement items are listed in Appendix D. With these factors established, analysis can be conducted to examine how, if at all, these factors may vary by gender, ethnicity, language spoken at home, and institutional enrollment (college or university). Analysis of all the variables in terms of self-reported English ability did not result in any significant differences; however, three differences were present with respect to the perceived academic achievement factor.

Female students (M = 3.96, SD = 0.89) reported higher academic achievement than did males (M = 3.79, SD = 0.88, $p < .05$). The effect size for this difference is small, however ($d = 0.25$). Another small difference in self-reported academic achievement was found where students from Asia scored themselves higher (M = 3.75, SD = 0.77) than did other students (M = 3.60, SD = 0.66, $p < .05$), but again, this is a small effect size ($d = 0.22$). The final difference was that students in the colleges (M = 3.80, SD = 0.74) reported higher academic achievement than did students in universities (M = 3.63, SD = 0.73, $p < .05$). The effect size for this difference is also small ($d = 0.23$). As all of these differences are relatively small, it may be safe to say that in this sample of students, there were no differences in perceived academic achievement, and only small differences in language acquisition. This suggests that the experience for those in the sample was relatively similar.

### *RIAS Community Engagement (RCE) Scale*

While the previous set of items examines academic and classroom-specific activities, an additional set of items was used to examine engagement in non-academic or community activities. These included events outside the classroom such as sports, membership in clubs or

participation in cultural activities – all suggested as important components contributing to academic success (Grayson, 2008). The seven items were scored on a four-point scale ranging from never = 1 to very often = 4. These items, as with the traditional engagement items earlier, could not be grouped into clearly identifiable factors. Therefore, the data is presented in Table 10 only in descriptive form ranging from the item the participants scored the highest to the lowest.

**Table 10**
**Community non-Academic engagement**

| Items | Mean (/4.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Tried to better understand someone else's views | 2.71 | 0.90 |
| Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue | 2.69 | 0.84 |
| Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views | 2.22 | 0.92 |
| Exercised or participated in physical fitness | 1.97 | 1.04 |
| Participated in activities to enhance your spirituality | 1.93 | 1.13 |
| Attended an art exhibit, play, dance, etc. | 1.70 | 0.83 |
| Participated in cultural, religious or political clubs or events | 1.43 | 0.78 |

*N* = 420

This data suggest that RIAS are participating in community events or activities on an infrequent basis, which is consistent with the activity profile previously reported for community involvement. This is understandable if the data in Table 7 are taken into account, as they highlighted the fact that most RIAS have little time for out-of-class or non-family activities. If RIAS are predominantly engaged in academic and family activities, any expectations of involvement in the larger academic community are unrealistic. However, if student engagement necessitates involvement outside of the classroom (as suggested by Grayson, 2008), other ways of engaging RIAS are needed in order to expand their worldview and enhance their academic success.

### *Factors Affecting RIAS Engagement*

Further analyses were conducted to determine whether demographic or educational factors had an impact on academic engagement. These efforts were hindered by the fact that only two factors were identified as contributing to RIAS engagement. Further research is needed to determine additional types of learning activities that could be included in this preliminary scale. This observation again supports the position that NSSE-like surveys, which were originally designed for younger traditional students who were locally educated, may not be an appropriate measure for RIAS. The results point to the possibility that RIAS experience PSE in very different ways.

### *Demands of Immigration (DOI) and Student Engagement*

Being a RIAS in a new PSE environment is a unique experience that recent immigrants often do not anticipate. Another major study objective was to identify the nature of this experience and its impact on RIAS engagement, since this type of information has not been documented in the literature.

An additional existing measure was included in this study – one that was specifically intended for immigration experiences. The Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale developed by Aroian, Norris, Tran and Schappler-Morris (1998) was previously used to measure the immigration experiences of 485 adult Europeans who had immigrated to the United States in the early 1990s. This comprehensive scale contains items addressing the multiplicity of challenges experienced by adult immigrants. The DOI is a unique, 23-item survey, in which all of the items are posed in a negative style. Two examples are "Speaking in English takes a lot of effort" and "When I think of my past life, I feel emotional and sentimental." All items are scored on a 1-5 Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. Thus, individuals who scored the item closer to 5 were indicating that the item in question had been a challenge for them in terms of immigration. Conversely, items that were scored closer to 1, suggested that the respective challenge did not impact them very much. Descriptive statistics for each item are found in Table 11.

**Table 11**
**Descriptive statistics for Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale**

| Factors and Items | Mean (/5.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| *Discrimination* | | |
| Canadians don't think I really belong in this country | 3.40 | 1.20 |
| Canadians treat me as an outsider | 3.71 | 1.17 |
| As an immigrant, I am treated as a second-class citizen | 3.62 | 1.29 |
| People with foreign accents are treated with less respect | 3.25 | 1.24 |
| *Loss* | | |
| When I think of my past life, I feel emotional and sentimental | 2.36 | 1.19 |
| I feel sad when I think of special places back home | 2.89 | 1.24 |
| When I think of my original country, I become tearful | 3.31 | 1.30 |
| I miss the people I left behind in my original country | 1.87 | 1.13 |
| *Novelty* | | |
| I must learn how certain everyday tasks are handled in Canada | 2.75 | 1.25 |
| I need advice from more experienced people to know how to live here | 2.79 | 1.30 |
| I am always facing new situations and circumstances | 2.72 | 1.14 |
| I have to depend on other people to show how things are done | 3.63 | 1.17 |
| *Occupational Adjustment* | | |
| I have fewer career opportunities than Canadians | 2.86 | 1.37 |
| I am disadvantaged in getting a good job | 2.95 | 1.34 |
| I cannot compete with Canadians for work in my field | 3.25 | 1.35 |

| Factors and Items | Mean (/5.00) | SD |
|---|---|---|
| The work experience from my original country is not accepted | 2.68 | 1.33 |
| Educational credentials from original country are not accepted | 3.12 | 1.33 |
| *Language Accommodation* | | |
| I have difficulty doing ordinary things because of a language barrier | 3.83 | 1.20 |
| Speaking in English takes a lot of effort | 3.49 | 1.31 |
| Canadians have a hard time understanding my accent | 3.58 | 1.12 |
| *Not feeling at home* | | |
| I do not feel this is my true home | 3.53 | 1.28 |
| Even though I live here, it does not feel like my country | 3.34 | 1.29 |
| I do not feel at home | 3.46 | 1.22 |

*N* = 426

**Table 12**
**Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale descriptive statistics**

| | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Language adjustment | 3.64 | 1.01 |
| Discrimination | 3.49 | 1.05 |
| Not feeling at home | 3.44 | 1.15 |
| Occupational adjustment | 3.02 | 0.99 |
| Novelty | 2.96 | 0.96 |
| Loss | 2.60 | 0.97 |
| Total Demand of Immigration Score | 3.19 | 0.69 |

### *Summary*

For RIAS students, language adjustment was the most challenging aspect of their immigration, followed by discrimination. Despite self-reported high scores on previous questions pertaining to composite English language competencies, the DOI suggests that the challenges of communicating in English are greater than previously acknowledged. Difficulties with the English language may also accentuate any perceptions of discrimination. Conversely, feelings of loss or homesickness were the least challenging aspects of their immigration. Nevertheless, all the averages are above the midpoint 2.5, indicating that all aspects of immigration present some challenge for RIAS. The combined effect of making an adjustment to North American PSE may have a significant impact on RIAS engagement.

Further analyses were conducted to determine whether any sociodemographic factors influenced demands of immigration, but no significant differences were identified, since the numbers in the sub-samples are relatively small. This result suggests that immigration was experienced in a similar way by all participants.

## Campus Service Utilization Patterns

All PSE institutions offer a variety of academic and non-academic support services to enhance the success of PSE students. Twenty-two student services that were common to all five institutions participating in this study were identified, although very few were specifically designated for RIAS, with the exception of ESL programs. Respondents were asked to report on their awareness and frequency of use of each service, as well as the degree of helpfulness of each. Table 13 highlights the general awareness of each of the student support services.

**Table 13**
**Awareness of campus services and supports**

| Service | Aware |
|---|---|
| Libraries and computing | 98% |
| Tutoring and learning centre | 81% |
| Counseling | 79% |
| Athletics and recreation | 76% |
| Students with disabilities | 74% |
| International student centre | 67% |
| English Language Studies | 59% |
| Career coaching and assistance | 57% |
| Housing | 53% |
| Child care | 52% |
| Advising program | 48% |
| Assessment centre | 47% |
| Mentor program | 47% |
| Diversity, equity, human rights | 44% |
| Bridging programs | 36% |
| Language skills assessment | 34% |
| College advising service | 33% |
| Student success | 29% |
| Multifaith centre | 28% |
| First-generation students | 27% |
| Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) | 25% |
| Immigrant student centre | 25% |

*N* = 426

Table 13 indicates that there are three clusters of services: (1) those that are well known by more than 60 per cent of students (including libraries and computing, tutoring, counseling, and athletics); (2) those that are known by approximately 50 per cent of students (English Language

Studies, career services, child care, mentoring programs) and (3) those that are known by relatively few (these include language skills assessment, student success, first generation). It is the last group of services that is most concerning. These are not services specifically designed for RIAS students, but they are of great potential value to their academic success.

The second set of questions focused on the use of known services. Table 14 highlights the finding that only the libraries have any measure of consistent use among RIAS. Tutoring, counseling and mentoring all ranked considerably lower, which might seem counterintuitive, given the challenges identified by RIAS in other parts of this survey. However, since most of these students indicated that class and family consumed much of their time, it is unclear how much time would have been left over to use these programs and services, irrespective of their value in assisting students.

**Table 14**
**Use and perceived helpfulness of support services**

| | Use | | | Perceived Value | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Weekly** | **Monthly** | **Semester** | **Total (rounded)** | **Helpful** |
| Libraries and computing | 60% | 12% | 10% | 81% | 97% |
| Tutoring and learning centre | 8% | 11% | 17% | 36% | 79% |
| Assessment centre | 3% | 5% | 23% | 30% | 77% |
| Counseling | 2% | 6% | 20% | 29% | 75% |
| Athletics and recreation | 8% | 5% | 12% | 26% | 69% |
| Career coaching and assistance | 3% | 2% | 15% | 20% | 69% |
| Advising program | 2% | 3% | 15% | 19% | 73% |
| English Language Studies | 5% | 2% | 7% | 15% | 73% |
| College advising service | 1% | 2% | 10% | 13% | 63% |
| Mentor program | 2% | 3% | 8% | 13% | 53% |
| Student success | 1% | 2% | 8% | 11% | 57% |
| Language skills assessment | 1% | 1% | 8% | 10% | 63% |
| International student centre | 2% | 3% | 5% | 10% | 60% |
| Bridging programs | 4% | 1% | 4% | 9% | 66% |
| Multifaith centre | 2% | 2% | 4% | 8% | 46% |
| Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) | 1% | 1% | 5% | 7% | 46% |
| Diversity, equity, human rights | 0% | 1% | 6% | 7% | 61% |
| Housing | 1% | 1% | 5% | 7% | 32% |
| Students with disabilities | 2% | 1% | 4% | 7% | 63% |
| Immigrant student centre | 1% | 1% | 4% | 6% | 58% |

| | Use | | | Perceived Value | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Weekly | Monthly | Semester | Total (rounded) | Helpful |
| First-generation students | 0% | 1% | 4% | 6% | 39% |
| Child care | 2% | 1% | 3% | 5% | 36% |

*N* = 426

Table 14 highlights those services that saw greater utilization by RIAS and those perceived by RIAS to be most helpful. The programs that receive the most use by RIAS appear to be helping the students significantly. The challenge that remains is how to increase awareness – and ideally use – of these student services that are already available to RIAS on campus.

### *Summary*

A variety of student services is available on all five PSE campuses that participated in this study. However, there is a general lack of awareness among RIAS that these services exist. "Libraries and computing services" is the only student service that is well known to RIAS and that they perceive to be helpful. Although services providing tutoring, counseling and English language skills development would almost certainly benefit RIAS, the students in the study were generally unaware of their availability, and thus the services were underutilized. This illustrates an overall lack of awareness of the comprehensiveness of student services.

## FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

It is important to emphasize that RIAS – like all students – experience student engagement holistically, and therefore the observations that follow must be interpreted accordingly. In order to avoid imposing an academic lens onto the narratives of the participants (Markham, 2005), the participants' speech and grammar were not modified in the quotes that follow. Some of the quotes are lengthy, but again, they have not been modified – in order to capture the richness of the RIAS experience.

### Challenges to RIAS Engagement and Academic Success

Participant narratives elaborated on the two factors identified in the survey phase of this study – that is, language competency and academic participation. Their comments focused on the demographic and institutional factors that influence RIAS engagement, the unique challenges of being RIAS in PSE and recommendations for service needs. Major themes included academic integration issues, such as being older (an adult student), along with poor awareness of services and barriers to understanding a new educational system and its practices. These themes were evident in all the focus groups. Most of the issues stem from difficulties with social interactions and communication skills and with adapting to the different ways of learning, studying and participating in a Canadian context, which appeared to be dramatically different from their previous experiences outside of Canada.

Overall, the focus group findings convey that RIAS in this study are having difficulty integrating effectively into colleges and universities in Ontario. They define their student experience as having been relatively mediocre and indicate that there are few services directed and tailored to their specific needs. Although participants were given the opportunity to discuss any relevant aspects of their academic experiences, the findings revealed that the major themes were focused on the broad heading of "Challenges to Student Engagement." Each of the specific interrelated themes is discussed below. No identifiable order of importance was assigned to each of these issues, but language fluency was a dominant theme.

### *Language Fluency*

Inadequate composite English language skills were cited by all groups as a significant barrier to student engagement. The majority of participants noted that difficulty with academic English fluency affected not only their classroom experience, but also their daily life. For instance, participants spoke about their lack of written and verbal English proficiency in the following terms:

> *Male university student:* I feel isolated, I feel alienated because I do not hear my language spoken at all. I don't feel confident to speak out and participate in class or any other place.
>
> *Female college student*: I have to think twice before I say something and I have much more rich thoughts that I can express … and it just … sometimes I feel really stupid. I feel stupid, because I cannot express what I think and what I wanna say.
>
> *Male university student:* For me, the biggest challenge in English language is writing. I can communicate and I can listen, I can read, but my writing's still way beyond where it should be. To do one assignment it takes me 16 hours to finish compare it to 4 or 5 hours to somebody who has better writing skills than me.

This barrier also influenced other areas of their lives, including financial literacy, understanding the "bureaucracy" of PSE institutions and being able to balance work/life demands. Throughout these passages, RIAS participants acknowledge that written and verbal English proficiency is not only important in the classroom, but also affects their job prospects and their integration into "Canadian culture":

> *Male college student:* English skills somehow are even more important than academic studies because most of us are here just to find a job, right? But a lot of person I know, they cannot find a job because their English is poor. Most of the students here, not including native speaker, I mean, of immigrant from here, English is a second language … they already have a diploma or degree or maybe a master or doctorate degree at hometown, but still you need to build your network. You can't build your network properly without good English. If your English is not good enough, it is very hard to mould into the Canadian culture.

Participants recommended that faculty, service staff and other students at Canadian PSE institutions should try to avoid employing slang and Canadian terms that RIAS may not fully understand and should instead make an effort to communicate more clearly.

### *Student-Faculty Relationships*

RIAS participants expressed the belief that faculty were key to their academic success. RIAS language skills were described as challenges to student-faculty interaction and ultimately to their PSE engagement. Again, participants discussed the impact of the lack of adequate language skills:

> *Female college student:* I still have language problems after being here for five years. I don't know anybody here who speaks my language and I have some problems with my teachers … Sometimes they ask me like, why I never participate; I always, my participation marks are very low and even with my assignments I have to get somebody always to edit my work and I feel very limited with that. I don't feel very comfortable speaking with people here because … I don't know, I just feel we are completely different.

Participants reported that their experiences in the classroom and with their professors varied in quality. Students were concerned about the limited availability of professors and contract faculty who may have limited time on campus because they may be commuting longer distances to their job, hold other teaching positions at different colleges and universities, and have family obligations of their own. This is exemplified by the following quote:

> *Male university student:* I find that professors in their office hours all the time and I think this, this is very very helpful 'cause, in the class, of course, there are some things that you will not understand. However, the professor, I mean … my experience is that universities are not really, it's not really a school, it's a research facility where the professors are here to do their research and teach you something during that little time that they have in the lecture. So, it's um … when you go afterwards for their office hours, it's very very helpful – the questions you didn't understand – to ask them and this is a very effective one-on-one experience regardless of your background, regardless whether you can, you think your English is good or you think your English is bad. This is the time where you go to the professor and he will, and you basically, you make the professor explain the things to you the way you understand. As a, yeah, this makes a very big difference.

RIAS narratives also included reference to the lack of opportunity the students had to interact with their professors both inside and outside the classroom. Some professors did not hold office hours, offered limited e-mail communication with their students and could not be available for discussions after class. This was a major challenge for RIAS, because some felt they needed extra help with the class materials, and the professor/faculty member was unable to offer additional time to answer the student's questions or review class material.

RIAS participants felt that faculty play a major role in helping them integrate into the academic community. A female university RIAS aptly described these difficulties and concluded that some faculty members may not contribute to a quality educational experience:

> *Female university student:* I just found life overwhelming: the class, the school, the university life. As a relatively new immigrant, as somebody who has been out of school for so many years, things here are overwhelming. First of all, the class is big, they are bigger than when I was in school some years ago, and I just noticed that the instructors, they are there to do their job. They don't know whether the class, everybody in the class has mastered the material. So, an instructor comes and does his job or her job and they may leave some of you … maybe stranded, maybe you can't catch up. For somebody, maybe your construction level was low or maybe you guys have been out of school, maybe you because their language is so scattered, like somebody who is an immigrant, you may not be able to follow the instructor. Sometimes they crack some jokes and everybody's laughing and you don't know why!

RIAS also discussed how they are not the "typical" students – that is, Caucasian, young and middle class – and they believed that this influenced how professors interacted with them in the classroom. For instance, a female college student discussed her experiences in the classroom with college contract faculty. She made the following comments:

> *Female college student:* Professors didn't understand the difference between an adult student and a regular student and the way they teach and communicate with us. It was demeaning. I am adult immigrant student taking classes to improve my chances of getting a job. I think that they [professors] should have specific training. It is not just the fact that you have a degree or you've been doing teaching for so many years. You gotta make the distinction that these are mature students, they're immigrants, they have values and they have enough issues to deal with … that, the school environment should be a welcoming environment and, as part of their job, they should be more engaging or more understanding, and not be critical. Be aware of their tone of voice and the way they may come across to the students. You know, the professors should have a course on intercultural relations …. It is a lot easier to learn if you feel that your professor is interested in working with you and you know, help you understand the material. The professor is there to help you learn.

The negative impact of large class size was also cited as having an impact on student-faculty interaction. Most participants noted that the number of students in their classes in Canada was much higher in comparison to the number in their home country. They felt that large classes at universities detracted from having a positive student experience:

> *Female university student:* I feel some disadvantage, because the classroom environment is so big for us and especially my voice is low and my language barrier is not compared to children born here and hard for the professor that like, accepted my words. Sure! Like our professors have … like one hour per week office hours and like you imagine our class is … twelve hundred people for chemistry now so like it's ... and also tutorial when we spend like one hour per week ... and it's on the form that somebody gives some question and he's explaining to … all the lecture hall where I guess like almost nobody else is interested in the question.

### *Lack of Familiarity with PSE Institutional Culture*

RIAS reported a particular lack of understanding of the uniqueness of Canadian PSE and often described how much this differed from their educational experiences in their country of origin. This lack of familiarity with the local academic culture – the expectations, policies and standards of Canadian PSE institutions – was perceived as a challenge for RIAS and created significant barrier to their engagement in PSE. For example, one RIAS talked about difficulties in understanding how the college "system" worked:

> *Female college student:* We need to have clear instruction about what to do. For me, it was a challenge to understand how the system works. What this "major" means. I was calling the administration to inquire about the application process and I felt like the person was so bored, like she had to explain me things that are so obvious to others who live in Canada all their lives, but for me, it's different. I'm new and I don't speak English very well … I have applied to four schools in total here in Canada and it was pretty intense period with all the communication with administration. I had to arrange my papers, my documents – that was another issue and all this stuff. I think maybe somewhere, they [the college] should put in a glossary of all this or explain the Canadian system. You don't know what you're supposed to do when you get here.

A number of participants also stated that they often did not understand Canadian terms, Canadian cultural values and cultural differences in the classroom. For them, "making sense" of the Canadian PSE system was a challenge:

> *Male college student:* At the beginning it was really difficult to understand some terms. It would be great if teacher … ok, I know what discussion is, but it's like, now they're going to do Focus Group, I have no idea what it is, to be honest. And, it would be good for teacher, even to us, it's not attention that everybody comes with Canadian experience, educational experience, and – ok, I know discussion, I know like, brainstorm. Like, whatever, but we just, I read about that but I have no idea how it works.

These statements highlight the difficulties that RIAS experience in understanding the culture of Canadian institutions.

### *Student Services*

Throughout the focus group sessions, RIAS spoke about the positive and negative aspects of student services on their respective campuses and the impact of these services. Generally, when RIAS did use services they found them to be helpful:

> *Male university student:* I had very big problems with Chemistry. My first semester, I did Chemistry very long ago and I was very bad at it. So, the first semester I had Chemistry and Engineering and I was doing very bad. I failed the first midterm test. And, and I was thinking, "Oh my god, I have to drop this course. And I'm going to fall behind and all this." And I went to the Access Centre where they give you all this time management and all this writing and they give you a consultation and consultation on your, how, you know, how to arrange your

> academic life and all this how to run your time and I talked to them and they just told me, "You know what? Just drop Chemistry. It's ok, you know? You'll take it next semester." And, I was so relieved. I mean, it helped me so much and I dropped it and I got an A next semester. So, it was very helpful.

Accessing and locating student services were issues raised by a number of RIAS participants, especially since most were located in numerous buildings throughout the campus and there was no one-stop system that housed all student services. Campus websites were also confusing to navigate, according to the RIAS, and it was nearly impossible to find the correct contact person for a particular service. Furthermore, RIAS acknowledged that the physical layout or the geographical space of the college/university campus hampered their student engagement on campus. Some commented on the lack of space for studying quietly, difficulty in accessing computers to complete assignments and not having spaces to socialize with other students.

It is also important to note that the colleges and universities located in the Greater Toronto Area are characterized as commuter campuses, which can further hamper student involvement on campus:

> *Female college student:* My program is a compressed program, and it's really intense. It doesn't give me space for a social life. I just travel to campus, attend classes and go back home. My program rarely gives you space to work, but some immigrant students work. They have families and they go to school. I don't know how they do it all. I find my biggest challenge is being in school studying as intensively as I have to study to make decent grades and then not having the time or energy to do anything else.

A male university student commented on difficulties experienced with admissions and financial services offered at the university:

> *Male university student*: Most of my complaints are the admissions process. I feel like I am being played. You go in this department and then you go to that department and you know, you just get passed along … The difficult part is trying to get all the paperwork done, especially trying to coordinate two, ah, two majors … because I'm doing double majors and so one doesn't know anything about the other and then you gotta find out all these different information … and the worst of all I found was the financial aspect. Getting information about financial assistance is hard. They really don't go above and beyond to really help out, especially for the newbies like ourselves here. And, there is a lot of information on services offered by this university that's not known to us. I am surprised by that. There are so many things that XXX University offers for us, but we don't know about. They are not advertised. So what's the use of these things if it's supposed to be beneficial to me but I don't know about it?

Another comment was made comparing the services provided to RIAS and international students. RIAS observed that international students had access to a higher quality of student services but also noted that these were, in fact, restricted to international students and that RIAS could access them only by paying additional fees. Another description of the "bureaucratic maze" was offered by a male college student seeking information about new career paths and

courses offered at one of the colleges. This particular student was so frustrated in trying to use the services that he wanted to find another institution that would respect and help him. Here are his comments:

> *Male college student:* I go to the student service, the main office, and then they send me to another office and that office, they send me to another person, and that person sent me back to the other person right? And they … they have all this kind of bureaucracy there. Many students just want advice; they want to know about their grades or new programs. In my experience, I went to ask for advice about a new career path that I can take here and like they sent me to three different offices. And the last answer was, they offer me a program that had nothing related with my career, so I decided, you know what, I have to go to another institution.

### *Financial Constraints and Balancing Work-Life Obligations*

The remaining thematic challenges to student engagement for RIAS participants include being adult learners, financial constraints, and balancing work and life obligations. These three are grouped together in order to illustrate their collective effect. RIAS, not unlike local adult students, experience multiple personal demands such as family responsibilities, commuting to and from off-campus residences and maintaining employment. These differences are likely to have an impact on the nature of adult learners' participation in postsecondary environments, often in ways that are at odds with traditional indicators of successful engagement, such as residence on campus and social involvement with other students.

The majority of RIAS in this study attended school full-time, which created challenges in balancing home and academic life. Their personal schedules imposed constraints on the degree to which they could engage in academic activities. Rather than participating in extra- and co-curricular activities on campus, their time was more often spent in studying and personal or family-related responsibilities. In addition, many RIAS participants noted that they faced financial constraints resulting from family obligations in particular. Many immigrants have to support themselves and their children and other dependents, and some also have a responsibility to send funds back to their home country to support their relatives there. Although many immigrants have heavier financial burdens than do traditional students, immigrants must navigate a financial aid system designed to meet the needs of local, younger students who are making a direct transition from high school to PSE.

Married students with working spouses can be disqualified from receiving student financial aid due to a spouse's income level and expected contribution. Moreover, in many provinces, there are no financial aid programs geared to part-time students, and where such programs do exist, the level of aid can be very limited and students must pay interest on loans provided while they are still in school. The limited financial aid that is accessible to RIAS is generally not enough to pay for tuition, living costs and the family support that is so vitally important to immigrants. In fact, if RIAS are sending funds back to their country of origin to support their children and/or parents, financial aid does not count these close relatives as dependents, because they are not living in Canada. Once again, this can result in inadequate financial support to RIAS. Lack of

financial assistance often makes RIAS feel that they must work as much as possible to earn money to fill the gaps in their financial support.

In order to gain some financial relief, a number of RIAS indicated that they welcomed co-op programs as part of their postsecondary program of study in order to gain Canadian work experience as well as financial support:

> *Male college student:* I have … advice on the ... programs. I mean to suggest ... because for the immigrants ... if with the [school name] can bridge ... the new immigrants to … in a few years it's a very helpful ... provide come [some] co-op ... or internship ... opportunities.

The combined challenges of being an adult, a new immigrant and a student can be seen as overwhelming and, as a result, can inhibit student engagement. Lengthy quotations from two different RIAS describe these multiple challenges. The first is offered by a single father who is enrolled at a university and also has the sole responsibility for taking care of his three children. In his narrative, he discusses the challenges of balancing his academic responsibilities with raising his children:

> *Male university student:* As an immigrant, you need time to settle in a new country. You need also time to settle in an institution like this one, and as a single father, I need time to help my kids settle in a new country as well. I am faced with a lot of challenges. In fact, one time I was talking to a friend of mine and mentioning about all the courses I'm taking. I have my family, I'm a single parent and I found it very challenging. There is a subject; in fact, it was an assignment I couldn't catch up with the timing, because I have a lot of other subjects. I found the assignment hard to complete. I was there by myself; I had to take care of the children and cooking for them, organizing them. And, but when I told the friend of mine that I was failing to complete this assignment on time, but he said, "You have to, to know your priority. Your education is your priority, leave the other things!"
>
> But then I, when I went I thought about it, I said, "No. Is my education a priority or my family priority now?" 'Cause, I have children, sometimes they need help with my … they need help with their homework. They need me to help them. But we don't know, they forget, too, I also have homework and I need help! So now, what should be the priority? Is it my study? my children's homework or my homework? So, I find it very challenging. Second, while my children are in school, I have to pay for my education. I paid a lot for my education. So, it is challenging to know what should be your priority in that kind of situation.

A single mother who is enrolled at a college discusses similar challenges related to parenting, academic demands and financial difficulties:

> *Female college student*: I had to work harder. It's frustrating to balance everything. I have to be in school at least 4 days a week from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. And the problem is that I have to commute from Scarborough, which is an hour and 15 minutes away. I have to pick up my kids, 'cause the daycare closes at 6 p.m. and they open at 7 a.m. And I found it very hard, because I went to the classroom, I can't study. I tried to finish some of my assignments by lunch time, but that's not enough time. So, then I need to go back home, pick up my kids,

> do what every mom does for her kids, then put them to bed, study for two hours and wake up in the morning at 6 a.m. I find it very tiring and, um … I was sick most of the time, because it was so stressful, and to tell you the truth, I broke down.I'm not just a student; I have a family. I have children that I need to take care of, and I have my assignment to do. And personally, it takes me a long time to do the assignment because my English is not that good. I found it very time consuming and sometimes the balance is thrown off. 'Cause, I know for me personally, my daughters says stuff like, "Oh, when I'm in school, I don't spend time with them." So, it's like my grades are suffering too … And I find that they're [the college] is not flexible, which is a huge frustration because they're putting me in the same category as the students who live with mommy and daddy and don't have that sort of responsibility. Meanwhile, they're teaching you that in the workplace now, there's flexibility about the work life and family balance. And now, within the school, you're not showing me that same flexibility. I don't want you to hold me hand but allow me some flexibility.

This single mother further explained the relationship between language skills, employment and the ability to pursue PSE:

> *Female college student:* There is also the challenge of money. Because we are studying English, our English is not good enough to get a job, and we are investing this time in full-time program … But at the same time, we have to pay the bills, we have to pay for our children and we have to pay a lot of things. And you have to be very creative in order to manage your economic situation. I know many people that just quit school because they didn't have the money for it.

A number of different thematic challenges can be identified in these two passages. First, adult immigrant students have multiple responsibilities associated with being both an immigrant and an adult learner. Not only do they have to settle into their new lives in Canada, but they must also settle into and understand the Canadian college and university system and help their children settle into Canada as well. Second, both RIAS quoted above discussed the financial challenges of being adult learners enrolled in part-time or full-time studies and taking care of the economic and personal needs of their families. Finally, they emphasized how difficult it is to balance the responsibilities of being students with those of being parents.

These two adult immigrant students experienced additional pressure because they were single parents. They were not able to rely on another adult for financial or parenting assistance, and they were geographically isolated from their extended families in their home countries. This left little time, space or energy for being engaged in university or college life. All of these challenges act as significant barriers to full engagement in academic programming.

### Summary of Focus Group Results

- RIAS focused on the academic components of their PSE educational experiences. They experienced a sense of social isolation from the larger academic community, tended to be unaware of the availability of student services and reported minimal involvement in campus events outside the classroom.

- Balancing personal and academic demands presented major challenges to academic engagement.
- Inadequate academic English language skills posed major challenges to RIAS engagement. These included difficulties in understanding English terminology, challenges in preparing written assignments and the lack of opportunity to practice speaking English.
- Interactions with faculty were viewed as an important learning resource for RIAS, and they strongly recommended improved access to and communication with professors.
- RIAS noted the distinct differences between Canadian (Ontario) PSE institutions and those of their home country. Improved orientation to academic standards, policies and educational practices of Canadian (Ontario) PSE institutions was strongly recommended.
- RIAS strongly recommended improved coordination and access to student services.

## Enhancing RIAS Engagement

The following recommendations were identified by RIAS in order to enhance their student engagement. This does not represent a comprehensive list but reflects the priorities identified by the combined focus group participants.

### *Improve access to student services*

RIAS recommended that improved advertising and more comprehensive information about student services be provided when they are accepted into their respective PSE programs and that they be advertised in one specific location on the campus website. The students in this study also mentioned wanting oral presentations in their classes by campus student service providers detailing all the student services available to them. RIAS also indicated that professors could provide information about student services in the classroom.

Although it may not be feasible to implement this suggestion, all RIAS participants recommended that services be made available at a central location. If this would not be possible, the participants recommended that there be better coordination of key student services such as admissions, registrar and financial services. From their perspective, this would diminish the bureaucratic maze they had to negotiate at postsecondary institutions and would help promote a one-stop-shop approach. One of the universities, for example, has introduced a one-stop admissions, registration and financial aid office. It is user-friendly, with an emphasis on customer service, including automated lines designed to help students negotiate the system.

### *Provide comprehensive orientation to the PSE institution*

RIAS recommended early orientation in their PSE program, based on the recognition of their unique needs, such as information about Canada's educational system, faculty expectations, and how to access financial aid and other support services available to RIAS through the institution and their community. This recommendation is supported by Schonfeld's (2003) discussion of research that links orientation programs to student engagement and persistence.

Schonfeld (2003) notes that orientation programs, whether they last a few days or a semester, create a safe transition period conducive to the student's adjustment to the college environment.

### *Enhance student-faculty interaction*

Most RIAS desired more interaction with their professors – that is, having more access through flexible office hours, more discussion time in the classroom to review course materials and more e-mail communication to ask questions not answered in class as a means of enhancing academic success. RIAS also indicated that they would like the opportunity to build mentorship relationships with their teachers and to establish other social networks in order to enhance their chances of employment in the future. Although not specifically cited as an opportunity to improve their conversational English skills, this would be an added benefit.

### *Increase access to co-op programs*

All RIAS indicated that they would like to have the opportunity to participate in more co-op programs, because they viewed this as key to gaining Canadian work experience and as a means of building social networks and friendships that would help them gain employment in the future.

### *Improve access to financial aid*

The cost of PSE education was a challenge, since approximately half the RIAS sample had low or poverty-level family incomes. They pointed out the need to increase the availability of student bursaries and grants to offset the cost of tuition and books and the cost of living.

### *Increase opportunities to build social networks among peers*

All RIAS appreciated the opportunity to meet peers from different cultural backgrounds in a face-to-face forum and to discuss their shared experiences as adult immigrant learners in college/university. Participating in the focus groups also gave them an opportunity to practice speaking English with each other in a safe environment. Increased opportunities for interaction with non-RIAS students were also recommended.

## DISCUSSION

The importance of student engagement in promoting the educational success of PSE students has been well established in the current literature (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek. 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup and Gonyea, 2006; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2004; Zhao, Kuh and Carini, 2005). The profile of student populations in Ontario colleges and universities is changing, including greater numbers of minority and immigrant students. As a result, research is required to understand the pedagogical and administrative challenges for Ontario PSE institutions as they attempt to accommodate the needs of RIAS, who may require different strategies in order to be fully engaged in all components of academic life. Despite institutional differences and the diversity of the combined sample of respondents, recurrent themes were

identified from both the survey and the focus group results in this study. Each of these themes is discussed below.

### RIAS Student Engagement

Despite the dramatic increase in the enrolment of multicultural recent immigrant students reported by the participating institutions at all levels of PSE in Ontario, there has been insufficient research addressing their learning needs and how this growing segment of students affects the academic community as a whole. Previous research on student engagement has focused primarily on traditional students and PSE education in the United States (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek, 2006 ). In addition, the way in which students perceive student engagement has been reported to vary according to the demographic characteristics of the student and the educational context.

In Canada, student engagement measures have been used primarily to assess organizational-level performance, with less emphasis on individual student experiences. These two trends have resulted in a deficit in the current student engagement literature. This research addresses this gap by attempting to develop an appropriate preliminary measure of RIAS student engagement.

The major finding of this research was that, despite sociodemographic differences, student engagement appears to be an important component of the RIAS educational experience. A preliminary student engagement measure was developed, consisting of components from pre-existing scales (Grayson [2008], NSSE and LSIC) used for international students, local students and new immigrants. Although a comprehensive measure of RIAS engagement did not emerge from the survey, two major engagement factors were identified. The RIAS Academic Engagement Scale consisted of two dimensions, which included positive perceptions of academic achievement and improvement in English language ability.

#### *Academic Achievement*

Academic achievement was perceived by RIAS as an important component of student engagement and as a key factor in contributing to their sense of purpose in being enrolled in PSE. Developing intellectually, having increased their knowledge level, being satisfied with their academic program and achieving good grades was perceived as important aspects of academic achievement. Since the major motivation for RIAS to pursue PSE is future employment, it is not surprising that academic achievement would be viewed as a first step toward achieving this goal. This is congruent with the major themes reported by Anisef, Sweet, Admuti-Trache and Walters (2009), who examined the educational pathways of adult immigrants in Canada. Both our research and the study by Anisef et al.  support the important role of PSE for RIAS in helping new immigrants obtain new knowledge and skills and thus assist them with entry into the Canadian labour market and into the larger society.

### *English Language Skills*

The second-most-important component of RIAS engagement was improvement in the students' composite English language skills. Having an opportunity to increase English language skills – reading, writing and speaking – as well as achieving improved overall ability, was viewed as a highly important educational activity. This perception is consistent with the focus group data. English language skills were viewed by RIAS as the major contributor to academic and future occupational success, and the lack of it as a major barrier to success in both areas. Previous research on student engagement in PSE has failed to identify English language skills as an important component due to a lack of attention to the special needs of students who have not been educated locally. Although many RIAS are required to pass language skills tests and complete ESL courses prior to entering PSE programs, these results suggest that they continue to experience deficits that appear to affect their academic engagement. It is important to note that the RIAS in this study all had some form of English language training and passed standardized PSE entrance language tests. They also tended to rank themselves as being proficient in English communication and easily understood. Nevertheless, the results illustrated that language skill deficits still existed. For example, the focus group participants cited difficulties in understanding their professor and classmates. RIAS also cited their ability to communicate in the English language as the most difficult challenge or demand during the immigration and settlement period.

The literature provides some potential explanations for these results. Grayson (2008) stated that although most immigrants to Canada who are enrolled in PSE already have at least some undergraduate education – and, as in this study, some even report having graduate degrees – the results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey indicate that many still have English language deficiencies. They score significantly lower overall, and only 11 per cent, as compared to 37 per cent of domestic-born students, are found in the higher score categories.

At the PSE level, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argued that it is difficult for foreign students who have lower levels of linguistic capital to understand the "convoluted" nature of the scholarly language often employed by their professors. They found that despite having verbal skills that tended to be generally lower than those of local students, they performed equally well on written assignments. Perhaps this is because, in written assignments, they would have more time and opportunity to gain external assistance. It may also be that professors tend to grade their assignments in a more lenient manner in order to accommodate English language deficits or that RIAS students engage in greater self-selection of courses or programs where certain types of writing skills are not required. The length of residence in Canada was of no consequence for the literacy performance of immigrants. Evidence such as this suggests that any programs designed to facilitate literacy improvement among immigrants may be having less than optimal impacts (Grayson, 2008, p. 129). Written and verbal English skills appear not to affect their academic achievement, but they may have a significant impact on future employment, suggesting once again that further research is needed. The lack of connection between cultural group membership and linguistic capital suggests that linguistic deficiencies in the short and long term may be overlooked by academic institutions.

### *Demographic Factors*

Levels of student engagement have been previously reported to be affected by demographic differences (Grayson, 2008; Grayson, 2009). Factors such as being a full-time student, living on campus and being female enhanced student engagement in American colleges (Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek, 2006). However, differences in demographic characteristics were not found to affect RIAS engagement in this study. Despite differences in institutional and demographic characteristics, this sample appeared to be relatively homogeneous in their perceptions of student engagement.The sample was predominantly female, a result that is consistent with the current literature regarding the composition of the population of postsecondary students. Female students have also been shown to be more willing to participate in research. No gender difference was apparent in this study in terms of engagement or experience of demands of immigration, but the results may not adequately reflect gender or immigrant origin differences that might actually exist in the overall populations. For example, Chinese RIAS were the largest group of participants in this study, and the fact that the majority of the sample originated from Asian countries may bring a particular cultural bias to the results. However, specific country differences within the Asian sub-sample itself were not identified. More research exploring the effects of cultural and language differences on student engagement, using larger samples and allowing comparisons between specific countries or regions, are needed.

Although being adult learners in PSE did not appear to significantly affect academic success, the demands of having additional personal and family responsibilities and balancing school and family obligations were cited as the most common challenges. RIAS with greater family responsibilities may be less engaged. Further research is needed to determine the specific ways in which these challenges impact student engagement.

### *Classroom Dynamics*

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek (2006) support the idea that the nature of the classroom experience, or the dynamic between the learner and the environment at the PSE institution, can influence student engagement. Activities that promote active participation in group learning, critical thinking and oral discussions with classmates and the professor appear to significantly enhance student engagement. In this study, RIAS identified involvement in specific learning activities as being important to their learning. (These activities included asking questions, making a classroom presentation and working on papers or projects that promoted integration of ideas).

The focus group participants also highlighted student-faculty interactions as being an important component of student success (a conclusion that is consistent with those of much previous research) (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup and Gonyea, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Recent research surrounding the engagement of minority students on campus argued that the quality of interaction with faculty is an important factor in determining minority student persistence, success and engagement (Brown and Ward, 2007). Clear communication with students about their perceptions and concerns is also essential. RIAS identified North American PSE as being very different from PSE in their home countries in terms of teaching and learning approaches.

Linguistic and cultural differences can also impede student engagement. According to several studies of international students discussed by Andrade (2006), teachers can misinterpret student motivation and behaviours, such as perceiving lack of class participation by RIAS to be a cultural preference, rather than linguistically motivated. Furthermore, Andrade (2006) suggests that teachers can address the needs of many immigrant students by modifying their teaching styles for greater ease of understanding.

The following are some specific suggestions that would promote more effective communication between RIAS and faculty: writing key terms and assignments on the board, speaking slowly, avoiding slang, using examples that can be understood by all students, making expectations clear, checking for comprehension and giving students time to reflect before answering questions. Many RIAS are also required to adopt a new style of learning. For internationally educated professionals such as teachers, nurses and pharmacists, research has demonstrated that the adult immigrant student has a distinctive learning style, a style that is based on experiential and self-directed approaches (Lum, Bradley and Rasheed, 2011). However, the current Canadian university classroom generally employs collaborative approaches to learning that may not be consistent with the preferred learning style of RIAS and thus may present a barrier to their engagement.

For many RIAS, obtaining a PSE credential is an unanticipated aspect of settlement, for which they are unprepared. Most immigrants pursuing PSE can be considered to be first-generation students in that they cannot depend on someone else's experience for guidance in navigating the institutional system. Skulley (2004) characterizes first-generation college students as being less prepared than other students and as requiring additional support. Though many new arrivals will have completed some PSE prior to immigration, the institutional system and culture of postsecondary institutions in their home country is likely to differ significantly from the system and culture of Canadian postsecondary institutions.

Furthermore, Schonfeld (2003) contends that cultural capital has an exclusionary effect on historically disenfranchised student populations, negatively impacting their success and participation in higher education. These students "are most likely to be unaware of and unfamiliar with the policies and procedures that tend to govern higher education, the expectations faculty and other members of the institution may hold, the nature of relationships and interactions on the campus, and the language of higher education" (p. 4). Schonfeld's observations are echoed by RIAS in our study. Their narratives describe a confusing bureaucratic maze they must go through in order to have their international credentials assessed, complete the admissions process, register for classes, seek information about financial assistance and find the appropriate student services to help with their queries.

### *Engagement in the Larger Academic Community*

The results demonstrated that RIAS, for the most part, were not actively engaged in non-academic aspects of PSE. They were either unaware of extracurricular activities or disinterested, since such activities appeared not to be a priority. Recent research by Brown and Ward (2007) suggests that students' experiences beyond the classroom are as critical to their development, learning, being engaged and overall success as the actual academic work in the classrooms, libraries and laboratories. Many college and university personnel who engage with

students outside the classroom have as much impact on students' development and learning as do those who teach them in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to recognize that access to and the quality of student services on campus play a role in shaping the ways in which recent adult immigrants are engaged on campus.

Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) note that while it is plausible that international students will channel their efforts toward academics to compensate for what may be a less than satisfying social life, the literature is silent on the extent to which they engage in other effective educational practices, activities that research has shown are associated with high levels of learning and personal development. In fact, relatively little is known about the extent to which international students are satisfied with their experiences, interact with peers and faculty members, and participate in a variety of other educationally purposeful activities (De Leon, 2005, p. 220). Similarly, little is known about these factors in terms of RIAS in Canada.

Dietz and Triponey (1997) suggest that student populations often appear to be less involved at metropolitan (urban) universities than at other institutions. Several factors might explain this phenomenon. Especially for commuters, being an adult student is only one of the many demanding roles and responsibilities in their lives. Commuters may work full-time or part-time and also have responsibility for managing a household and caring for children, siblings or other relatives. With their limited time, commuter students often have to select their campus involvement carefully. The perceived relative value of activities is usually a major factor in their involvement. The majority of participants lived off campus. This situation, in addition to commuting, work and personal commitments, was cited as the prime reason for lack of involvement in non-academic activities. In addition, the majority of adult learners who attend school part-time participate in evening, weekend or specialized adult programs and often have interrupted enrolment at various institutions (Kasworm, 2003). According to Kezar and Kinzie (2006), due to the class schedule of adult learners, peer interaction or out-of-class faculty interaction is constrained and perhaps non-existent. Rather than participating in extra- and co-curricular activities, their time is more often spent studying and engaged in personal or family-related responsibilities.

### Challenges to Educational Success

The results of this study demonstrated that RIAS experience student engagement in ways that are different from those reported in the literature, which has focused predominantly on locally educated PSE students. They experience the combined effects of the challenges common to adult students, as well as those unique to being new immigrants – such as language deficits, cultural differences and financial difficulties. Being adult learners in a PSE system that is organized largely around the needs of locally educated younger students with no dependents and fewer cultural challenges can inhibit student engagement. The challenges to academic success are not unique to RIAS, but for them, the impact of these problems is much greater. If they do not have access to services or social networks in order to overcome these challenges, the impact is compounded. Despite their perception of being highly motivated and performing well academically (that is, achieving good grades), the survey results describe a profile of students who are only moderately engaged in the academic components of PSE.

The focus group results confirmed that these challenges are interrelated and stem from combined language and cultural differences, as well as lack of familiarity with institutional practices. All of these factors combined can influence their levels of student engagement, as well as their long-term academic and professional success.

The multidimensional measure of adjustment to a new country utilized in this study produced some significant but unexpected results. The Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale was found to be a reliable and valid measure of the stressors experienced by RIAS. This is a significant result, since the original Demands of Immigration Scale was developed for a non-student adult immigrant population in the United States. The dimensions of this scale appeared to capture a unique set of challenges for recent adult immigrants, regardless of country of origin and institutional context. Specifically, the biggest challenges for RIAS included learning a new language, not feeling at home in Canada and facing discrimination. The extent to which RIAS continued to experience adjustment distress associated with being recent immigrants even after an extensive period of residing in Canada (up to 10 years) was also an unexpected finding. This suggests that social and cultural integration is a much longer process than has been previously recognized.

These results suggest that in order for RIAS to be more engaged in academic life, the negative effects of being a recent immigrant need to be mediated. Recent immigrant issues such as dealing with the loss of a former lifestyle, the novelty of living in Canada, language difficulties and potential discrimination both at school and in the workplace all contributed to the sense of "not belonging" in Canada. This lack of feeling at home in Canada was evident in comments made by RIAS about their lack of familiarity and discomfort with Canadian educational practices. Language accommodation was found to be the greatest challenge for RIAS regardless of their personal or academic backgrounds. They cited doing ordinary tasks as being more difficult due to language barriers, and noted that speaking English required increased effort. This finding has significant implications for academic success, and needs to be effectively addressed if RIAS are to enhance their engagement both inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition, adult immigrants can face numerous financial constraints, in many cases as a result of family obligations. The RIAS in this study reported a full range of income levels, but it is important to note that over half of the sample reported family incomes that were at lower levels. Although many were employed on a part-time basis, being enrolled in full-time studies could contribute to severe financial constraints. Since RIAS are not eligible for certain types of bursaries and scholarships, financial aid and tuition policies need to be better aligned to provide financial assistance that actually meets students' needs at critical periods. This topic has not been adequately explored, suggesting that future research is needed.

### *Implications for Further Research*

A two-factor model was identified to form a preliminary RIAS engagement scale, and this scale was found to be a reliable measure for this sample. However, further research is needed to identify additional factors that may contribute to academic engagement. An expanded scale also needs to be tested with a larger sample of RIAS, in order to improve the generalizability of the results. More effort should also be made to undertake a construct validation of the academic engagement scale that was employed in this study. RIAS represent a diverse group of

students. They differ in key ways, such as gender, programs of study, and ethnic and cultural characteristics. Sub-group analyses were conducted to determine how RIAS differed in their responses to the engagement and demands of immigration scales and to discover what factors may influence these differences. Statistically, significant differences were not found, most likely as a result of the small size of the sub-groups. In particular, using larger samples to explore differences between Asian and non-Asian RIAS may be fruitful in identifying the specific cultural needs of RIAS.

The results revealed no significant institutional differences between colleges and universities or within the college and university sub-groups. Irrespective of the type of PSE, similar levels of engagement and demands of immigration existed. This suggests that the proposed conceptualization of RIAS student engagement appears to be a phenomenon common to the PSE experience instead of arising from the uniqueness of each institution. This has implications for generalizability across all PSE institutions in Ontario.

This result is also consistent with the literature, suggesting that differences in levels of student engagement are more likely to occur within each institution, rather than between types of institutions (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek, 2006). Differences may have existed, but it was beyond the scope of this study to undertake a more detailed examination of the policy and service structure of each of the participating institutions in order to determine how these policies and structures might have influenced student engagement.

## CONCLUSION

A major conclusion from this study is that PSE institutions play a pivotal role in helping RIAS to integrate into Canadian society – through the provision of educational experiences that promote academic achievement and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Effective programs, services and teaching are essential to assisting RIAS as they strive to achieve educational success. The participants in this study represent a rapidly growing population of adult students enrolled in Ontario PSE. Further, this study has provided much needed empirical evidence concerning their learning experiences, as well as implications for institutional responses. The combined results from the survey and interview phases of the study contribute to the literature in terms of providing a better understanding of the number of factors that promote RIAS engagement.

An array of educational policies, student characteristics, and institutional and other factors are associated with student success. However, much of the existing literature concerning student engagement presents a unitary model of involvement that cannot be seamlessly applied to non-traditional students such as adult immigrants. The earlier work of engagement theorists such as Tinto (1987) and Astin (1984) imply, for the most part, that the traditional student's experience in PSE can be universally applied to all students. The major result of this study demonstrated that, irrespective of the type of PSE institutional program, RIAS engagement experiences do not fit the conventional models of this concept. Personal characteristics such as being a recent adult immigrant, having membership in a minority culture, language difficulties and lack of familiarity

with the Canadian postsecondary educational environment pose increased challenges to being fully engaged – and potentially affect the achievement of academic and employment success.

An immigrant academic engagement model must take into account measures of engagement as they relate to student success and be modified to account for differences in the way RIAS are socially and academically engaged. Such a model must also be more inclusive in recognizing the unique needs of PSE adult learners who are also recent immigrants. Although these students may not follow involvement patterns typically equated with positive outcomes (such as extensive interaction with faculty outside of class, social engagement with other students or living and working on campus), they are not necessarily doomed to academic failure or isolation. These results illustrate that, despite these challenges, the majority of the participants perceived themselves to be achieving moderate to high levels of success in their postsecondary education. This conclusion is consistent with previous research results which show that, using standardized measures of engagement such as NSSE, minority students, in comparison with local students, show comparable levels (Kuh, 2003).

Nevertheless, more effort needs to be directed toward building on RIAS's current levels of academic engagement to assist those who are experiencing greater degrees of difficulty with the immigration and settlement experience, in addition to supporting those who are apparently succeeding. Institutional approaches to supporting immigrant student success must address challenges faced by newcomers, such as language and financial barriers, as well as enhancing their strengths through a bicultural frame of reference and strong community involvement. This may be achieved through the development of institutional missions that clearly articulate a commitment to supporting immigrant participation and congruent policies and programs that address immigrant student needs. Complementary programs, policies and practices that promise to enhance the educational attainment of all RIAS need to be developed. These must be in harmony with the institution's mission and must take into account student characteristics and campus culture. Equally important, the interventions need to be implemented in a reasonably high-quality way and demonstrably effective for RIAS population to be served. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that PSE institutions are limited in what they can do to assist unprepared students to overcome limitations in their academic preparation for postsecondary education.

Finally, it is important to determine the elements of institutional culture at each college and university that are associated with student success. The research on student development indicates that students learn more – and more deeply – when their experiences inside and outside of the classroom are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Although it was beyond the scope of this study, the authors became aware of educational strategies and student services available at the participating institutions that could be modified to better service RIAS. For example, academic and social programs for mature adult students, language programs for international students and career development initiatives. More research is needed to understand these aspects of organizational structure that support or hinder student engagement. Learning more about the way different groups of students make sense of and navigate the postsecondary environment will benefit all students, including RIAS.

## Recommendations

The results of the combined survey and the focus group results point to specific key initiatives at multiple institutional levels that could be improved to enhance RIAS engagement, as well as overall PSE success.

### *Identifying and Monitoring RIAS Enrolment in PSE Institutions*

Most Canadian PSE institutions have well-established programs to serve the needs of international students. Similar initiatives are not available for RIAS despite the fact that many new adult immigrants enroll in PSE during the early stages of settlement in Ontario. This is particularly true for Ontario, which is the destination of choice for many new immigrants. However, this study has illustrated that RIAS report barriers to student engagement within Ontario PSE institutions. In addition, the difficulties in identifying RIAS reduced the numbers in this study sample. Their presence within PSE institutions is not formally recognized, and their numbers are not consistently tracked despite the fact that RIAS are enrolled in all major programs of study. Although they are not a large group of students, RIAS represent approximately 10 per cent of the total undergraduate student population of the two participating universities and possibly a higher percentage in the three colleges that participated in the study. In order to provide improved educational experiences and services, however, they need to be formally identified as a distinctive sub-group of students in much the same manner as international students have been identified.

We recommend that these students be identified – particularly those who are most likely to be at risk of academic failure – and that support and early intervention be provided, especially in the areas of improved language training and financial support. PSE institutions also need to direct more effort toward improving educational curriculum and learning activities to accommodate the challenges associated with language skill deficits and with adapting to a new learning environment. In this way, these institutions will enhance the academic engagement of RIAS.

### *Student Services*

In sociodemographic terms, RIAS are a highly diverse group of students, and this will most likely influence their service needs. There is a strong probability that they will require services in areas related to English language skill development, understanding Canadian educational expectations and becoming involved in the larger academic community. These services could include RIAS writing support services, peer mentoring programs and web-based social clubs. At present, no programs or services specifically developed for RIAS were identified at the participating study sites. According to Winston (2003), the most important purpose of academic services is to enrich the educational experience and learning of all students. He suggests that administrators and faculty can determine the effectiveness of these services by addressing the following key questions (which could be used to evaluate and improve services):

- Are students clear about how to proceed through the academic maze? How is this information disseminated?

- Is there intentional outreach to first-year students who may not understand processes? Is the information free of academic lingo that first-generation, international and RIAS university students may not understand?
- Can all faculty members and academic advisers articulate what services (including locations and phone numbers) are available for students with special needs?
- How is the communication and collaboration between faculty members and academic services offices maintained?
- How often do PSE institutions assess how the campus environment is perceived by new students (Winston, 2003, p. 336)?

A plethora of student services was available at all five of the participating PSE institutions. However, the results of this study illustrated that RIAS used these services to only a relatively low degree, largely because they were unaware that the services existed. Several of the PSE institutions have initiated orientation programs specifically directed to the needs of adult students; a similar program could be developed for RIAS. In order to be more beneficial to students, more institutional effort needs to be taken to ensure that all students, including RIAS, become aware of available services.

### *English Language Skills*

Promoting the linguistic capital of RIAS is essential, as academic engagement cannot occur without proficiency in academic language at the PSE level. This study has illustrated that there is a discrepancy between current language test results and actual language skills among RIAS. Despite RIAS reporting confidence in their language skills, their actual skills present a major challenge to their adjustment to Canadian PSE.

Unfortunately, much of the research on student engagement has not focused on the language needs of PSE students – despite a major shift towards greater student diversity at PSE institutions. These results illustrate very clearly that deficiencies in composite English language skills in the areas of reading, writing and speaking can have a major impact on RIAS's ability to participate in the classroom and in the broader academic community.

Institutional programs and resource allocation policies need to be examined in terms of their effectiveness, and administrators need to consider allocating additional resources to English language services. RIAS reported that the availability (and possibly the quality) of current writing and spoken English language services is not meeting their needs. These types of services need to be made readily available at no or low cost. Student mentoring programs could also be developed for RIAS who need additional support. Most students reported having passed standardized English language tests. However, these results may not be reliable indicators of their actual ability with academic or specialized language skills. Advanced academic ESL programs may need to be developed and funded at all PSE institutions. Improving the linguistic capital of RIAS will require a combined effort of students and their educational institutions so that services are aligned with RIAS's needs.

Elevating current admission standards regarding English language competency may also need to be considered. Students who have skill deficits but meet other admission requirements may require supplementary programs in order to be adequately prepared.

### *Enhancing Classroom Learning*

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayaek (2006) proposed that making the classroom the locus of the community is essential to enhancing student engagement. Many students spend only a limited amount of time on campus each week, and the classroom is the only regular point of contact they have with other students and faculty. Thus, using class time more effectively (by creating communities of learning in the classroom) must be a high priority in building a success-oriented campus culture. Specific learning activities have been identified as contributing to RIAS engagement. Essentially, these include activities that are intellectually challenging, promote critical thinking and increase interaction between RIAS and their peers and faculty.

It is further suggested that faculty members – in partnership with student affairs professionals – play a key role in creating classroom experiences that complement the institution's academic values and students' preferred learning styles. In order to meet the needs identified by RIAS in this study, faculty must recognize that these students have additional learning needs and provide increased opportunities for student-faculty interaction within and outside of the classroom. Many RIAS have reported being reluctant to participate in classroom discussions due to lack of English language proficiency. Opportunities for increased participation in oral learning activities are recommended. In order to assist RIAS in acclimatizing to a Canadian style of PSE, faculty members must also be more intentional about teaching institutional values and traditions and informing students about campus events, procedures and deadlines. Designing specific cooperative learning activities within the classroom that bring diverse groups of students together to work on meaningful tasks would promote a greater degree of social inclusion for RIAS. Faculty development programs need to include instruction on how to recognize and respond to the unique learning needs of RIAS.

### *Facilitating Adjustment to Canadian PSE*

In addition to the usual types of academic challenges, RIAS are at risk of experiencing an additional set of complex challenges as a result of being immigrants, as well as adult learners, that may persist for up to 10 years. The high scores on the Demands of Immigration (DOI) Scale provide strong evidence that, in order to promote the academic success of RIAS, improved services are needed to assist them in making the adjustment to living and studying in Canada. The Demands of Immigration Scale has been found to be a reliable and valid measure of the key challenges for RIAS. This scale could be used to assess students and provide specific information about issues that need to be addressed.

Although some of the participating institutions provided immigrant-specific services, these appear to be insufficient to address the needs of RIAS. These services need to be directed toward reducing social isolation within classrooms and also to improving connectedness to other immigrant and non-immigrant student groups in the larger academic community. Where PSE

services are not available, referral to local community-based. immigrant settlement programs might be considered.

## Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the generous contributions of the following individuals and organizations: HEQCO and their funding of this study between March 2009 and December 2010; RIAS participants attending five Ontario PSE institutions; administrative staff at the five participating PSE institutions (for their assistance in identifying the sample); Etta Anisef, who, as project coordinator, demonstrated tireless effort in the data collection process; and Penny Dowedoff, graduate research assistant.

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**Appendix A**

Institutional Code:_____
Program Code: _____
Student I.D._____
Date: _____

# HEQCO Student Engagement Questionnaire

# York University

All participants will remain anonymous. Survey data will be treated in an anonymous manner. Transcriptions and reports will contain no identifying information.

## I. Academic Profile

**1. Name of college or university you are currently attending:**

☐$_1$ Ryerson University
☐$_2$ University of Toronto
☐$_3$ York University
☐$_4$ Centennial College
☐$_5$ George Brown College
☐$_6$ Seneca College

**2. What program/department are you <u>currently</u> enrolled in?**

Program _____

**3. Enrollment status:**

☐$_1$ Full time ☐$_2$ Part time

**4. How long is your program**?_____

**5. How many semesters/years of the program have you completed?**

a. semesters_____ b. years_____

**6. How much longer will it take for you to graduate?** a. semesters_____ b. years_____

## II: Background Information

*In the following section we are interested in finding out about yourself and members of your family. In answering the following questions please either check off the category that is right for you or write in your own personal answer.*

**1. In what year were you born? _____**

**2. (Are you?)** ☐$_1$ **Male** ☐$_2$ **Female**

**3. What is your marital status?**

☐$_1$ Single ☐$_2$ Married ☐$_3$ Common-law
☐$_4$ Divorced ☐$_5$ Separated ☐$_6$ Widowed

4. **a. Number of Children _____**

   **b. Ages of Children_____**

5. **Number of dependents (children, parents, spouse, other relatives)_____**

6. **To what ethnic or cultural group do you belong?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐01 American | ☐17 Guyanese | ☐33 Pakistani |
| ☐02 Austrian | ☐18 Haitian | ☐34 Polish |
| ☐03 Bahamian | ☐19 Hungarian | ☐35 Portuguese |
| ☐04 Bangladeshi | ☐20 Indian/India | ☐36 Russian |
| ☐05 Black/African | ☐21 Iranian | ☐37 Scottish |
| ☐06 British | ☐22 Irish | ☐38 Serbian |
| ☐07 Chinese | ☐23 Israeli | ☐39 Sikh |
| ☐08 Croatian | ☐24 Italian | ☐40 Slovakian |
| ☐09 Danish | ☐25 Jamaican | ☐41 Hispanic |
| ☐10 Dutch | ☐26 Japanese | ☐42 Somali |
| ☐11 English | ☐27 Jewish | ☐43 Sri Lanka |
| ☐12 Ethiopian | ☐28 Korean | ☐44 Tamil |
| ☐13 Filipino | ☐29 Lebanese | ☐45 Trinidadian |
| ☐14 French | ☐30 Macedonian | ☐46 Ukrainian |
| ☐15 German | ☐31 Netherlander | ☐47 Vietnamese |
| ☐16 Greek | ☐32 Nigerian | ☐48 Other (*specify*) |

7. **How many years have you lived in Canada?_____**

8. **In what country were you born?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐01 China | ☐10 Italy | ☐19 Sri Lanka |
| ☐02 France | ☐11 Jamaica | ☐20 Somalia |
| ☐03 Germany | ☐12 Korea | ☐21 Taiwan |
| ☐04 Greece | ☐13 Netherlands | ☐22 Ukraine |
| ☐05 Guyana | ☐14 Pakistan | ☐23 United States |
| ☐06 Hong Kong | ☐15 Philippines | ☐24 United Kingdom, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland |
| ☐07 India | ☐16 Poland | ☐25 Vietnam |
| ☐08 Iran | ☐17 Portugal | ☐26 Other (*specify*) _____ |
| ☐09 Israel | ☐18 Russia | |

9. **From what country did you come to Canada?_____**

**10. What is your current immigration status?**

☐$_1$ Landed immigrant/ permanent resident ☐$_2$ Canadian Citizen

☐$_3$ Other (*specify*)_____

**11. In what year did you become a permanent resident? _____**

## III. Classroom Experiences

**1. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? Please circle the number that comes closest.**

| | Never | Sometimes | Often | Very Often | Uncertain |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| b. Made a class presentation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| c. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources from various sources | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| d. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| e. Come to class without completing readings or assignments | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| f. Worked with other students on projects **during class** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| g. Worked with classmates **outside of class** to prepare class assignments | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| h. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| i. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| j. Used an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, e-mail, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| k. Used e-mail or other electronic means to communicate with an instructor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| l. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| m. Talked about career plans with a faculty member, advisor or career service provider | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| n. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| o. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| p. Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| q. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class students, family members, co-workers, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| r. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| s. Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

**2 . Rate the majority of your professors by circling one answer for each of these statements:**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Disagree Somewhat | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Use excellent teaching techniques | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Know subject matter well | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c. Are responsive to class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d. Care about students in class | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e. Have a sense of humor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f. Are well organized | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g. Overall, I am satisfied with my course professor/instructors | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**3. In addition to in-class time, did you have contact with your professors either during office hours, by appointment , by telephone or email, during this semester?**

☐$_1$ Everyday
☐$_2$ Several times per month
☐$_3$ Several times per week,
☐$_4$ Never

## IV. Academic Involvement

**1. How often do you attend your classes/seminars on a weekly basis?**

☐$_1$ Infrequently or not at all
☐$_2$ About half the classes/seminars
☐$_3$ Most of the classes/seminars
☐$_4$ All of them
☐$_5$ Not sure

**2. Approximately how many hours do you spend studying per week? (This may include reading, researching and writing)**

☐$_1$ 0
☐$_2$ 1-5
☐$_3$ 6-10
☐$_4$ 11-20
☐$_5$ 21-30
☐$_6$ Over 30
☐$_7$ Uncertain

**3. On average, how often do you either visit or electronically access the library per week?**

☐$_1$ Never
☐$_2$ Once per week
☐$_3$ 2-3 times per week
☐$_4$ 4-6 times per week
☐$_5$ Every day
☐$_6$ Not sure

**4. What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐01 | A+ | ☐06 | B- | ☐10 | D+ |
| ☐02 | A | ☐07 | C+ | ☐11 | D |
| ☐03 | A- | ☐08 | C | ☐12 | D- |
| ☐04 | B+ | ☐09 | C- | ☐13 | F |
| ☐05 | B | ☐98 | Don't know | | |

**5. If you know your overall grade point average (GPA), what is it?_____**

**6. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Disagree Somewhat | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. I have developed intellectually this year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. I have increased knowledge this year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c. I have achieved my educational goals this year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d. I have had a lot of opportunity to speak English in my courses | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e. I have had a lot of opportunity to write in English in my courses | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f. Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to speak English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g. Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to write English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| h. Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to understand English | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| i. Overall, I am satisfied with my academic program | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| j. Overall, I feel that I am getting the grades that I expected | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## V. Non-Academic Event Involvement

**1. About how often have you done each of the following during the current school year?**

| | Never | Sometimes | Often | Very Often | Uncertain |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Attended an art exhibit, play, dance, music, theater, or other performance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| b. Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities or sports | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| c. Participated in activities to enhance your spirituality (worship, meditation, prayer, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| d. Participated in cultural, religious or political clubs or events on campus | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| e. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| f. Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his/ her perspective ..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| g. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue ..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

## VI. Contact with Faculty, Staff, Classmates and School Friends

**1. How many new friends have you made this semester in school?** **Number___ ___**

**2. How many hours per week do you spend with school friends while on campus?** **Hrs/wk ____ ___**

**3. How many hours per week do you spend with school friends while off campus?** **Hrs/wk ____ ___**

**4. What percentage of your friends at school is of the same cultural background as you?**

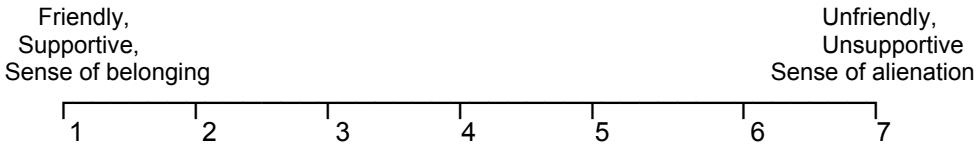
☐$_1$ 0% ☐$_2$ (10%) ☐$_3$ (11-25%) ☐$_4$ (26-50%) ☐$_5$ (51-75%) ☐$_6$ (76-100%)

**5. When you are with friends on campus, how often do you speak English?**

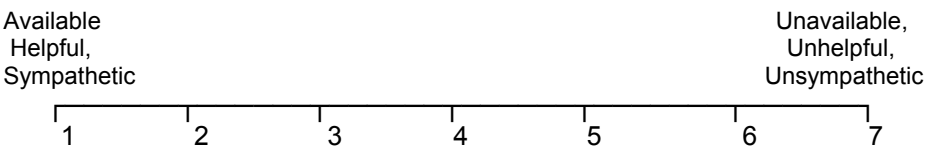
☐$_1$ Never ☐$_2$ Sometimes ☐$_3$ Often ☐$_4$ Very Often ☐$_8$ Uncertain

**6. Circle the number that best represents the quality of your relationships with people at your current institution.**

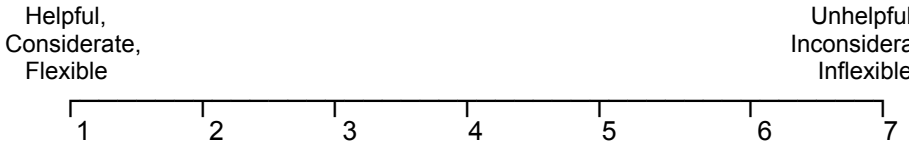
a. Relationships with **other students**




b. Relationships with **faculty members**

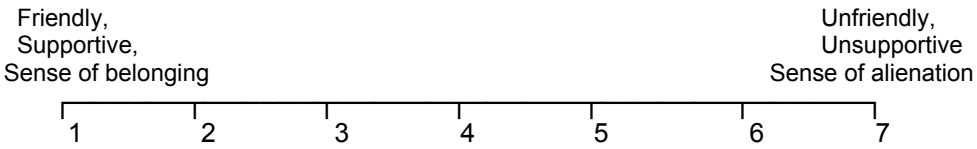


c. Relationships with **administrative personnel and offices**

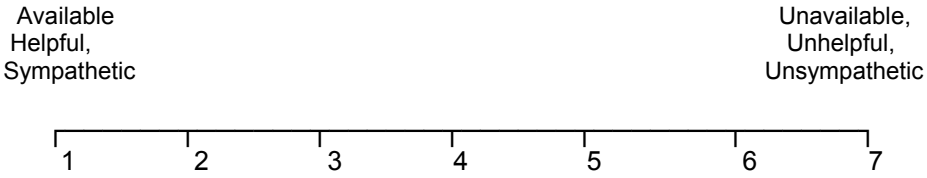



**7. Circle the number that best represents the quality of your relationships with people in your <u>previous educational institution outside</u> Canada.**

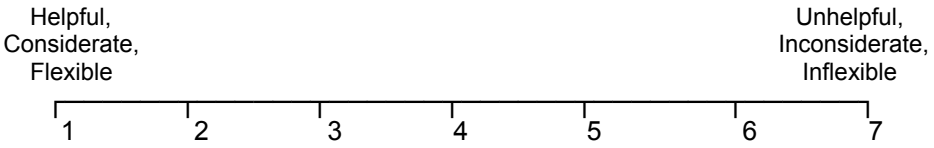
a. Relationships with **other students**




b. Relationships with **faculty members/teachers**




c. Relationships with **administrative personnel and offices**



## VII. Academic Support

**1. If you have an academic problem, who do you usually turn to for help?**

☐1 Classmates
☐2 Friends
☐3 Campus services
☐4 Professors
☐5 Teaching Assistants or Tutors
☐6 Writing Centre
☐7 Family
☐8 Other (*specify*)_____

**2. There are a variety of student services on campus. For each of these services, circle all the ones that you have used. Indicate how often you have used these services, if you are aware that these services are available, and if they were helpful or not helpful.**

| Student Services | At least once a week | At least once a month | At least once per semester | Aware of Service | | Helpful | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| a. Assessment Centre | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| b. Housing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| c. Child Care | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| d. Athletics and Recreation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| e. Counseling | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| f. Tutoring and Learning Centre | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| g. Career Coaching and Assistance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| h. Mentor program | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| i. Diversity, Equity and Human Rights | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| j. Advising program | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| k. Libraries and Computing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| l. Students with Disabilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| m. First Generation Students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| n. International Student Centre | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| o. Immigrant Student Centre | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| p. Student Success | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| q. Multi Faith Centre or Religious Organizations | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| r. College Advising Service | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| s. Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| t. Language Skills Assessment for Internationally Trained Immigrants | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| u. English Language Studies | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| v. Bridging Programs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| w. Other (*specify*)_____ | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 2 |

**4. How did you find out about the above services? (check as many as apply)**

☐1 Classmates
☐2 Professor
☐3 Counselling Centre
☐7 College Advising Service
☐4 School Calendar
☐5 Internet
☐6 Campus Orientation Session
☐8 Other (specify)_____

## VIII. Weekly Activities

**1. About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing each of the following?**

| Hours per week: | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21-25 | 26-30 | More than 30 | Not applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work and other academic activities) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| b. Working for pay **on campus** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| c. Working for pay **off campus** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| d. If you work for pay off campus, how many hours per week do you work night shift (i.e., through the night)? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| e. Commuting to class (driving, walking, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| f. Relaxing and socializing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| g. Providing care for children or dependents living with you (e.g., parents, children, spouse/partner etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| h. Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, sports, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| i. Volunteer work | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| j. Religious activities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| k. Cultural activities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| l. Involvement in the community | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| m. Other (*specify*)_____ | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

## IX. Academic Challenges

**1. There are various reasons why some students experience difficulty studying at college or university. Check <u>all</u> of the following that apply to you.**

☐01 Balancing school and other commitments
☐02 Courses available do not match my needs
☐03 Lack of confidence, preparedness
☐04 Cannot afford the cost of tuition and/or books and computer

☐05 Difficulty obtaining student loans such as OSAP or other loans
☐06 Personal health problems
☐07 Working at a paid job
☐08 Providing financial and social support for family back in your country
☐09 Providing care and financial support for dependents in Canada
☐10 Personal or family responsibilities
☐11 Racial or other forms of discrimination
☐12 Other (*specify*)_____

## X: Educational Qualifications

**1. What is the highest level of schooling you completed <u>before</u> immigrating to Canada?**

☐01 High school diploma or equivalent
☐02 Some trade/vocational, college, (no certificate/diploma or degree)
☐03 Trade/vocational certificate
☐04 Apprenticeship certificate
☐05 Non-university certificate or diploma from a college, school of nursing, technical institute or other such educational institute
☐06 University transfer program
☐07 University certificate or diploma below bachelor's degree
☐08 Bachelor's degree
☐09 University certificate above the bachelor's
☐10 First professional degree (medical, veterinary medicine, dental, optometry, law, divinity)
☐11 Master's degree
☐12 PhD
☐13 Education not definable by level
☐15 Don't know
☐16 Other, (*specify*)_____

**2. In what country did you obtain this education? _____**

**3. Have your previous academic credentials been assessed in Canada?**

☐1 Yes ☐2 No

**4. If yes, were your previous academic credentials accepted by your current educational institution?**

☐1 Yes ☐2 No

**5**. **Did you receive any advanced standing credit for your previous education?**

☐$_1$ Yes ☐$_2$ No

**6. What is the highest level of education your father or male guardian ever completed?**

_____

**7. What is the highest level of education your mother or female guardian ever completed?**

_____

## XI: Language Skills

**1. What languages do you speak fluently other than English?_____**

**2. What language(s) do you speak most often at home?_____**

**3. What language(s) do you speak most often with your friends? _____**

Language training refers to making efforts to learn the English language. Training can be formal including taking classes held in your home country or Canada and whether your schooling was conducted in the English language, or informal which includes self-learning and everyday conversations.

**4. What kind of English language training have you undertaken? Please check as many that describe you.**

**a) Formal Language Training**

☐0 **None**

☐1 LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) classes

☐2 ESL classes (English as a Second Language)

☐3 Sector Specific Technical Language (STIC) Programs

☐4 ELT (Enhanced Language Training) Programs

☐5 English was taught as part of my education or certification program in my home country or Canada

☐6 I took specific English classes in my home country

☐7 I completed my primary and secondary schooling in English

☐8 I completed my higher education / post-secondary education in English

☐9 Other (*specify*) _____

**b) Informal Language Training**

☐0 **None**

☐1 I taught myself using books, tapes, CDs or other instruction materials before or after coming to Canada

☐2 I learned English through speaking with my neighbours, friends and colleagues or watching TV

☐3 Other(*specify*) _____

**5. Think about your everyday conversations in English. Read the statements below and please select the one which best describes you.**

☐1 I feel that people always understand me

☐2 I feel that people understand me most of the time

☐3 I feel that people sometimes understand me and sometimes they don't

☐4 I feel that people don't usually understand me

☐5 I feel that people never understand me

**6. How well can you read in English?**

☐$_1$ I read English poorly

☐$_2$ I read English fairly well

☐$_3$ I read English well

☐$_4$ I read English very well

☐$_8$ Don't know

**7. How well can you write in English?**

☐$_1$ I write English poorly

☐$_2$ I write English fairly well

☐$_3$ I write English well

☐$_4$ I write English very well

☐$_8$ Don't know

## XII: Employment

**1. Before you came to Canada, had you ever worked?**

☐$_1$ Yes ☐$_2$ No [*go to question 6*] ☐$_8$ Don't know

**2. What kind of work did you do in this job before coming to Canada?**
(e.g., doctor, nurse, teacher, office clerk, plumber)_____

**3. Has your work experience obtained outside Canada prior to your arrival been accepted in Canada?**

- ☐1 Yes
- ☐2 No
- ☐3 Yes and No
- ☐4 Have not tried to get it accepted
- ☐5 In the process of finding out
- ☐6 Have not looked for a job yet
- ☐8 Don't know

**4. Who accepted your foreign work experience? Mark all that apply.**

- ☐1 Employer
- ☐2 Professional association
- ☐3 Educational institution
- ☐4 Other (*specify*) _____
- ☐5 None of the above
- ☐8 Don't know

**5. Who did not accept your foreign work experience? Check all that apply.**

- ☐1 Potential Employer
- ☐2 Professional association
- ☐3 Educational institution
- ☐4 Other (*specify*) _____
- ☐8 Don't know

**6. If you have a spouse or partner, is he or she working?**

☐1 Yes ☐2 No ☐9 Not applicable [*go to question 10*]

**7. Did your spouse/partner work before coming to Canada?**

☐1 Yes ☐2 No *[go to question10]*

**8. What was your spouse or partner's profession/employment <u>before</u> coming to Canada?**

_____

**9. What is your spouse or partner's current profession/employment?**

_____

**10. How much do <u>you normally</u> earn per year?**

- ☐1 No income
- ☐2 Less than $10,000
- ☐3 $11,000 to $20,000
- ☐4 $21,000 to $40,000
- ☐5 $41,000 to $60,000
- ☐6 $60,000 to $80,000
- ☐7 More than $80,000
- ☐8 Don't know

**11. How much does <u>your spouse or partner</u> normally earn per year?**

- ☐1 No income
- ☐2 Less than $10,000
- ☐3 $11,000 to $20,000
- ☐4 $21,000 to $40,000
- ☐5 $41,000 to $60,000
- ☐6 $60,000 to $80,000
- ☐7 More than $80,000
- ☐8 Don't know
- ☐9 Not Applicable

**12. Do other family members work to support the household or do you have other sources of income?**
Please <u>check all</u> that apply to you.

- ☐1 Children work
- ☐2 Older relatives work
- ☐3 Income from property (in Canada or abroad)
- ☐4 Income from cash assets
- ☐5 Income from businesses
- ☐6 Other income sources (*please describe*) _____
- ☐7 No other income

**13. What is your annual household income?**

- ☐1 Less than $10,000
- ☐2 $11,000 to $20,000
- ☐3 $21,000 to $40,000
- ☐5 $41,000 to $60,000
- ☐6 $61,000 to $80,000
- ☐7 $81,000 to $100,000
- ☐8 More than $100,000
- ☐8 Don't know

## XIII: Demands of Immigration

**1. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Disagree Somewhat | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. I miss the people I left behind in my original country | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. When I think of my past life, I feel emotional and sentimental | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c. When I think of my original country, I become tearful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d. I feel sad when I think of special places back home | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e. I need advice from people who are more experienced than I to know how to live here | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f. I must learn how certain everyday tasks are handled in Canada | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g. I am always facing new situations and circumstances | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| h. I have to depend on other people to show or teach me how things are done | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| i. I am disadvantaged in getting a good job | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| j. I cannot compete with Canadians for work in my field | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| k. I have fewer career opportunities than Canadians | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| l. The work experience from my original country are not accepted | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| m. The educational credentials from my original country are not accepted | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**1. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: (continued)**

| | Strongly Agree | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Disagree Somewhat | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| n. Canadians have a hard time understanding my accent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| o. I have difficulty doing ordinary things because of a language barrier | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| p. Speaking in English takes a lot of effort | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| q. As an immigrant, I am treated as a second-class citizen | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| r. Canadians don't think I really belong in this country | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| s. Canadians treat me as an outsider | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| t. People with foreign accents are treated with less respect | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| u. I do not feel at home | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| v. Even though I live here, it does not feel like my country | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| w. I do not feel this is my true home | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

---

Additional comments:

**Are you willing to participate in an in-depth interview? We will pay you $25.00 for participating in the interview.**

☐ No ☐ Yes (*complete information below*)

Name (Please Print)_____

Address:_____

_____

Telephone number: _____

Email address: _____

# Appendix B

## York University Student Engagement Research
## Focus Group Interview-Demographic Information

**Name of Student _____**

**Name of College/ University attending_____**

**_____ Male** **_____ Female**

**Program: _____**

**Full-Time_____ Part-time_____**

1. *What is the language that you first spoke?* _____
2. *What is your age?*_____
3. *How would you describe your ethnic or racial background? You can list more than one ethnic heritage if you like*

   _____

   - **African, North (*e.g.,* Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian, Egyptian, *etc.*)**
   - **African, Northeast (*e.g.*, Ethiopian, Somali, Djibouti, *etc.*)**
   - **African, East (*e.g.*, Kenyan, Tunisian, Madagascan, *etc.*)**
   - **African, West (*e.g.*, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, *etc.*)**
   - **African, Central (*e.g.*, Sudanese, Ugandan, Rwandan, *etc.*)**
   - **African, South**
   - **Arab**
   - **Black**
   - **Caribbean (*e.g.*, Haitian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Guyanese, Barbadian, *etc.*)**
   - **Chinese**
   - **East European (*e.g.*, Russian, Romanian, Polish, Ukrainian, *etc.*) Former Yugoslavian (*e.g.*, Bosnian, Serb, Croat, Kosovar, Slovenian, Macedonian)**
   - **Southern Europe (*e.g.* Italian, Spanish, Portuguese *etc.*)**
   - **Filipino**
   - **Japanese**
   - **Korean**
   - **Latin American (*e.g.*, Mexican, Cuban, Central Amer. country, South Amer. country, *etc.*)**
   - **South Asian (*e.g.*, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Tamil, Sri Lankan, *etc.*)**
   - **Southeast Asian (*e.g.*, Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, *etc.*)**
   - **West Asian (*e.g.*, Afghani, Israeli, Iranian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Palestinian, *etc.*)**
   - **Other**

4. *How long have you lived in Canada?* _____
5. *What is your marital status?*

   _____ *Single* ___ *Married*
   _____ *Divorced* ___ *Widowed*

_____ *Common-law* ___ *Separated*

**6.** *Do you have any children?* **___no**

**___yes** *How many?* **_____**

**7.** *Are you currently working while attending school?_____Yes_____No*

**8.** *If yes, what type of work are you doing?_____*

**9.** *How many hours per week are you working_____*

***All information that you provide is confidential.***

***It is possible that we may want to include you in future follow up on students' experiences or in future surveys. Could we contact you again later to see if you'd be willing to participate in another survey or short interview?***

***If yes, please fill out future contact form.***

***Name:_____***

***University/ College Email:_____***

***Personal Email ( if different from above email): _____***

***Telephone:_____***

**FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Our goal for this focus group is to explore your overall experience at university/college. We are particularly interested in how engaged or involved you are with your academic and non academic activities and how could post-secondary institutional student services be more effective in meeting your needs. All information gathered will be kept confidential.**

**Section 1: Student Engagement:** For us in Canada, student engagement refers to students being actively involved in university both inside the classroom and outside the classroom. We would like to explore your ideas about student engagement.

*1. Tell us about your current overall class room experiences at _____.*
*Are you satisfied with your overall college/university experience? What aspects of attending this college/university do you like? What aspects do you dislike?* **Probe**

*2. Do you think being involved in classroom discussions, interactions with students and professors makes a difference in your college/university experience?* **If no, probe why not**? **If yes***, what types of activities do you do and how engaged are you?*

*3. Do you feel that your English language skills affect your classroom engagement?*

*4. How do you think professors could help you become more engaged in the classroom?*

*5. Are you more involved in the classroom in Canada than your previous educational experience in your home country? What type of classroom activities did you do in your home country?* **Probe: engagement with teachers/professors; quality of education; level of difficulty of education**

6. *What other types of learning activities, other than the current ones, would improve your overall classroom experience?*

*7. What are some of the challenges you face in college/university? By challenges we mean time, money, language, work/life balance etc.* **Probe. Money issues, language- speaking, reading, writing; work etc.** *How do you think these challenges can be resolved?*

*8. Do you feel that you fit into your college/university?* **If not.** *What type of programs /services would be helpful for you to fit into this college/university?* **Probe**

*9. Have you made friends with other students on campus?* **If yes,** *are most of them from your own country, other immigrant students, or Canadian students?* **If no, probe why not.**

*10. What type of activities do you do on campus i.e. How often? How would you define your involvement in activities on campus?* **Probe.**

**Section 2: Student Services** In Canada, student services are offered by university/college puts in place to help students be successful in their academic career. They are a variety of services offered by post-secondary institutions. These range from the library, computing services, housing services, financial aid offices and counseling. We would like to explore your usage of student services.

*11. In your home country, what student services were available at your college or university? Did you make use of them? Which ones?*

*12. Have you used any of the student services available to students at your current college/university?* **If no***, why not?*

13**. If yes,** *How often have you used student services at your college or university? What do you think of the quality of service you received?*

*14. Did your program have an orientation session? If yes, did you attend it and was it helpful?*

*15. If you experience academic difficulty, that is, problems with your courses, on campus, what would you do and where would you go to get help?*

*16. Do you know where your student services are located on campus?*

*17. How could student services in colleges/universities better advertise their services to immigrant students? What recommendations/suggestions do you have for your institution, to improve student services on campus?*

*18. If you had any advice to give universities or colleges about helping immigrant students from your country of origin or any country in general, what would you suggest?*

*19. Is there anything else you would like the research team to know or to think about?*

---

**Thank you very much for your time and help with this research project.**

**Reminder: all information will be treated confidentially.**

# Appendix C

## Country Codes and Distribution of Participants by Country of Origin

### Country Codes

I. Asian

- South Asian (*e.g.*, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Tamil, Sri Lankan, *etc.*)
- Southeast Asian (*e.g.*, Chinese, Filipino, Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, *etc.*)

West Asian (*e.g.*, Afghani, Israeli, Iranian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti)

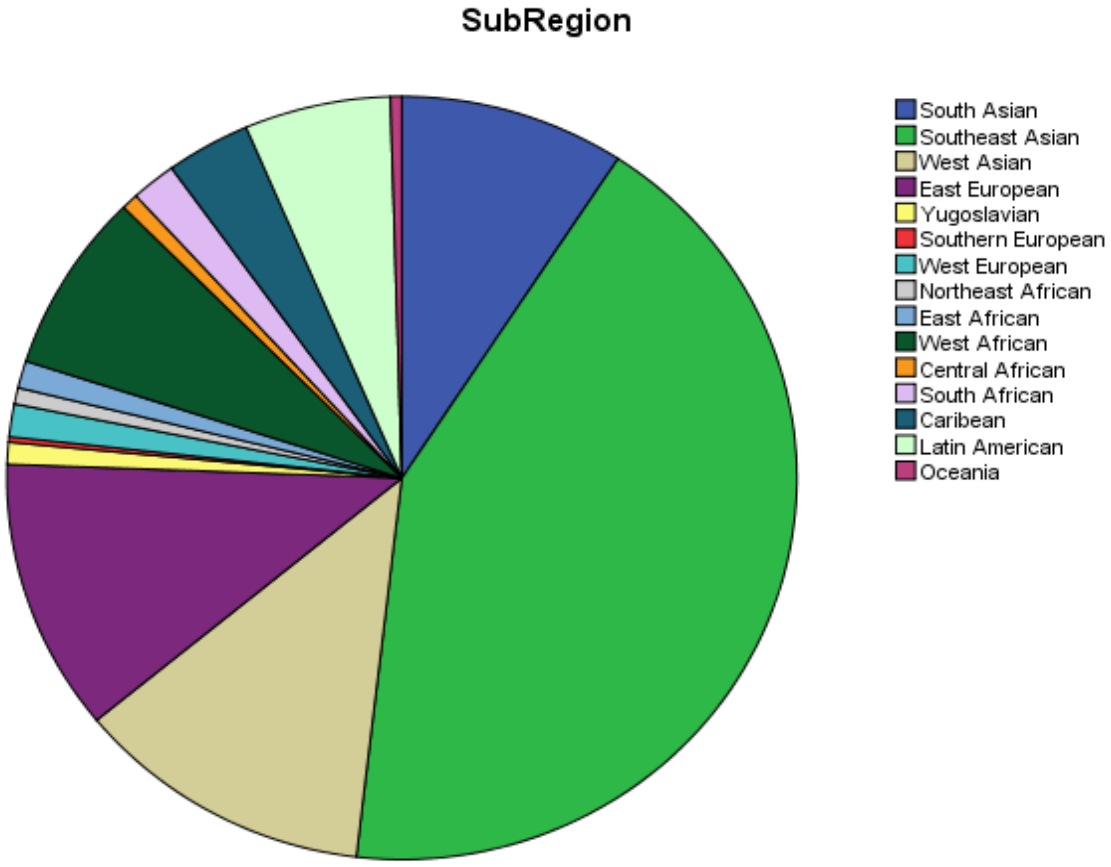
II. Europe

- East European (*e.g.*, Russian, Romanian, Polish, Ukrainian, *etc.*) Former Yugoslavian (*e.g.*, Bosnian, Serb, Croat, Kosovar, Slovenian, Macedonian, *etc.*)
- Southern Europe (*e.g.* Italian, Spanish, Portuguese *etc.*)

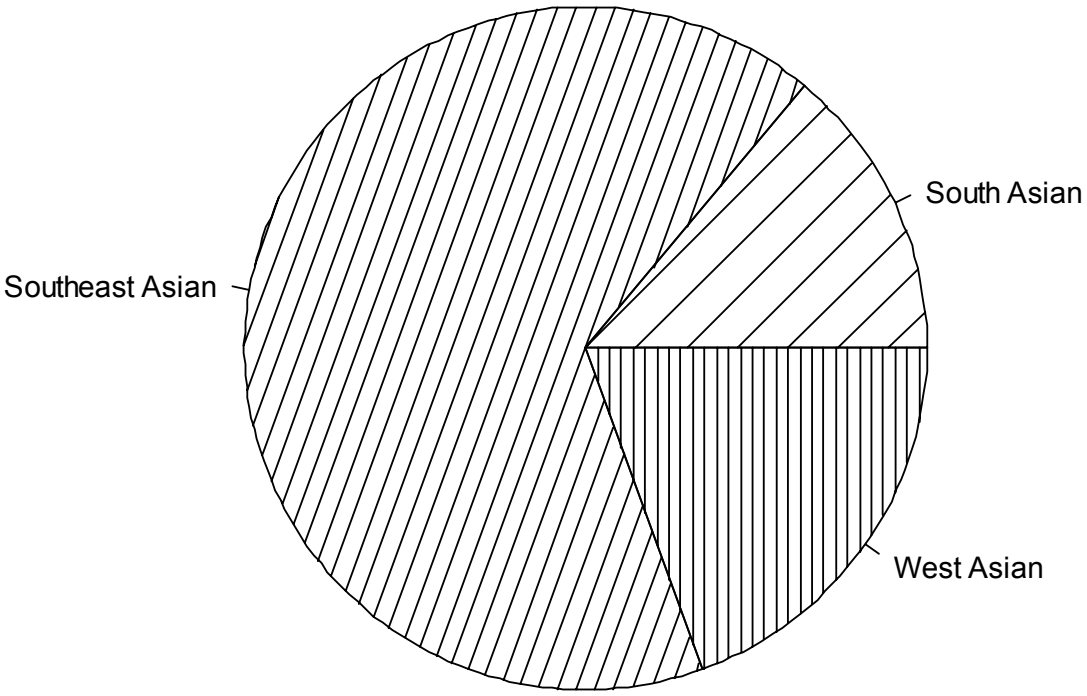
III. Africa

- African, North (*e.g.,* Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian, Egyptian, *etc.*)
- African, Northeast (*e.g.*, Ethiopian, Somali, Djibouti, *etc.*)
- African, East (*e.g.*, Kenyan, Tunisian, Madagascan, *etc.*)
- African, West (*e.g.*, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, *etc.*)
- African, Central (*e.g.*, Sudanese, Ugandan, Rwandan, *etc.*

**Figure 1: Countries of Origin by Subregion and Asian countries of Origin**



**Asian Sample by Subregion**



# Appendix D

## Factor Loadings of RIAS Academic Engagement Measure

| Item | FACTOR 1 English Language | FACTOR 2 Academic Achievement |
|---|---|---|
| I have developed intellectually this year | | 0.769 |
| I have increased knowledge this year | | 0.753 |
| I have achieved my educational goals this year | | 0.683 |
| Overall, I am satisfied with my academic program | | 0.682 |
| Overall, I feel that I am getting the grades that I expected | | 0.623 |
| I have had a lot of opportunity to speak English | 0.644 | |
| I have had a lot of opportunity to write in English in my courses | 0.739 | |
| Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to speak English | 0.972 | |
| Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to write English | 0.903 | |
| Overall, I feel I have improved in my ability to understand English | 0.748 | |
| Proportional Variance | 0.339 | 0.261 |
| Cumulative Variance | 0.339 | 0.6 |

# APPENDIX E

## Demands of Immigration Factor Loadings

| Factors and Items | Factor Loading | Reliability Coefficient |
|---|---|---|
| **Discrimination** | | **0.89** |
| Canadians don't think I really belong in this country | 0.83 | |
| Canadians treat me as an outsider | 0.79 | |
| As an immigrant, I am treated as a second-class citizen | 0.71 | |
| People with foreign accents are treated with less respect | 0.65 | |
| **Loss** | | **0.81** |
| When I think of my past life, I feel emotional and sentimental | 0.78 | |
| I feel sad when I think of special places back home | 0.69 | |
| When I think of my original country, I become tearful | 0.68 | |
| I miss the people I left behind in my original country | 0.61 | |
| **Novelty** | | **0.81** |
| I must learn how certain everyday tasks are handled | 0.82 | |
| I need advice from people who are more experienced to know how to live here | 0.67 | |
| I am always facing new situations and circumstances | 0.67 | |
| I have to depend on other people to show how things are done | 0.54 | |
| **Occupational Adjustment** | | **0.79** |
| I have fewer career opportunities than Canadians | 0.75 | |
| I am disadvantaged in getting a good job | 0.66 | |
| I cannot compete with Canadians for work in my field | 0.61 | |
| The work experience from my original country are not accepted | 0.52 | |
| Educational credentials from original country are not accepted | 0.48 | |
| **Language Accommodation** | | **0.79** |
| I have difficulty doing ordinary things because of a language barrier | 0.86 | |
| Speaking in English takes a lot of effort | 0.65 | |
| Canadians have a hard time understanding my accent | 0.55 | |
| **Not feeling at home** | | **0.91** |
| I do not feel this is my true home | 0.71 | |
| Even though I live here, it does not feel like my country | 0.66 | |
| I do not feel at home | 0.59 | |