

Student Experience Review

Executive Summary

The University of Waterloo is committed to excellence and innovation in all areas of the University – from academics, to experiential learning, and research. The University also endeavors to facilitate and catalyze positive student experiences, such that Waterloo students are well-positioned to achieve their individual goals and objectives in an inclusive, and supportive environment.

The University is undertaking a holistic review of student experience. For the purpose of the review, the Steering Committee provides the following definition:

A positive student experience is one in which students perceive that the university has created an environment – including academically, professionally and socially - that allows students to achieve their goals in the same categories. Further, university representatives should be perceived as responsive, courteous and supportive of students in their interactions in such a way that demonstrates transparency, equity, empathy and compassion.

This self-assessment document has been prepared to support an external review team who will be engaged to help gather students' perceptions and provide recommendations to the University. More specifically, this text aims to provide an External Review Team with sufficient local context and information, as well as background on University operations that will allow for a fulsome and productive review.

Sections 1 and 2 provide this contextual framework, through an overview of University services and offices, with links to more information where appropriate. Section 3 in the document provides what the Steering Committee has collected and identified as key data sources and observations. These data, drawn from various institutional and national surveys, demonstrate many positive attributes of student experience at Waterloo. Some potentially concerning trends do exist however. The Steering Committee is particularly eager to understand the observed decline in undergraduate students' perception of the University from the time of enrollment to graduating year. At the graduate level, the data puts the University on par with its Ontario counterparts. Naturally, our objective is to exceed our peers. The assessment of the student experience at Waterloo suggests significant opportunities for improvement.

To help structure the reviewers' work, the Steering Committee has created three foci or "bins" – teaching and learning; student support; and student wellness – that we believe comprise the most important elements of student experience. For each, a summary of our perceived strengths and possibilities for improvements is articulated in detail in Section 4 of the self-assessment.

With regard to **teaching and learning**, the University believes that faculty regularly engage in high-impact teaching practices, an assessment that is supported by the data. The University is also globally known to advance experiential learning in diverse and meaningful ways. Again, the student data suggests that co-operative education and other work-integrated learning (WIL) programs at Waterloo are positively influencing student experience. An important question relating to the above, however, is how the Waterloo educational model possibly influences the student experience as a result of the intense formal educational requirements. This is a topic about which the Steering Committee encourages the review team to comment.

For graduate students, particularly research students, the Steering Committee recognizes that the quality of their experience will be influenced by the degree to which University representatives – supervisors, faculty, staff and other resource persons – are seen to be supportive of creating vibrant graduate student communities. Generally, the Steering Committee is interested in learning of the strengths and opportunities around the conduct of graduate student research at Waterloo.

In the area of **student support**, this self-assessment includes a statement of principles that should guide interactions between students and University representatives (faculty, staff and members of the broader community). The Steering Committee believes that students needing support should be able to find these services easily, have ready access to them, and be confident in the guidance provided. The Steering Committee also supports the idea that students should be empowered to customize their educational experiences within the limits of University policies and resources. As part of this review, the Steering Committee is eager to affirm that students' interactions are happening in ways that are consistent with these principles.

The University recognizes that **student health and wellness** are intrinsically linked to student success; the educational and research missions of the institution are only possible when the wellness of those teaching, learning and advancing knowledge is in place. Given this importance, the University has placed increasing priority on these areas. The self-assessment contains an inventory of the University wellness supports, particularly those for students, and has documented the important steps the University has taken in recent years to increase the quantity and accessibility of these resources. That being said, the Steering Committee seeks feedback on the emphasis and efforts being placed by the University on student wellness.

Finally, the Steering Committee recognizes that the University community, including the relationships that are formed on- and off-campus by those who share an association with the University, has profound influence on student experiences. There is a wide range of factors that may influence community and student experience, including: celebrating student diversity, fostering a spirit of inclusion, facilitating the creation of peer-to-peer supports and activities, and maximizing the benefits to students of the physical locations where their University activities take place. The Steering Committee welcomes feedback on those attributes of Waterloo communities that may advance or limit the student experience.

Following the main body of the self-assessment document, the Steering Committee has provided a series of questions that are intended to be suggested areas of exploration for the External Review Team. These questions reflect possible differentiators that may be influencing student experience.

1. Self-Assessment and Areas of Interest - Background

The University of Waterloo attracts students who have demonstrated academic excellence and are eager to extend their education through conventional and experiential learning, as well as cutting-edge research. Waterloo is a premier destination for students motivated by the possibilities of integrating their learning with their personal and professional development, with the end goal of effecting impactful changes in their and society's well-being.

Waterloo's academics at both the undergraduate and graduate levels are known to be challenging, but also exceptionally successful in preparing our graduates to continue the University's well-recognized leadership in disruptive innovation. The University believes that the quality of our students' experiences should parallel the excellence of our academic and experiential offerings. As such, the University is engaging in a holistic student experience review, the goals of which are to:

- assess overall student experience at the University;
- situate the findings of this review relative to other data sources and external rankings; and
- provide direction for future investigations and interventions to build upon successes and address identified challenges.

As noted in the Terms of Reference, the student experience evaluation process will include a team of External Reviewers who will engage the campus community, with support from a Steering Committee and appropriate staff colleagues, to gather information and perceptions of Waterloo's current strengths and opportunities.

To guide the external review team's work, this self-assessment aims to:

- provide a sense of the Waterloo culture and University operations, such that the team's assessment can be informed by local context;
- establish links to existing data sources, strategic documents, or other information that may be useful in completing the review; and
- direct the review team towards areas that the University perceives as strength or opportunities, and on which the University seeks specific feedback.

The Steering Committee has established three primary focus areas or "bins" on which this self-assessment concentrates. These include:

1. Quality practices in teaching and learning, including:
 - Classroom experiences;
 - Experiential programs and opportunities;
 - Research activities.
2. Student support, with a focus on:
 - Academic support activities, for example academic advising; program or enrollment status changes; or international exchanges;
 - Non-academic interactions with the University, for example registrarial, student award and student finance activities, etc.
3. Student wellness, including students':
 - Physical and mental wellbeing;
 - Sense of community.

The Steering Committee also acknowledges that students' experiences in these focus areas depend heavily on the presence or absence of appropriate communication methods and well-designed IT

infrastructure. When possible, the interdependencies among student experience, communications and IT are explicitly articulated in this self-assessment.

The remainder of this report is constructed as follows. Sections 1 and 2 present an overarching look at the University's organization in the area of student experience, and links to appropriate University services and offices. This part of the document gives the review team an overview of the University resources and we hope, may be helpful in organizing a consultation strategy during the reviewers' visit.

Section 3 introduces the External Review Team to existing data and their sources that shape the University's perceptions of the student experience. We welcome the reviewers' interpretations of these data points and we encourage the reviewers to use this information, as appropriate, as starting points for consultations during the site visit.

In Section 4, three focus areas are presented that the Internal Steering Committee has identified as key themes related to student experience.

A number of high level questions are contained in the appendix (1) to this document. Some of these inquiries are derived from student experience data, while others are based on the Steering Committee's own observations in relevant areas. It is our hope that these questions may be useful in stimulating conversations among stakeholders. Naturally, the reviewers are encouraged to uncover and explore any issues or situations that they perceive relevant.

2. Overview of Student Experience Resources at Waterloo

2.1 University and Faculty Organization

The University of Waterloo is comprised of [six Faculties](#) (Applied Health Sciences, Arts, Engineering, Environment, Mathematics and Science) all of which offer undergraduate and graduate degrees. The University is also associated with three colleges and a university, referred to locally as the Affiliated and Federated Institutions of Waterloo (AFIW) including [Conrad Grebel University College](#), [Renison University College](#), [St. Paul's University College](#) and [St. Jeromes' University](#). These Institutions provide a variety of roles including residences, academic programming, and cultural and faith-based supports for University of Waterloo students.

Physically, the University is located across multiple campuses. In addition to the main campus, the University operates facilities in downtown Kitchener (Pharmacy), in the Galt section of Cambridge (Architecture), in Stratford (School of Interaction Design and Business), and in Toronto (MTax).

[Enrollment data](#) indicate that there are about 32,000 undergraduate students and 4,600 graduate students. At the undergraduate level, about 67% of students are enrolled in co-op programs. 20% and 40% of undergraduates and graduate students are international, respectively.

Like most North American universities, Waterloo Faculties operate with a Department (or School) structure; within each unit there is a Chair (or Director) and typically Associate Chairs whose mandates include undergraduate and graduate affairs. Each of these faculty positions is typically supported by a staff person, a coordinator, who is often the first point of contact for students who are seeking academic support. Similar positions exist at the Faculty level, with each Faculty having an Associate Dean Undergraduate and an Associate Dean Graduate. These positions typically lead committees that include

the Associate Chairs and Coordinators; their work involves the development of both new academic outputs, but also regulations that influence students' academic and personal experiences.

The Faculties also have Associate Deans for Co-operative Education whose mandate includes supporting the development of co-operative education opportunities and supporting those students during co-op experiences.

In some Faculties, there are additional student support units. For example, the Faculty of Engineering has an office dedicated to the success of [first-year students](#). Other Faculties have created web [presences](#) dedicated to supporting first-year students.

Some Faculties engage in what are known as 2+2 programs in which international students complete their first two years of their academics at an international partner school and their final two years at Waterloo. Additional supports are often in place to assist these students as they transition to academics and community at Waterloo.

2.2 Centrally-provided Student Supports

Outside of the Faculties, there are many important offices with which students typically interact and from which students seek support. The University's [Student Success Office](#) (SSO) provides academic and personal development services, with an emphasis on the undergraduate community and a broad set of initiatives related to new student transition for both grad and undergrads. The SSO also supports internationalization efforts, both via exchange programs and a comprehensive visa advising program. For those students who have temporary or permanent challenges for which accommodations can improve their likelihood of academic success, the [University's AccessAbility Office](#) is the primary point of contact. The University's Student Success Office in partnership with [IST](#) has developed and implemented a web-based service and an app known as [The Portal](#) to provide "real-time, just in time" information on a host of student services including food, transportation, course scheduling, events and other information. Portal engages the student community in its features and evolution.

Waterloo's student community is also influenced strongly by its [Housing and Residences](#). Waterloo's housing offers about 5,800 beds and houses 80% of first year undergraduate students. The City of Waterloo has undergone a significant transition around the universities with the introduction of a very large number of private, high-density student housing units that have changed the dynamics of housing choices for students. Housing and Residences has a focus on student experience, introducing a number of initiatives including [Living Learning communities](#), and [student services](#) in living communities.

The University has also invested substantively in the [wellness](#) of all stakeholders on campus, with special emphasis on [students](#). Services offered to students range from nutrition and health promotion, to health services, to counselling and mental health supports. Campus Wellness also provides important links to off-campus resources. In 2017, the President commissioned an Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health ([PAC-SMH](#)) that produced a report containing [36 recommendations](#) which are now [being implemented](#).

These resources fall within the portfolio of the [Associate Provost, Students](#), who also oversees [Athletics and Recreation](#) and [Food Services](#).

The University is also widely recognized for its support of entrepreneurial activities most notably its support for students who wish to create companies or other organizations that help mobilize diverse initiatives. [Velocity](#) is an incubator that provides knowledge, funding, equipment and access to networks that catalyze students' transformation of product ideas to creation and, ultimately, commercialization. And, Waterloo's support for student entrepreneurship is not limited to product development. [GreenHouse](#), hosted at St. Paul's University College, is "an innovation community for students and community members who want to create ideas and ventures that generate social or environmental change". The University believes that the emphasis on developing ecosystems that advance innovative agendas is an important, positive component of student experience at Waterloo.

The University's [Registrar's Office](#) (RO) supports the full life cycle of undergraduate students, from [marketing and recruitment](#) of future students, to admissions, and through their student experience up to and including convocation. Most frequently, undergraduate students will interact with the RO for issues related to their enrollment and [finances](#). The Registrar at Waterloo reports to the Vice President Academic and Provost. [Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs](#) (GSPA), led by the Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs, provides the same services for graduate students. In December of 2018, the University opened [The Student Service Centre](#), a newly created consolidation of university administrative services for undergraduate and graduate students.

In 2017 the University consolidated and enhanced its myriad efforts towards equality, inclusion and diversity with the creation of the [Equity Office](#) and the appointment of an Associate Vice President for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion.

2.3 Co-operative Education and Experiential Learning

Waterloo's student experience is profoundly influenced by the prevalence and breadth of co-operative and experiential learning opportunities many of which are led by the University's [Associate Provost, Co-operative and Experiential Education](#). The University of Waterloo's leadership embraces the following pedagogy related to co-operative education and more generally, work-integrated learning (WIL).

Work-integrated learning is a model and process of curricular experiential education which formally and intentionally integrates a student's academic studies within a workplace or practice setting. WIL experiences include an engaged partnership of at least: an academic institution, a host organization, and a student. WIL can occur at the course or program level and includes the development of learning outcomes related to employability, personal agency, and life-long learning (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada -CEWIL, 2018).

Work-integrated learning combines classroom learning with time working in industry, public or community organizations. WIL programs are often seen by governments, academic institutions, students and parents as a way of preparing students with the skills and experience they need to be successful (Sattler & Peters, 2012; Sattler & Peters, 2013; Peters, Sattler, & Kelland, 2014). Industry, public and community organizations see WIL programs as a way to develop the next generation of talent and meet the short-term needs of their organizations (Sattler & Peters, 2012).

Quality work-integrated learning programs, including co-op programs, contain these common characteristics: (1) meaningful experience in a workplace setting; (2) curricular integration of workplace learning and academic learning; (3) student outcomes that lead to employability, personal agency and life-long learning; and (4) reflection (McRae & Johnston, 2016).

As a result, from the student experience perspective, the co-operative education program at UW has the following important components:

1. Training prior to and during work terms that help prepare students for successful job search, workplace learning, and professional skill development. Administered by Waterloo's Professional Development program for undergraduate students ([WatPD](#)) and the Centre for Career Action ([CCA](#)), both mandatory and optional programming exists that support students as they prepare for their first co-op experience and for continued success in co-op, and in their professional experiences.
2. Exposure to real-life labour market conditions, competitive practices and workplaces. In order to obtain co-op positions, students are provided with a lists of available placements; students then apply to jobs of interest. Employers select students from the applicants for interviews. After the interview process, students rank employers with whom they've interviewed, and employers rank the students. A "matching" process occurs where students are placed with employers. Students who are unmatched after the first round have additional opportunities to find employment through subsequent matching processes. This process is managed primarily through "WaterlooWorks", an online platform developed for the University.
3. Co-operative education work terms that allow students to apply academic concepts within a workplace and practice setting and in so doing provide them with opportunities to develop learning outcomes that lead to employability, personal agency and life-long learning.
4. Reflective assignments designed to practice communication skills, encourage critical self-reflection and develop reflective habits of mind. These exercises most often take the form of what is known at Waterloo as the "Work Term Report" – a synthesis of the work completed as part of the placement and considerations of how the skills and knowledge gained are complementary or supplementary to their in-class learning. Other reflection exercises are possible and encouraged within the Faculties.

When co-op decisions or processes influence a student's academic progression, these issues are managed collectively between the student's Associate Dean Cooperative Education and the Faculty Relations Manager from co-op who is assigned to the student's Faculty.

Undergraduate students not enrolled in co-op programs and who wish to engage in experiential learning opportunities, and have those activities recognized, may work towards the Experiential Education Certificate Program, known as [EDGE](#).

2.4 Student Representation

Student populations are represented by the Federation of Students ([FEDS](#)) at the undergraduate level and the Graduate Student Association ([GSA](#)) at the graduate level. FEDS and GSA are actively involved in University administration; issues of concern to students are often heard at their respective relations committees (i.e., Undergraduate Student Relations Committee, Graduate Student Relations Committee).

While the resources described here constitute perhaps the most commonly utilized services, or perhaps the most impactful, there are, of course, a large number of [services and offices](#) not included in this introduction. A more complete list is contained in Appendix 2.

3. Evidence on Waterloo's Student Experience

Evidence related to satisfaction regarding the student experience at Waterloo is decidedly mixed. There exist some data that suggest the University is performing equally to or exceeding peers in important metrics. For example, concerning undergraduate student experiences:

- Waterloo student respondents were equally likely as peers to indicate that they were satisfied with their decision to attend Waterloo and to recommend Waterloo (87% vs. 88% and 85% vs. 87%, respectively). ([CUSC GY 2015](#))
- Over 80% of graduating students rated the quality of their Waterloo education as “good” or “excellent” and would return to Waterloo if they could start over, higher than Ontario peers (statistically significant). ([NSSE 2017](#))
- About 70% of graduating students are satisfied with opportunities to become involved on campus. (CUSC 2018)
- Almost three-quarters of student respondents reported that Waterloo shows interest in student well-being ([NCHA 2016](#))
- Three-quarters (75.6%) of graduating students in 2018 felt as if they belonged at Waterloo. In 2015, 71.6% felt the same. (CUSC 2018 and 2015)

Some positive data exists regarding Waterloo's graduate students' experiences. These data points, taken from the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey ([CGPSS](#)) suggest that:

- 71% of graduate students rated their academic experience at Waterloo as excellent or very good. This represents an increase from 67% in 2013. The Ontario average is 67%.
- 65% of graduate students indicated that their overall experience at Waterloo was excellent or very good, again a modest increase from 2013 (63%) and above the Provincial average (60%).

Survey data also supports the importance of co-operative and experiential learning opportunities to Waterloo students. For example:

- Waterloo undergraduate student respondents had received more extensive financing from co-op, internships, or other practical experiences (56% vs. 9%) than Ontario peers. (CUSC 2015)
- 71% of incoming undergraduate students chose Waterloo because of co-op, a 5% increase since 2013. (Incoming Student Survey)
- 60% of current undergraduate students are enrolled in co-op, a 5% increase since 2013/14. ([Waterloo Key Performance Indicators](#) website)
- Over 20,000 students enrolled in entrepreneurship credit and non-credit activities in 2017/18, an increase of about 100% since 2013/14. ([Strategic Plan in Action](#) website)
- Waterloo student respondents were more likely than their Ontario peers to have achieved full-time employment arranged for after graduation. (86% vs. 66% (CUSC 2015))

Finally, despite the rigor of Waterloo's academic programming, evidence exists that Waterloo students are excelling academically:

- Fewer students at Waterloo experienced interruptions to their studies (16% vs. 18%) and delays in completing their programs (27% vs. 33%) than students from other post-secondary institutions across Ontario. (NSEE 2017)
- Waterloo student respondents more often had grades of A- or higher (46% vs. 30%) than peers;

However, student experience surveys, including those linked above, provide contrasting results in other areas vis-à-vis the student experience. In particular:

- In the 2017 [NSSE survey](#), over half (54%) of first-year Waterloo respondents indicated that Waterloo places 'quite a bit' to 'very much' emphasis on overall well-being, but less than half (43%) of graduating year respondents felt the same.
- In the CUSC first-year survey, about three out of four (74%) first-year Waterloo respondents were satisfied (satisfied and very satisfied) with the concern shown to them by the University, compared to about half (42%) of CUSC graduating year survey respondents (lower than Ontario peers, statistically significant).
- The satisfaction with concern shown by the University among Waterloo's graduating year student respondents (48%) is significantly lower than Ontario graduating year students (59%). (CUSC 2015)
- The 2016 and 2015 CUSC surveys indicates that one in five (20%) first-year undergraduate survey respondents disagree that most of their professors treat students as individuals, not just numbers. Among graduating year respondents, this number increases to 24%, suggesting a sentiment among students that they are treated impersonally.
- The [2016 National College Health Assessment](#) survey shows 39% of Waterloo respondents met recommendations for moderate and/or vigorous exercise. In the prior two weeks, 25% felt things were hopeless, 16% felt so depressed it was difficult to function, 32% felt very lonely, 53% felt exhausted for reasons other than physical activity, and 26% felt overwhelming anxiety. While these results are not significantly different from peers' responses, it is cause for concern.

For Waterloo's graduate students:

- Results from the CGPSS in 2016 indicate that only 51% of graduate students found their student life experience at Waterloo to be 'excellent' or 'very good'. While this is above the 2013 and Ontario values (both 47%), having only just above half in these categories may be considered problematic.
- The data also indicate that doctoral students at Waterloo are particularly dissatisfied with their student life experience, with only 48% rating 'excellent' or 'very good'.

Moreover, in the [Maclean's 2019 University Rankings](#), Waterloo was ranked 11th out of 15 universities in the comprehensive university category for student satisfaction. As a subset of that, the University was ranked 15th in mental health services. While these results are disappointing, it is critical to note that these survey results are unreliable due to a very low survey response rate. Moreover, as described in detail later in this self-assessment, the University has dedicated significant resources to Campus Wellness support and more proactively, health education and promotion.

Data collected and reported for the 2013-2018 Strategic Plan Summative Report (some data are reported in the [Executive Summary](#) and [Detailed Report](#) [WatiAM credentials required for access], other data shown on the [Strategic Plan in Action](#) website) provides an understanding of how Waterloo's student experience has changed over the last five years, and other important data about the student experience.

These data points show conflicted responses on Waterloo's student experience. Waterloo is determined to provide our students with an unparalleled experience and education to help them achieve their academic and career goals. It is incumbent upon us to better understand these discordant perspectives in the student experience and identify a path forward to addressing these concerns.

4. Specific Themes in the Student Experience Review

Between 2013 and 2018, strategic initiatives at the University of Waterloo were guided by its [Strategic Plan](#). At the conclusion of that time period, the University engaged in a consultation exercise to help inform the next strategic planning window, expected to begin in 2020. During that process, several [issue papers](#) were written that were intended to stimulate discussion among all campus stakeholders. The most relevant of these papers to the student experience review include:

- [Undergraduate Learning](#);
- [Graduate Studies](#);
- [Learning Environment](#);
- [Internationalization](#).

The executive summaries for these papers appear as Appendix 3.

The consultative, engagement exercises through which these papers were developed, along with the data presented above, have helped to inform the Steering Committee's perceptions of strengths and opportunities in the student experience in each of the following themes.

Focus 1: Quality Teaching and Learning

As noted in the introduction, the University of Waterloo has demonstrated an ability to attract and educate exceptionally strong students. The most recent data from the Strategic Plan indicate that 61% of the incoming undergraduate class had higher than 90% averages. Graduate student data, while more variable, suggest a similar quality of students applying to our diverse programming. Moreover, the University is uniquely positioned in Canada and in North America to catalyze students' experiential learning opportunities.

To ensure continuous improvement in teaching and learning, the University has embarked on a number of initiatives in the recent past, including:

- The [Teaching Fellows](#) program, where Professor(s) from each Faculty lead in the development and sharing of best practices to enhance student learning.
- The consolidation of various teaching and learning resources into a central, well-supported [Centre for Teaching Excellence](#) (CTE) with the mission of which *"is to collaborate...to foster capacity and community around teaching and to promote an institutional culture that values effective teaching and meaningful learning."*
- The implementation of the [Centre for Extended Learning](#) that *"supports the design, development and delivery of online credit and non-credit courses...offers professional development opportunities to the world, and advocates for adult, part-time and online learners."*
- The development of the [Writing and Communication Centre](#) that *"engages, encourages, and empowers members of the...community to better articulate ideas while meeting the varied expectations of their disciplines and vocations."*

- The [Undergraduate Communications Outcomes Initiative](#) that was conceived to replace previous language qualification exams with a course-based approach that equips students with communications skills necessary for academic success and relevant to their disciplines.

These programs and offices report to the University's Associate Vice President, Academic ([AVPA](#)).

Course Experiences

The University, through the Faculties and Departments, strongly encourages deep learning¹ with [high impact teaching practices](#). Waterloo's in-class learning includes the spectrum of traditional teaching methods - lectures and seminars, as well as cumulative, capstone projects that are intended to help students demonstrate the collective body of knowledge and skills obtained in their programs. Courses at Waterloo also move outside of the classroom - field work, laboratory work, and international experiences are common in all Faculties, as well as online learning.

Instructors at Waterloo are also encouraged to extend students' course-based learning into non-traditional areas, including [problem-based learning](#), and engagement with incubators such as [Velocity](#) and [GreenHouse](#).

The Steering Committee has confidence in the caliber of instruction our students receive at both the undergraduate and graduate level, and in all teaching formats. Naturally, in a large university, there will be a distribution of teaching quality that ranges from exceptional to needing improvement. But, we believe that our courses generally provide positive, reinforcing learning opportunities that meet or exceed students' expectations. The Steering Committee also points to the issue paper on undergraduate learning that articulates the attention to teaching at Waterloo, both in terms of existing resources and efforts to create a culture of innovation in teaching. Finally, the Steering Committee notes that the challenges to improved teaching identified in the undergraduate learning paper demonstrates a self-awareness that will allow for continued improvement.

Thus, the Steering Committee perceives that in-class experiences, and the resources that support them, have the potential to produce positive impacts on the student experience. That being said, concerns exist about how the University's academic programming impacts the student experience. Returning to the data presented above, we note that Waterloo students at the time of graduation have a more negative perception of Waterloo's care for their well-being and concern shown to students than in their first year. The Steering Committee seeks to understand those teaching and learning experiences – both in the delivery and content – that may contribute to this reported decline in undergraduate students' perception of the University.

Experiential Learning and Cooperative Education

Waterloo's experiential learning opportunities, particularly its co-operative education system, are an obvious attractor for our undergraduate students and an important path towards our students' personal and professional successes.

¹ Deep Learning occurs from experiences that encourage learners to make connections, apply knowledge in new contexts, engage in learning activities and analytical thinking on their own and with others, and retain their learning. (Christensen Hughes & Mighty, 2010)

While there is some diversity in how the co-operative education programs are sequenced, there is a general pattern. Undergraduate students begin with a number of terms of course work prior to their first work term. In some cases, students will study on campus for only one term prior to their first work term; in other cases, students won't have their first work term until after their fifth term (including one term off).

Interestingly, students in the [same program may actually be streamed differently](#), with half the cohort having its first work experience in term two while the other half of the cohort will start in term three.

Once students begin their work terms, the typical pattern is alternating between work terms and academic terms for the remainder of their program. In some cases, students will complete a “double work term” – two consecutive terms with either a single or multiple placements – nearer to the end of their academic program.

The administration of this co-operative education program requires that students are applying and interviewing for their subsequent work term during an academic term. Moreover, in the academic term following a work term, students are required to complete their reflection exercises – most commonly in the form of a work term report.

We recognize and celebrate the vast benefits of co-operative education and experiential learning to supporting students in achieving their personal and professional objectives. We also believe that the cohort-based system that co-op sequencing can create results in very strong camaraderie among our students that results in a peer-supported learning environment.

The Steering Committee is also cognizant that the requirements placed on students to be successful in co-op often interact with their academic obligations, potentially creating increased stress and decreased student experience. The Steering Committee has concern about how students may be impacted in instances where the student is unable to secure a placement. Finally, given the strength and pervasiveness of co-operative education at Waterloo, the Steering Committee seeks to gather information on the student experiences of those enrolled in non-co-operative education programs.

Another, increasingly important experiential student learning opportunity at both the undergraduate and graduate level involves international experiences. The Internationalization Working Group defines “Internationalization Abroad” as a diverse set of opportunities, both short- and long-term, that engage Waterloo students in activities that expose these students to new learning environments, teaching and learning methods, as well as perspectives and philosophies of fellow learners. Access to international experiences through coursework, co-operative education placements, or other types is a focus for many stakeholders, with [Waterloo International playing a catalyzing and coordinating role](#).

Student Research

The University of Waterloo is a [research intensive university](#). The University's Office of Research notes:

In 2017-2018, Waterloo attracted more than \$224 million from public and private sources to fund research across a spectrum of challenges. Waterloo's strength in research excellence is supported by partnerships with industry, creating opportunities that generate new knowledge and further Canada's economy.

Many of the University's strongest undergraduate students, as well as all research graduate students, engage in transformative and disruptive research. The opportunity to conduct research is often seen as a way for students to become excited by the sense of empowerment they feel as they define their own areas of exploration.

At the undergraduate level, students have funded research opportunities through the NSERC Undergraduate Student Research Assistantships ([USRAs](#)) and the [President's Scholarship of Distinction](#); Cooperative education has introduced a research stream – where undergraduates conduct a number of on- or off-campus research terms to satisfy co-op requirements. The Steering Committee considers undergraduate research experiences as a potential strength in student experience.

At the graduate level, research is, of course, often an integral part of the student experience. Most research graduate programs require a modest number of courses – typically between four and eight for master's students and about four for PhD candidates. The remainder of a graduate student's academic requirements involves the conception, conduct and dissemination of research.

It is the view of the Steering Committee that the research graduate students' experience is strongly correlated to the degree of satisfaction and empowerment they feel in their research. Successful research occurs when: a student has appropriate level of input into the definition of the problem; the student is well-supported (in terms of scholarly guidance, access to necessary resources, and timely feedback) in the completion of the work; and the student's dissemination of the work is facilitated. Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs maintains a Handbook on Graduate Student Supervision that articulates these goals. The Steering Committee is eager to understand how research activities are seen to contribute to graduate students' experience.

Focus 2: Student Support

The University's faculty and staff interact with students (and their support systems) in an enormous number of ways, on issues that are both academic and administrative. These interactions may be in person, via email, by phone or through online interfaces.

Simply, the Steering Committee believes that in all cases, when students seek support from members of the University community:

- Students should have clear information about the appropriate person or offices with whom they should interact.
- Complementary services should be physically co-located to reduce the inconvenience experienced by students.
- Students should receive timely, correct information that (when possible) fully resolves the students' concerns, or presents the students with appropriate options.
- Students' concerns should be heard with appropriate levels of empathy and demonstrations of cultural sensitivities.
- Students' initiatives and requests – particularly those that advance students' customization of their academic and other experiences – should be supported when feasible within University policies and resource limitations.

Further, the Steering Committee recognizes that increasingly students are seeking access to University support beyond normal business hours and, when possible, online with 24/7 service.

There are also times when the University wishes to provide information to students. In a time when students are overwhelmed by diverse information sources and communication methods, the University has an obligation to be thoughtful in planning when, how and what to communicate.

In the area of student support, the Steering Committee sets as an objective the goals articulated in the Learning Environment paper:

“a proactive community that demonstrates and encourages genuine care, concern, and respect for students and all members of the University community.”

To this end, the Steering Committee seeks to understand students’ perceptions on the quality of support they are receiving, and how the support influences their overall student experiences.

Focus 3: Student Wellness

The University leadership believes strongly that the health and well-being of students are critical factors in their success. The University considers a successful environment to be one in which students’ physical and mental health are promoted not only by formal structures and programs, but also by the community that is created. This section presents information on students’ well-being and how it is influenced by student communities.

Physical and Mental Health

In its report, the Learning Environment Group spends considerable time on student wellness, with an emphasis on University supports, including those listed earlier in this document. Subsequent to the writing of that paper, the University has signed the [Okanagan Charter](#), and has articulated a [number of commitments](#) that are intended to advance the spirit of that framework. The University aims to create a holistic approach to wellness – physical and mental health achieved through disparate methods including resilience, social inclusion and spirituality. These efforts will be led by a health promotion and wellness collaborative.

The Steering Committee, while pleased with the University’s trajectory in this area, believes unequivocally that this is an area in which continuous improvement is an obligation. We also are eager to ensure that the University community is aware of the myriad of options that are and will be available.

Beyond investing in services that promote students’ health, the Steering Committee recognizes that it is equally important to create a community and environment in which no obstacles – social, financial, or spatial – exist that preclude or dissuade students from seeking support. We also note that the propensity to seek support for mental health and other issues may be influenced by students’ cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

The University also seeks to learn of and address the sources of challenges that students may be facing that can negatively influence their health. These may be academic (as described above), financial (as students are known to be taking on greater responsibilities in funding their education), social (as means of inclusion become more diverse and potentially complex), and inclusive (based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or cultural associations). To these ends, the Steering Committee seeks input on the level of awareness of wellness supports and the comfort level among students in accessing appropriate aids.

Sense of Community

The University's community is large, diverse and growing. The University aims to create a diverse, welcoming community where new ideas can be created, tested and proven without limits and with respect for all individuals' needs and preferences on how to learn. As such, specific attention at Waterloo is directed to our large and growing international student population. The University's strategic planning exercise also produced a working paper on internationalization. The working group states:

"It is critical that universities commit – wholeheartedly – to the ways in which internationalization can serve to advance their core mission of teaching, research, and service for the public good. Not only does the world need the graduates, discoveries, and contributions that would result from these activities, but the world also needs this example of global engagement and leadership, so that others can be inspired."

The data on international students reflect the University's diversity. China is the most common international country of citizenship for our students, with about 6,800 undergraduates and more than 1,600 graduate students. Indian students represent the next largest group of students, with about 1,500 students in total, with nearly equal numbers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. For undergraduates, Pakistan and East Asia – Korea, Malaysia and Singapore are the next most populous student countries of origin. At the graduate level, nearly 500 students come to Waterloo from Iran. The University also operates an International Visiting Graduate Student program ([IVGS](#)) that welcomes graduate student researchers to work with Waterloo faculty members and have access to the University's resources.

The presence of these international students at Waterloo can promote what the literature describes as internationalization on campus – where the sharing of cultures and perspectives of domestic and international students help inform all students' learning and social awareness. Waterloo will correctly feel pride when our graduates have a breadth of cultural understandings that go beyond their home ethnicities and prepare them to be successful personally and professionally, and to contribute to the successful resolution of global challenges.

Given these objectives, the Steering Committee seeks feedback on the how internationalization influences the student experience.

There is reasonable gender balance at Waterloo, with about 46% of undergraduates and 43% of graduate students identifying as women. But, areas across the University exhibit less well-balanced enrollments, particularly in STEM disciplines, where women constitute only about 35%. To promote STEM disciplines to women, several Faculties have created "Women in" programs, like those in [Engineering](#), [Mathematics](#) and [Science](#) that attempt to attract applicants and support students. More broadly, the University's embraced the UN's [HeforShe](#) campaign that guides much of the University's activities to advance and promote women students, faculty and senior leaders.

As with concerns on mental health, the University does not intend to be satisfied with the status quo. That being said, the Steering Committee has confidence in the University's path towards eliminating any obstacles that limit or diminish student experience because of gender.

Spatially, the University spans across multiple campuses: main campus, the [School of Pharmacy](#) in Kitchener, the [School of Architecture](#) in Cambridge, the [Masters of Taxation program in Toronto](#) and the [Stratford School of Interaction Design and Business](#). The presence of multiple campuses may have the

positive effect of producing very strong cohorts within the satellite campuses; at the same time, there is some evidence that students enrolled in programs housed at satellite campuses feel less connected to the University. Transportation to and from main campus, as well as the presence or absence of University services at the satellite campuses may influence the student experience.

Waterloo's location, just 100 km from downtown Toronto presents both opportunities and potential challenges. The proximity to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) makes Waterloo a convenient destination for students, who are "far enough" from home to have some independence, but near enough to home to maintain a sense of connection with family and friends. While no formal data are available, there is a perception that many students opt not to stay on campus over weekends or on academic breaks. The impacts (if any) these patterns have on the local community, and student experience overall, is unknown.

The Steering Committee prior to and in preparation for this student experience review, has spent considerable time contemplating student community at Waterloo. We make the following observations: Waterloo students are diverse in their extracurricular activities. Waterloo students are equally likely to be attending a football game, to participating in a hackathon, to volunteering, or visiting with family or friends in the Greater Toronto Area. Given the diversity of our students' interests, as represented by the more than [300 clubs](#) and services recognized by Waterloo's Federation of Students, it is difficult to centrally program activities that will be successful in catalyzing community. Instead, the University hopes to hear from students on how their initiatives can be supported to the betterment of the community.

Naturally, students can also create communities without interacting with the University administration. One of the recognized strengths of Waterloo is the students' association within their home Faculties and units, and their classmates in these programs. Within these programs, and across the University, peer mentorship is happening among Waterloo's undergraduate and graduate programs, both informally and through [formal structures](#).

The strong bonds that are built among Waterloo's undergraduate students may be reinforced by their cooperative education or experiential learning opportunities. Waterloo students who find themselves working in common locations in similar industries away from Waterloo often extend the Waterloo community to multiple cities around the world. Unfortunately, sometimes the converse may be true – where friendships that are formed on campus are disrupted as students travel to disparate locations for their work terms.

As part of the consultations around graduate students and graduate studies, significant concern has been expressed about the graduate student community. Those who have attended these sessions have reported an absence of opportunities to engage in activities that balance the social and scholarly goals that are common for graduate students. The graduate student community has also begun a review of the relationships between graduate students and their supervisors, to ensure that these relationships are promoting positive graduate student experiences.

To summarize, the Steering Committee perceives that the quality of students' experiences is directly related to the presence or absence of strong communities among our students. Issues that are particularly relevant at Waterloo include: internationalization and gender; physical campus locations and their students' access to services and community; the close proximity to the GTA; the ability of the

University to promote and respond to diverse student interests; the impacts of co-op sequencing; and, for graduate students, the ability to interact across campus and successfully with their supervisors.

We are eager to learn from the review process, particularly the external review team's consultations, about the relative importance of these (and other) issues that have direct impact on the student experience.