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### Project Ideas

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Community Mobilisation in Crisis (DVM 4330A)

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## Writing the idea

**Part 1: Literature review**

One of our team members found his first year at university as an international student quite disappointing as he felt there was so much more to offer. He expected more, especially in the new environment he was in, because we were promised opportunities as immigrants. These promises, however, seemed very overwhelming and lacked originality. There is no denying that the socioeconomic well-being of international students has gradually decreased over time.

The following literature review will outline the key issues faced by international students. This slowdown can be attributed to several factors which has affected the overall well-being of international students. First of all, there has been a substantial change in immigration laws, with an emphasis now more on immediate labor demands and economic objectives than on long-term integration. Canada has notably capped international student applications at 360,000 in May 2024.

(a reduction of 30% compared to the year prior), stressing that the current number of international students was unsustainable and leading to pressure on housing, health care and social services (Government of Canada, 2024). This change frequently makes it harder for immigrants to get resources and find steady work as they need a work visa on top of their international student visa. The application processing times for immigration-related requests are quite substantial with a backlog of a few million applications, especially for permanent residence. Some authors (Lynch, J. *et al.*, 2023) found that immigration processes were an important source of trauma for international students, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Secondly, financial changes, such as market saturation and the COVID-19 pandemic, have reduced job opportunities. In addition, issues like systemic barriers like discrimination, credential recognition issues, and lack of affordable housing hinder immigrants' ability to benefit from these opportunities fully. Marishia Akbar's Report on Challenges facing international students in Canada, emphasizes the vulnerability of International students due to their social status and lack of access to social services(Akbar, 2023, p.140 ). The covid-19 pandemic impacted the lives of international students adding to existing challenges and creating new ones related to job loss, reduced income, social isolation, and lack of adequate healthcare and support (Government of Canada 2021; Varugheses & Schwartz, 2022) (Akbar, 2023, p.140 ). Although enrolling international students through recruitment agencies is a profitable venture for Ontario public colleges, they often invest little capital in providing these students with adequate support services(Akbar, 2023, p.142). Even though the federal government of Canada funds a well-organized settlement services sector, international college students are not eligible for these

services because they are temporary migrants, except those who live in Quebec. Because of this, most international students rely on their institutions for assistance with their studies, jobs, health, and immigration, but they frequently discover that these resources and support are scarce. (Arthur, 2017)(Akbar, 2023, p.142). Akbar criticizes actors involved in ensuring policies dedicated to providing resources to international students deemed less effective. This is due to underlying causes such as failure to prioritize needs, lack of adequate resources, and accountability.

As the number of international students studying in Canada rises, the housing issues International students encounter are becoming more urgent. Although the number of overseas students attending Canadian universities has increased dramatically, there hasn't been a sufficient supply of suitable or reasonably priced housing to accommodate this demand. University dormitories, which have historically provided students with a convenient and safe place to live, are restricted in number and frequently give preference to domestic first-year students not to mention their expensive cost of 8,000 to 20,000 \$, as shown in the University of Ottawa website. As a result of this International students are subsequently led to turn to the private rental sector, where they experience a range of issues, particularly those who study in urban regions like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Foreign students are also very well equipped to deal with their new landlords and to negotiate their leases with limited knowledge of Canadian real estate practices and housing laws. This is where international students usually end up in precarious housing situations due to factors such as affordability discrimination and lack of knowledge. The housing market in Canada, particularly in the major cities, is quite unaffordable as rental prices

have skyrocketed in the previous years. This places a burden on international students with limited financial resources or restrictions to work. There are also discriminatory practices when trying to secure housing. For example, landlords who are reluctant to rent to international students may be due to language barriers, cultural differences, or false impressions about their financial stability and stay duration. At the same time, a lot of International students are also not aware of their tenant's rights in Canada which makes them vulnerable to exploitation, which includes unreasonable rent prices or being forced to live in substandard conditions. Due to the brief duration of their stay in Canada, international students may find it challenging to find long-term accommodation. While some students may only need accommodation for a few semesters or may return home during the summer, many landlords prefer tenants who can commit to longer renting terms. While these housing issues are common among immigrants and other newcomers to Canada, international students face some unique challenges. For example, immigrants who arrive under permanent residency programs may have access to settlement services that help them secure housing, and they might be eligible for government-funded housing options. On the other hand, international students often arrive on temporary visas, limiting their access to such services. They may also lack the social networks that other immigrants rely on to find housing, making them more reliant on the private market.

Housing also serves a vital role in the socioeconomic integration of newcomers and international students. Lack of adequate housing can often lead to a host of personal problems faced by international students which include poor academic performance social isolation and mental health issues(). Scholars such as Simone & Newbold (2014), Teixeira (2014), and Hiebert

(2017) have highlighted the significance of secure housing for facilitating immigrants' assimilation into Canadian society (Sherman, 2023). Finding secure and reasonably priced lodging is frequently the first step for international students to take while attempting to effectively assimilate to life in a new nation (Sherman, 2023). However, their unstable living conditions may make it difficult for them to concentrate on their academics and engage fully in campus life, which will negatively affect their experience in Canada as a whole (Sherman, 2023). Overall the lack of research on the issue is very concerning given the number of international students coming in every year.

The COVID-19 pandemic was another issue of structural concern as this caused significant disruption to Canada's International and Immigration goals. International Education was negatively impacted at the start of the pandemic by travel bans, public health precautions, and the following economic decline. According to a survey conducted by the CBIE (2020), 75% of international students experienced high levels of stress due to the pandemic, primarily related to health concerns, travel restrictions, and financial hardship (Sitton, 2023 p, 10). Additionally, hundreds of thousands of potential international students enrolling in Canadian schools and universities were disrupted by border closures and significant disruptions in the travel industry, limited language-testing venues, and the suspension of activities in visa centers (Sitton, 2023 p, 10). The tuition fees paid by international students, who usually have greater costs than those of domestic students, are a major source of income for postsecondary institutions in Canada. However, many international students choose to study in their home countries or postpone admittance due to travel restrictions and uncertainty about continuing their studies. According to

Matias et al. (2021), the drop in enrolment of overseas students might cost Canadian institutions between \$438 million (-1.0%) and \$2.5 billion (-5.7%) of their anticipated income for 2020–2021(Sitton, 2023 p, 11).. For Canadian postsecondary institutions, these financial effects have included budget cuts, hiring freezes, possible layoffs, and postponed maintenance, among other dire consequences (Hoye & Hatherly, 2020)(Sitton, 2023 p, 11). Additionally, the local economies of the places where these institutions are located suffer a significant loss as a result of the fall in the number of overseas students(Sitton, 2023 p, 11).

International students also experienced considerable obstacles when trying to enroll in Canadian universities following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many were forced to postpone admittance or decide to finish their education from home due to travel limitations, worries about their personal safety, and the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of in-person studies. The number of international students fell drastically as a result of this abrupt change, which had a domino impact on Canadian colleges as well as the larger economy.

In a broader sense, larger structural problems are reflected in the difficulties faced by international students in Canada, particularly those associated with housing and economic engagement. Precarious living conditions are a result of the mismatch between the increase in international student populations and the supply of cheap accommodation. This mismatch is made worse by prejudice and a lack of knowledge about tenant rights. Their academic performance suffers, social isolation occurs, and mental health issues arise all of which have a real impact on their well-being and ability to succeed academically. Furthermore, these

difficulties were made worse by the COVID-19 epidemic, which interfered with Canada's immigration objectives and put a heavy financial burden on local businesses and colleges.

The last challenge faced by international students is a combined sense of social isolation and cultural distancing that can be more aptly described as a “rupture” from the original cultural fabric and social relations they had back home (Linnea Wallen *et al.*, 2024). There are multiple causes for this such as stereotypes and discrimination, cultural differences, language barriers, challenges in building relations with locals and homesickness (Linnea Wallen *et al.*, 2024).

## **Part 2: Progress /15**

- **Briefly overview the initiative, e.g. purpose, partners, final products.**
- **Describe the progress to date. If products can be linked or attached, then please do so (e.g. URL of a web page, or PDF poster, etc.).**

### **A. Introduction**

To explain the initiative, let us take an hypothetical example of a new international student arriving on campus for their first example. This example is inspired from all team member experiences. Let us take the hypothetical name and experience of John, a young male student coming from a distant country for his first year of university. After saying their goodbyes to their family back home, the student flies over to Canada and goes to meet their relatives already in their country (aunt, uncle, or cousin) who help them get set up in their university dorm. All the information they have is what was in the immigration poster they saw on facebook and the information they had to submit for their Visa application that they had to submit two times



because the first one was rejected, and had a two year delay that made them arrive late for the beginning of the semester by 2 weeks. He did not participate in the Welcome Week, he did not even know there were activities in the first year of university. Once in his dorm, John feels a deep sense of isolation and dread as he does not know anyone on campus except their cousin who helped him get settled in. He is now late in his classes and has a hard time adjusting. Even though he was able to follow his classes online, the in-person experience is daunting and he does not have any friends or any knowledge of how to navigate the campus and its services to help him. More than anything else, John is trying to stay in touch with his family back home using WhatsApp calls and has a deep sense of longing for the familiarity of his own culture, and is confused about what constitutes Canadian culture.

Now imagine a situation where this hypothetical international student would have benefited from a strong sense of social support from a community of international students like him. Imagine he has a mentor, a fourth year student with a similar lived experience that shows him around campus and helps answer any question he might have. Imagine he had access to informational channels of all the campus' relevant events and services.

The main challenges that have arisen from the literature are social isolation (Kanagavel, R., 2019), acculturative stress (Li, L., & Peng, W., 2019) and the last challenge is cultural integration (Lynch, J. et al., 2023). The first concerns the loss of your direct social connections, relationships with family and friends back home which are now put online. The second problem concerns losing contact with your culture. The third problem is the difficulty to integrate a

culture that is not your own, integrating its institutions, values and legal system so as to not be perceived as a deviant or scorned and to be wholly accepted as a member of society.

Our target group, which started from a prototype that is very reasonable, i.e. the size of the class (about 50 students), moves onwards to a sample of all international students in the International Development and Globalization program for testing (about 1000 students), and would ideally encompass all 10,638 international students on campus (uO International, 2022, p. 9)

For such a large target audience size, the only feasible solution found in the literature was that of SNS instant communication groups. Such a group would need to be interactive, to be fully understood and utilized by international students, to fit their particular needs and be simple of use. To this end, we landed on the idea of a WhatsApp community with multiple channels for international students to share their experiences, learn about events on campus and sign up for them, learn about campus services and learn about local networking events or job and volunteering opportunities.

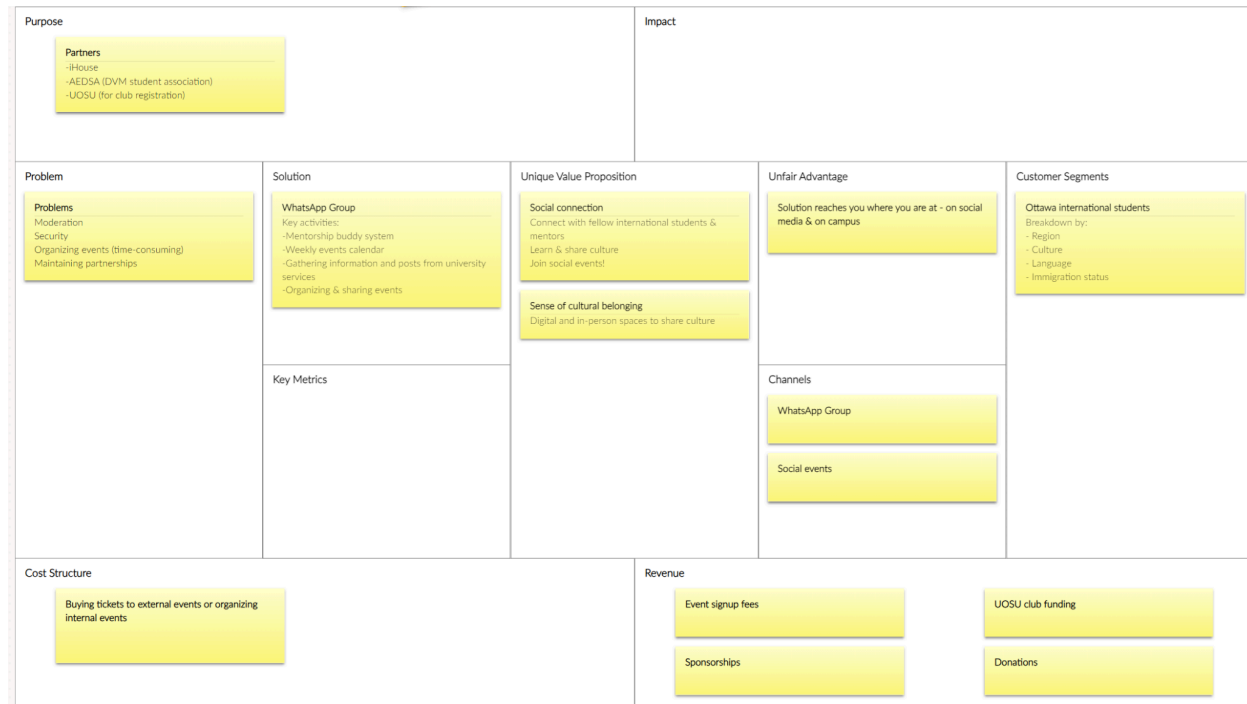
## **B. Our solution**

The core challenge we wanted to address was the social isolation of international students, a frequent theme in the literature. Nevertheless, the literature often forgets the needs of international students themselves and will ignore their need for cultural connection to their home, friends and families or their need for professional development. As such, these will also be key

aspects to develop. The literature has found so far that student satisfaction and grades can be improved using an online community but that there is no clear effect on learning and skill development as students are pushed to many differing and competing use of their online time and of social media communities. Positive results were found using LinkedIn (Hazzam, J. *et al.* (2024) which improved student satisfaction and grades, Facebook lowered school dropout rates (Masserini, L., & Bini, M. (2021), WhatsApp which improved student engagement with courses and interpersonal relationships (Tang, Y., & Hew, K. F., 2022). The main uses of social media are to follow friends, text, share information Bal, E., & Bicen, H. (2017))

Our solution is to create an online community that will link up international students better with with each other and with university services and student organizations. The best way to achieve this goal is to use already existing services such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Facebook is the world's biggest social media platform with 3 billion monthly active users, which is closely followed by WhatsApp at 2 billion active users (Statista, 2024).

While Facebook has the option to create community group pages and discussions, WhatsApp offers far more interactive solutions, with the ability to create multiple themed channels. This app also has the advantage of being more simple and user-friendly, with less clutter. Whatsapp is used predominantly by international students to stay in touch with their friends and family back home. This can be done by the individual or group chat feature. For big groups or communities, there is an option to create an advanced WhatsApp group with more functionalities. WhatsApp has been popularized especially for its ease-of-use and its security and confidentiality.

**Figure 1: Social Impact Canvas Project Plan**

With an advanced WhatsApp group such as this, it would be possible to create multiple community subtopics, such as an FAQ with a survival guide to university, a careers and professional development section, a general chat and a mentorship chat, and a social and networking events section.

By using WhatsApp, we can have real time interaction with international students which will facilitate their social integration and the building of interpersonal relationships. Further, the thematic separation of the page will allow students to access the information they need to succeed academically, personally and professionally much easier in bite-size pieces and in a collaborative and interactive way.

**Figure 2: Prototype WhatsApp Community**

Our current partners include the International House, the campus student-led organization dedicated to international students and the AEDSA or Development Student’s Association, which is the main representing body for students in our program, officially known as a “Recognized Student Government” (RSG for short). They were crucial in receiving early feedback on our prototype group and will be needed to share our group to the targeted audience of international students in the International Development and Globalization program (AEDSA) and of all international students at the University of Ottawa (International House). Both have the ability to do so by sharing the group information and link through their Newsletters or other mass online communication methods by email. Nevertheless, such a massive distribution requires a

whole chain of approvals and it was not possible to send out these emails on time for this report. This brings us to the challenges our initiative has faced.

### **Part 3: Challenges or Changes /10**

Now that we have conducted a literature review and detailed our progress in the initiative, it is time to address the difficulties and challenges faced during this project.

#### **A. Our challenges**

A transformative initiative such as ours relies on building social networks and partnerships to empower student communities. They require the use of existing channels and the biggest challenge lies in creating those initial connections and having our first members and ambassadors. It is also crucially important to acknowledge the fact that though social networks provide indispensable support to international students, they are mostly used to connect with their friends and family back home (Li, L., & Peng, W, 2019), (R. Kanagavel, 2019).

Our main challenge was to get international students to join our community. To get them to join, we first contacted iHouse as the most representative organization of international students. We gathered their feedback and decided to share the WhatsApp group by email and paper posters on campus.

#### **1. Time**

Building a community takes time. In a real-world context, creating a sustainable, engaging, and beneficial community would allow for a lengthy phased development. However, fast-tracking this process limited our capacity for detailed and substantial improvements. This motivated us to launch a platform, collect feedback, and identify early outcomes and findings within a shorter period of time. This was done by streamlining a version of the community by focusing on the core functions. The use of a WhatsApp group offers the opportunity to gradually enhance by gathering preliminary feedback from early users. The lack of time taught us the value of early-stage community-building, and the importance of prioritizing essential features over complexity in the initial phases.

## 2. Relevance

We needed to confirm we were actually solving the problem. Great care needs to be placed in ensuring the community meets the needs of the students. If the community or the app it is constructed in does not meet the needs of the students, they will not use it. We anticipated that meeting the numerous needs of international students would be crucial to creating a community that offers tremendous value. The students we aim to engage may require needs beyond social support, such as academic guidance, cultural integration, and career networking. This challenge made us adapt the community structure to include and feature sub-groups or channels, with each addressing a different aspect of student and personal life. This would reinforce the importance of adaptability and attentiveness. We feel that by offering flexible structures, we can accommodate a more inclusive community that can adapt to the evolving needs of international students.

### 3. Interest

There needs to be a certain amount of momentum and interest before a group community can be created. In the initial stages, we need extensive and intensive outreach efforts to have people join the group. In the later stage, such a community can count on word of mouth to get new members. To achieve this critical, we asked all consulted parties if they would be interested in partnering with us or sharing the group in their next newsletter. This was key as generating initial interest is a challenge, as international students may be hesitant to join a community intended to address personal issues such as social isolation. This may stem from a lack of familiarity with the community and its purpose, or simply having concerns about privacy and safety when sharing personal experiences. In order to address this, we focused outreach efforts that emphasize our community's values and intentions. We did this through informational posters, digital outreach campaigns, and using our partners and ambassadors to share the benefits of joining our group in a relatable fashion. We view this challenge as an example of how important trust, credibility, and transparency are in community mobilization.

### 4. Content

Another big challenge was to create partnerships to receive sufficient content and information to feed the group and make it of value to students. Maintaining a steady flow of valuable information is essential and key to keeping members and users engaged, and we expect to rely on consistent support from our partners and reliable information sources. Establishing a clear schedule with expectations and responsibilities from each partner, including updates and announcements, was a great way to combat this difficulty. Through this challenge, we learned the



importance of constant communication and accountability between the partners and stakeholders present, which allowed us to maintain a dynamic and engaged community.

## 5. Safety

Many problems are unique to online communities like digital safety, protection of privacy, and moderation. Such a high volume of content can be shared through social media that it becomes difficult to filter and avoid spam, unsolicited marketing, hateful or disrespectful speech, and racism and discrimination. As membership grows, there could have been an increase in unsolicited messages or instances of cultural misunderstandings. To address this issue, our team acted as moderators and utilized all the safety features available in the app. Rules and clear community guidelines were set for the group and disrespect for the rules was sanctioned by a written warning by direct message and the second violation would result in immediate removal from the group with the possibility of a written appeal. Group link sharing was restricted to moderators and verified individuals so as not to lose control of the group or have too many bots or spam. The group link is changed every week to avoid excessive sharing. Finally, new members are subject to prior approval before they can post in the group. Setting boundaries and restrictions was essential for maintaining a safe and positive environment for all.

## 6. Reliance

We were overly reliant on our institutional partners to have them share the group with our targeted audience. International House and the AEDSA both need to go through multiple formal approvals and meetings and then need a few weeks of work to send the information out in their

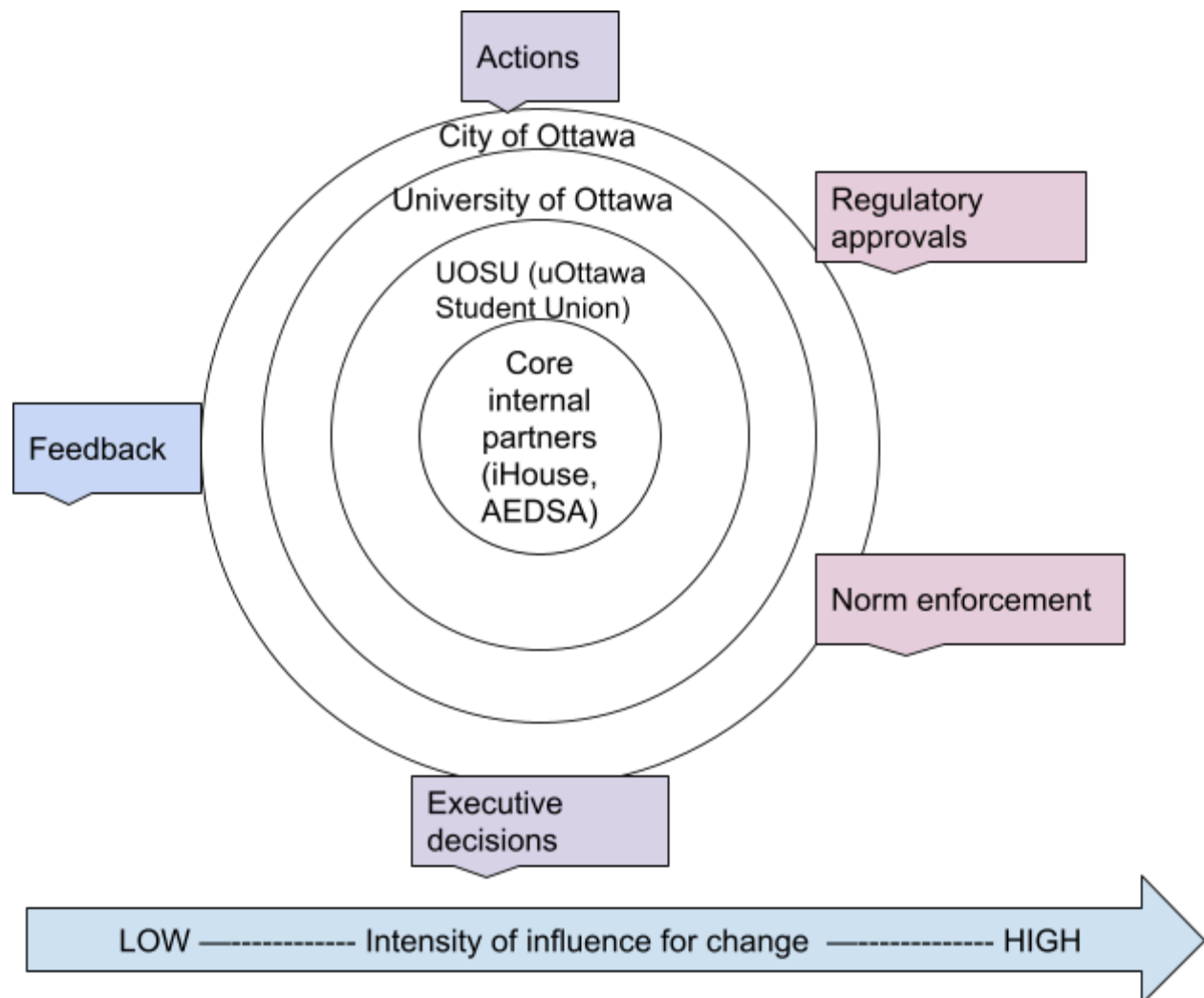
next newsletter or extraordinary email communication to share the information about the group.

This excessive reliance can result in major issues from delays and lengthy processes. To deal with this issue, we provided additional support with our independent efforts, which involved paper posters on campus and engaging directly with students to build interest and awareness.

Issues such as these show the need for flexibility, as many parts of a plan can fall apart at the last minute. Being spontaneous and prepared for anything provided a solution to a problem once considered substantial.

#### **Part 4 - Relational Accountability /10**

The idea of relational accountability is firmly anchored in indigenous methodology and has been increasingly applied in community organization and research. Relational accountability requires careful consideration of the relationships between the project leader and the targeted group and other social groups and how their interests are constituted and held accountable (Beveridge *et al.*, 2021). A key element of indigenous epistemology is the circle, and we can explain our relational accountability through concentric circles of accountability. For the reasons set out below, the processes of relational accountability for our project are deeply transformative, and our project by its very nature is very sensitive to our partner's inputs, decisions and actions.

**Figure 3: Relational accountability framework**

The relationships which are important to the initiative can be divided into two broad groups: internal partners which exist inside the University of Ottawa ecosystem and external partners, which exist outside of it. By considering thus the target group, the internal community they interact with and the wider civil society composed of many cultural organizations in the greater Ottawa area, we are able to better operationalize the project in a relational accountability

framework. The partners can be further distinguished per function, such as providing feedback on the initiative, sharing the WhatsApp group, providing content and hosting events.

Let us begin by discussing our inner circle. Our first main partners are International House (iHouse) and the AEDSA. They are critical internal partners that can offer all four main functions. We have first received their feedback on the project through virtual meetings where the class presentation was presented to key members of their teams and a detailed executive summary of the initiative was shared by email. This has transformed the project and its accountability as the project is slowly placed under the scrutiny of democratic student bodies that have given us their initial feedback and must now choose if they want to partner with us on the project or not. Should they choose to partner with our project, they have to choose whether they would like to take control of the initiative, establish their oversight and control mechanisms to our project or rather simply perform one or more of the above functions. This is accomplished through a detailed democratic decision-making process in the organization that is more complex than our team's decision-making which was based on a collective dream and multiple team meetings to divide the work and define the scope of the project. Both organizations must submit the decision to an executive vote of elected members of their organization of a specific resolution to make the decision to partner with us. They then must assign the work internally to perform one of the functions or establish oversight on the project. They will thus have a direct impact on the project and could for instance change the channels, the contents of the channels, the group name, and the in-person activities that will be conducted for the WhatsApp community we created.

There are thus three steps of relational accountability which vary from ‘soft’ normative pressure through suggestions to ‘hard’ normative pressure that will physically force the project and its key deliverables to change : the first was the initial feedback received on the project during the in-class presentations which structured the present paper. We were told to focus on providing an accessible user experience, to focus on our key differentiator of “meeting international students where they are at” and to engage them more effectively through sharing informational content, mentorship and social events. This has already been implemented in the project, even though we were not forced to, which goes to show the influence and ‘soft’ transformation potential of the early feedback. The second was the additional feedback from institutional partners that informed us of the requirements, ethical and accountability considerations that the project would need to embody in order for them to work with us and further suggestions to develop the idea. This was also implemented in the project, with the establishment of a joint project plan and a moderation structure for the project. Their influence was greater than our classmates because without their support our project is certain to fail, but it is still ‘soft’ relational accountability as we are not obligated to implement their feedback. The third is their decision-making process as to the type of partnership and the functions they would provide for the project. While the first two steps exerted an ever-growing influence on our project, only the second is capable of materially transforming the nature and scope of the project, as well as its key activities or work flows. It remains to be seen how this part will be carried out, as, regrettably, student organizations cannot make decisions of such import in time frames much shorter than 2 weeks or a month.

As we move to the outside circles in the relational accountability framework, the distance is greater and there is less connexity between the work done in the project and the work carried out by the organization or institution which is now much larger than our project team. Nevertheless, the sheer intensity of the institutional control and oversight on the few matters that are under the jurisdiction of the institution is significantly greater, and directly correlated to the scale of the institution. In particular, we as students are held accountable to the class teacher in terms of the scope, specifics, deliverables and nature of the project. At the end of this paper, we will receive a grade based on how well our project has satisfied the evaluation grids and expectations for this course. From the feedback of the teacher, we have decided to focus on the issue of international students as our backyard. We have also decided to adopt the WhatsApp group solution so as not to impede on another group's brochure project. These project changes are just the front end of the institutional oversight of the University of Ottawa which has authorized the course, assigned the teacher and approved the teacher's course outline.

Throughout the lifecycle of this project we have been held accountable to the university's services and administration by various academic rules and regulations that define what we can and cannot do in terms of course work and for social engagement on campus. Still, they do not dictate us the specifics and so long as we operate within the university's frameworks and respect its core set of institutional norms, we will not feel its powerful influence. In other words, their transformational accountability for our project is passive or reactive. Only with potential partner organizations in the university services will we find the more direct transformation. As we work with the career development centre and michaëlle jean center for community engagement, they

will set out their requirements for us to post their job opportunities and information on our WhatsApp community and we will ask them for feedback as to how to structure the information sharing.

Finally, there is the outermost circle of the City of Ottawa, but this will only be pertinent if we decide to create an official organization like a non-profit organization. The transformation potential and relational accountability at this level will come from our future discussions with Ottawa-based communities of different international groups, such as Ottawa's vibrant Muslim, Chinese and Lebanese communities to cite only the ones we interacted with. They will transform the project through their feedback and their sharing of information, but it is unlikely they will directly control or get involved in the project.

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