



AUGUST 2020

# WHAT MATTERS TO UofT STUDENTS?

Understanding Students: A Qualitative Analysis, 2016-2020

# THE INNOVATION HUB

## IMPROVING CAMPUS LIFE THROUGH STUDENT-CENTRIC DESIGN

The Innovation Hub is a student-led initiative that collaborates with UofT partners and students towards designing a university for all. We use in-depth qualitative research and design-thinking strategies to gain deep understanding of university life and the people whom it is for. Along with the insights from our collaborators, we creatively problem-solve and propose innovative approaches to co-create a university that works for everyone. We know that people support what they create.

## DESIGN WITH, FOR AND BY THE STUDENTS

We work closely with other partners at UofT to figure out the challenges faced by their students. We empathize with students by listening to their stories, and clarifying insights from their experiences to generate student-informed findings. We then ideate design principles geared towards solving student problems and help guide our partners to prototype the solutions. Integral to this process is a deep understanding of student life.



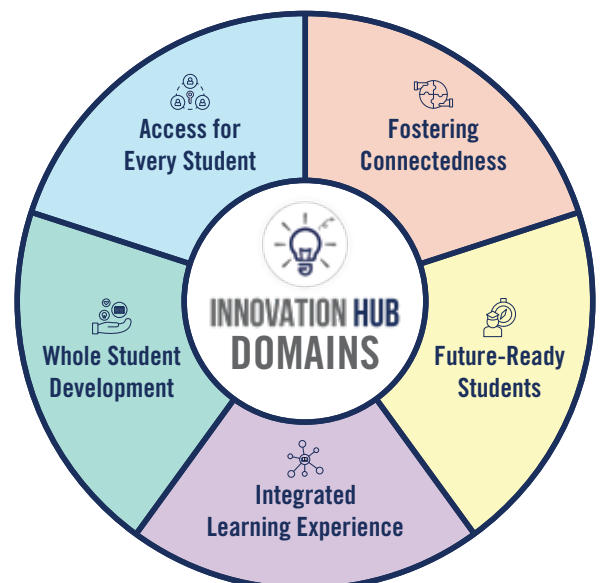
## SINCE 2016...



The Innovation Hub has become uniquely positioned to understand the UofT campus & student experience.

## WHAT MATTERS WHEN BEING A UofT STUDENT?

At its formation in 2016, through consultation with students, we centred our understanding of student experience on the following 5 domains:



## SO, HOW ABOUT NOW?

# WHAT MATTERS TO UofT STUDENTS TODAY?

Our key finding is that the university contains many experiences, places, and communities, and that embracing this dynamic multiplicity means transforming UofT from a Uni-versity into a **Multi-versity**.



## EMBRACE THE MULTI-VERSITY

The Multi-versity recognizes that the institution is a dynamic complex of multiple shifting identities, experiences, and roles. It is not based on oneness or a singular “uni” experience.

This multiplicity can also challenge the university’s abilities to respond to and be responsible for this diverse student experience, especially where the university is less dynamic or the student does not feel they belong.

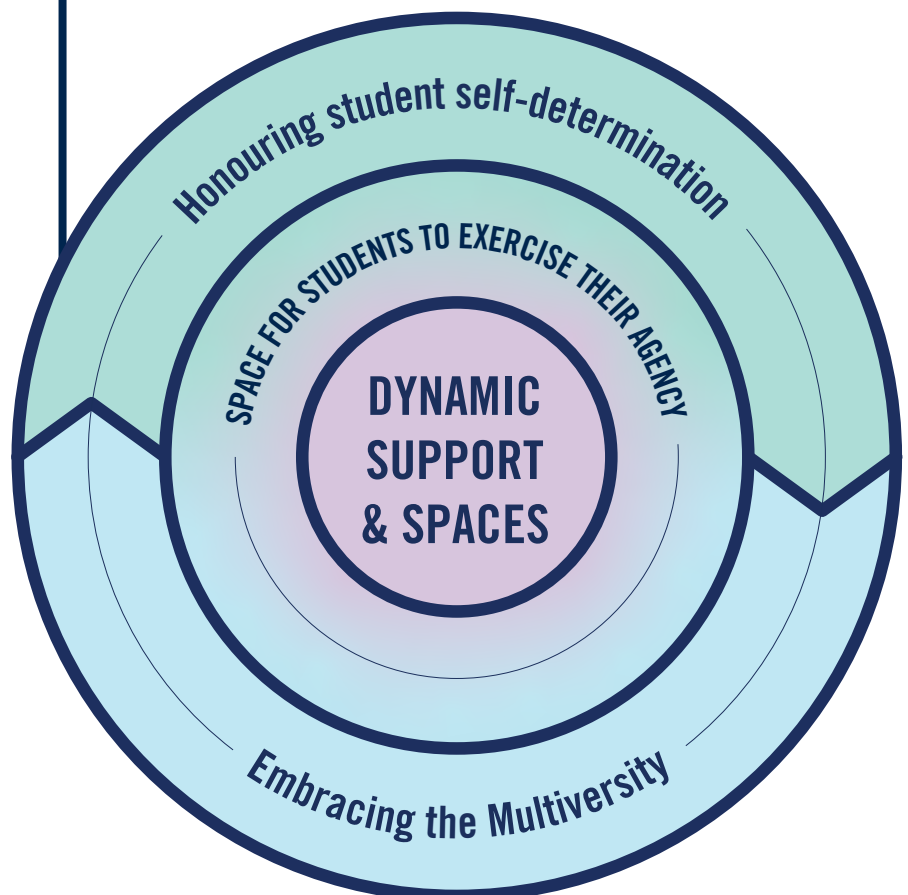
Providing dynamic and multiple forms of care and connection allows students to build their agency and self-determination within the multiple avenues that the university offers.

## KEY FINDINGS

Building on this key finding of the multiple and dynamic experiences of students, we see these three themes.

- 1 Building the **Multi-versity**
- 2 Honouring Every Student’s **Self-determination**
- 3 Redefine the way **Student Agency** is fostered

These themes help redefine the Innovation Hub’s 5 domains and in turn develop new directions that embraces the diversity of potentials and identities that characterize the University of Toronto.







# ACCESS FOR EVERY STUDENT

In a system that values diversity, equitable access to programs, services, resources, and spaces is paramount. A system that prioritizes accessibility recognizes the difference of experiences faced by students and creates the conditions for students to be able to meet their needs on their own accord.

## CRAFTING OUR OWN IDEAL

A self-determined definition of “success” places control into the student’s hands and prioritises their agency in crafting their own experiences. Students want to feel protected by the institution while simultaneously feeling in control of their learning experience, allowing them to decide what is best for their development in a way that is upheld by the university. How can the university widen these ideals of success and make space for student-centred development?

“Students feel like they are taking ownership over how they are being evaluated and how they can prepare for their studies. We haven’t specifically asked about how this flexibility makes them feel, but we’re seeing markedly different behaviors.

## RECOGNIZING THE MULTIPLICITY OF EXPERIENCES

Students experience different barriers to their ability to navigate the institutional landscape. Currently, students feel the onus is on them to navigate these barriers, and some overcome them more easily due to personal and financial circumstances. In recognizing that students contend with multiple, intersecting setbacks, the challenge becomes how to surmount these barriers without compromising student excellence and honoring student agency.

“**Experiential Learning opportunities are privileging the students who already have the privilege to get these opportunities.** I think at UofT we’ve had some of those conversations around equity, diversity and inclusion and Experiential Learning, but I think there’s a lot more that we can do to think critically about the individual barriers for student participation.

## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

To provide effectual and equitable programs, resources, and spaces to the student population, the knowledge of these services must also be accessible. Student feel it falls on them to navigate a complex, sometimes disconnected, system of what is available or not when they are faced with the stress of an already full schedule; however, students also become empowered when they do so. Improving access to resources allows students to exercise their self-agency and provides them with the option to seek the help that is readily available to them.

“**I think for me, it’s less about whether [services] exist or not, but how to access them.** That’s the most confusing part, it’s just there but there’s a lot of red tape around. I have no idea whether I go to [the] registrar, etc. Do I go to accessibility? I don’t know. And there’s very [much a] disconnect between all those available services actually.



# FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS

The University's student population is large and diverse. When students see this diversity represented across the University, they feel connection and belonging. Embracing diversity involves encouraging an abundance of student identities and ensuring space for each one to flourish.

## ACCOMMODATING CHANGE

Students express the importance of listening and feeling like their needs are being heard to feel like they are a valued and connected member of the community. Having needs heard is particularly important when those needs are diverse and changing. Who is being heard and how can unheard voices be amplified?



**It helps the students when they are asked to be on the panel...and they get to hear their experiences reflected. That always seems to be empowering to them and they'd like to have good representation for themselves so that they can develop that sense of identity and control and feel like they belong at the university as well.**

## RESPONDING TO DIFFERENCE

Students want to feel like the University both represents and responds to their needs. Students express that they often feel they work around the system, rather than the system being responsive to the needs of its diverse communities. Students create a set of personal hacks and workarounds to manage their multiple but also individual and changing needs. How can the institution take more of a responsive role and be adaptive to changing student circumstances?



**...Part of [it] involved learning how to make the existing system of mental health services, accessibility services, and accommodations...work for me in a way that made the demands of the institution doable....I was [in] the gradual process of learning how the system worked and learning more about myself.**

## BUILDING UNITY THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Difference in potential and diversity of experience is the commonality that underlies the UofT Multi-iversity student experience. This diversity leads to a greater sense of belonging for many students. Being large and diverse, the University provides many possibilities for students to build smaller networks or micro-communities. Students also express that this diversity and large decentralization can lead to feelings of disconnectedness and isolation. How can similarity and unity be fostered through this recognition of difference?



**...because of the size of the University of Toronto, we use sports and recreation as a strategy to create a sense of belonging on campus, to make it smaller for the students. That is really important, in that a lot of our students are overwhelmed by the size and by the number of people, by the city...participating in sports and recreations creates friendship, bonds, people with common interest, which creates a sense of community and a sense of belonging.**



# FUTURE-READY STUDENTS

Encouraging a multiplicity of trajectories complements the development of diverse skillsets that students can carry into their future pursuits. By creating space for students to craft their own experience, the University helps hone the self-efficacy, advocacy, and leadership skills that are universally valuable in future successes.

## FAILURE IS NOT FINAL

Failure is not a unique experience but is experienced in uniquely distinct ways by most students at UofT. Students often cite failure as a critical turning point in their university careers, and as playing a pivotal role in identifying the path they wish to follow and in their later successes. How can the University accommodate—even embrace—failure given that students report that some of their greatest, though hardest, learning comes from these moments?



**I think one of the most important skills that needs to be taught is that failure is a part of the learning process...We teach the opposite. We teach if you're failing, it just means you're not good at it... [Students] need to learn that struggle is part of the process and that hard work is part of the process.**

## STUDENT VOICES MATTER

Students with self-advocacy skills can inform change both within and outside of the University. Providing students with opportunities to be leaders cultivates these advocacy skills and allows students to adapt the policies and practices that affect them. These skills also teach students how to advocate for themselves in ways that transcend their University experience and inform real change in the broader community.



**I would say...open up your doors for students because at the end of the day, this university is for students. It's just heart-breaking to see when you enter like a meeting where there's major decision makers. There's no student representation there. ...So, it's really important to involve students in the decision-making process. Because we know what's going to work best for us.**

## WELCOMING PATHS LESS FOLLOWED

Students express the need for non-academic career trajectories and soft skills to be recognized and prioritized. Recognizing the diversity of potential futures of students could better prepare students for life and its continued learning after graduation.



**I think that we sometimes forget that course content is about the world outside the Academy. And so experiential learning is sort of a reminder that pulls us out of this university campus, sometimes the classroom, and makes us pay attention to the world differently.**

By positioning students (and graduates) as life-long learners, students benefit from a multi-generational system of learning and connecting. Students often express the value of having a alumni mentor who can offer useful insights and advice, especially about less common life paths. By connecting with alumni and peer mentors, the student experience at UofT transcends the time spent enrolled in the University.



# INTEGRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Encouraging students to adopt a self-directed approach to learning promotes a culture in which personal agency is valued and supported. Allowing students to craft their own learning experience gives them the choice to develop skills that matter to them and supports the celebration of a diversity of talents, skills, and career trajectories.

## ILLUMINATING HIDDEN TALENTS

Recognising that the Multi-versity is composite of various skills means allowing students the agency to advance their individual capabilities. Students express that sometimes their individual talents are not recognized through a standardised framework. A Multi-versity gives space for students to pursue their talents and interests to shape trajectories that make sense for them.

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Yeah, that flexibility to meet different learners' needs, but then also, just learner preference, right?... Maybe some of the students that aren't successful would be just fine if we had, if we had more of those kinds of things built in.

## ADAPTING A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Students are often under increased pressure to uphold their same academic excellence in changing learning environments. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the institution's ability to adopt a flexible learning strategy under rapidly changing conditions. How can the University maintain this same culture of excellence in these virtual spaces and how can it continue to create the conditions for this excellence to flourish in the face of change or uncertainty?

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The push to innovate educational, pedagogical approaches needs to be integrated more meaningfully by individual departments and by faculties in order for it to be more than just a standalone wing of the university that looks at teaching and pedagogy.

## SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE, NOT STUDENTS

A successful Integrated Learning Experience develops successful “people” rather than “students” who are trained narrowly to pursue academic or professional careers. Students are often met with barriers to participating in non-academic activities that expand their personal or professional growth. Holistic and self-directed learning is often considered subsidiary to academic work, yet also as necessary and essential for later in life. Widening ideals of successful personhood may allow students to prioritize values that are important to them.

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We need a real integrated experience in...valuing the person. No, we shouldn't abolish grades, but we need a system to value people – the Co-Curricular Record is a step in this direction but it's still surface level. Look for an institutional way to value each individual person, but from the university's side. Look at what staff can do – enforce university values but work to value students so they can build that self-confidence and awareness.



# WHOLE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

A culture of holistic growth is necessary for encouraging student agency. Creating a culture that values agency increases the likelihood of students developing a sense of purpose in their university experience. Moreover, recognizing the diversity of paths that can emerge in and from a university career allows students to focus on multiple areas of growth, instead of overemphasizing narrow academic development.

## SUCCESS IS MULTIFACETED

Students ask that the institution reconceptualizes and integrates different ideas of success. Often students feel success is defined narrowly by academic or professional endeavors and other achievements go unsung. Recognizing that healthy, self-aware, and community-minded students are also successful shifts and multiplies the definition of student excellence.

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**A test isn't going to allow all students to be successful. It's about differentiating how we are offering assessment opportunities to students so that we truly are able to capture what that student understands and what they are capable of...What we're trying to do is just make sure that every student has an equal opportunity to be successful.**

## BUILDING OUR OWN PATHS TO SUCCESS

Nurturing students' individual development relies on the provision of space for students to craft their own experiences. Students suggest that the institution often constrains their agency due to an inflexible system. Student success can be achieved by allowing students to change their trajectories and careers and embracing change and failure as a normal part of the university experience.

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**If you're in the position where you're studying finance and you don't like finance, then the idea is that you could try and find something else that you're interested in versus committing yourself to a life...that you don't like. It's not uncertain that I'm giving myself a chance to be happy and find my path. When I figure out what I'm really passionate about that, I know that can lead to something afterwards.**

## SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS ARE HEALTHY STUDENTS

Successful students often prioritize their mental and physical health to nurture positive and holistic well-being that allows them to flourish academically. In contrast, many students report that their academics come at the expense of their health and other activities as students prioritize grades over eating and sleeping. This can be seen as a result of a perceived lack of time to engage in activities that are conducive to developing wholly in a personal, professional, & academic regard.

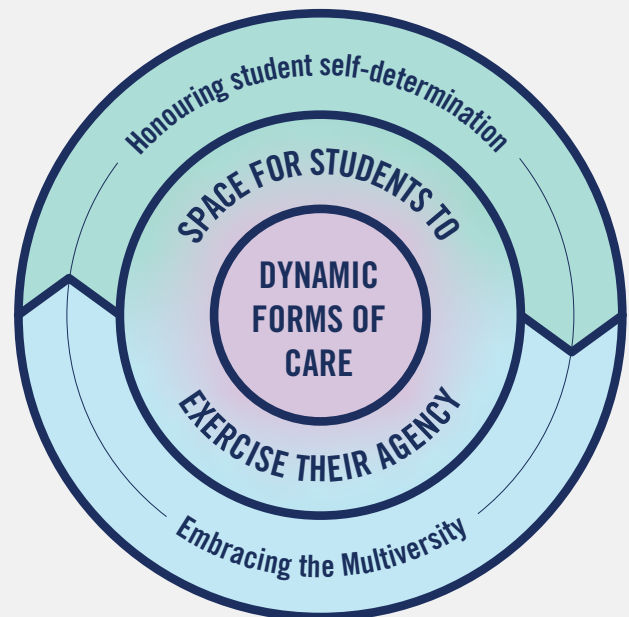
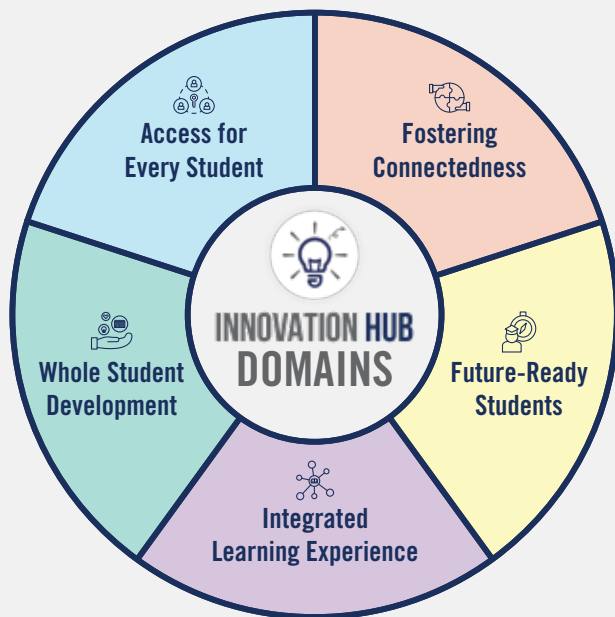
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**The most important significant challenge I've had during university is initially adjusting to a full-time university schedule, work, and managing time between all of my responsibilities. I found it incredibly difficult adjust to a life of rigid schedule with little to no leniency. I knew I had to adjust the way I was living in order to keep in good psychological and physical health in order to succeed.**

Strengthening a culture of care may encourage students to re-allocate their time to focus on their personal wellbeing, which in turn will add to their academic success.



# EMBRACING AND BUILDING FOR THE MULTI-VERSITY



Our insights highlight the need for a paradigm shift toward a Multi-versity that encourages a multitude of student identities, abilities, and trajectories. From the data, we found that this would be best achieved by recognizing that the relationship between the student and the University is always shifting and adapting and must be responsive to change. Future adaptations of student life may benefit from focusing on ensuring students are given choice, space, and flexibility in their academic, personal, and professional pursuits to reflect the nature of the changing social and academic world.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The Innovation Hub is part of this recognition of the importance of understanding the student experience, the importance of student diversity, self-determination, and agency, in order to continue to transform the university for student success and flourishing.

As a student-led initiative that grounds its findings in student stories, their diverse and changing needs, we continue to be inspired by and respond to the students who share their feedback, time, and trust with us.

We aim to bring this expertise, empathy, and in-depth understanding of what matters most to students to future work with our partners and towards co-creating a university that works for everyone!

# STUDENT CONTRIBUTORS

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