

**QE II SCHOLARS**  
**Public Engagement Event Report**  
**Opening Minds 2016**  
*“Studying Abroad and Diversity Issues in University Culture”*

**Roxanne Graham<sup>1</sup> & Claire Seremba<sup>1</sup>**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2015 awardees of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholarship, Roxanne Graham from Grenada and Claire Seremba from Uganda, collaborated and co-hosted their first public engagement activity 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2016 at the Marion Mc Cain Building (Room 2016) at Dalhousie University from 5:00pm to 7:30pm. The QES<sup>2</sup> Program requires their awardees to host a public engagement activity to increase the level of awareness of Canadians in understanding international development issues and at the same time encourage active engagement in the topics of international development.

The goal of the ‘Opening Minds’ event was to give an opportunity to students and non-students as well as direct and indirect beneficiaries to contribute their experiences, in order to gain a holistic picture of the issues international students face when studying abroad. Students interact with a wide range of aspects including chiefly diverse environments especially in college or university, but few platforms are given to create dialogue around these aspects. As we grow into a global community, it is relevant and paramount that we voice these concerns and create meaningful practical conversations and solutions to bridge the gaps in our societies.

Dalhousie University and other learning institutions engage in a variety of exchange and scholarship programs in a bid to create cross-cultural learning experiences. International Students in Dalhousie University make up approximately 14% of the total student body. Students are most often concerned with how they will be perceived and worry about a number of issues including but not limited to adapting to language and dialect differences, religion, race, culture, heritage and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, academic life, work and leisure, relationships and family, financial issues, food and nutrition, health & fitness and mental welfare, and weather and seasonal changes.

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<sup>1</sup> Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholarship Awardees 2015

<sup>2</sup> Queen Elizabeth Scholarship

It was our intention that this session would open minds and provide a safe place to create dialogue around these issues, to learn from each other and to break the ice on certain contentious issues.

## **EVENT PROCEEDINGS**

The event started at 5.15pm with snacks and casual discussion. 26 people (9 males and 16 females) attended the event. Welcome remarks were done by both Roxanne and Claire. We then had a small ice breaker activity 'the diversity identifier' by Roxanne for 5 minutes. It entailed a series of questions which gave the audience two choices e.g. are you a lover of nature or urban creature? Audience had to stand if they prefer one or sit for the other. This activity helped show the similarities and differences in our diverse audience.

Following the ice breaker, there was a panel discussion. The panel members were: Abkar Leili (Iran); Nicolas Winkler (Switzerland & Grenada); Monica Reed (Canada); Somed Shahadu (Ghana); and Hyeyoung Kang (South Korea)

Each panel member was given a list of questions prior to the event (Appendix 1) to prepare their responses. The panel spoke on topics such as identity, race, and institution services. This brought forth a diverse conversation regarding what, how and why these issues are of importance. A multitude of views were aired on certain issues with a central focus on race and access to student services. Appendix 1, summarizes the questions asked to panel members and some of the emerging issues discussed.

The panel discussion concluded at 6:55pm, at which time everyone was welcome to have pizza and a drink as well as have the opportunity to network, during a 10 minute intermission. After the intermission, groups were randomly formed to create a campfire setting to discuss the top three pertinent topics<sup>3</sup> which the audience took a vote on. These topics included:

1. Personal & Social Life of Local and International University Students
2. International Development and Keeping International Students in Canada
3. Issues In and Off Campus

The following guideline was used to assist in the group discussions of each topic including:

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<sup>3</sup> From a pre-designed list created by Roxanne and Claire

1. The main issues
2. The adjustments (if any) being made
3. The most positive memorable experiences
4. Has Dalhousie helped facilitate or are there recommendations (if any) on how Dalhousie could play a role.

The campfire session lasted approximately 15 minutes, after which each group presented what they discussed in 2 minutes. At the end, sweets and other treats were given to the audience members for their participation and great cooperation. The event concluded with a vote of thanks and presentation of certificates of appreciation to the panel members by both Roxanne and Claire.

### **EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS BY PANEL AND AUDIENCE**

A few of the suggestions made at the event including:

1. An exclusive job fair for international students:  
To arrange fairs with employers who are open to hiring international students. The Career and Development Centre has done remarkable work to organize networks sessions and prep sessions to develop skills to prepare the students for the different challenges in the job market. One student expressed the view that it is necessary to create an exclusive platform to link international students directly to employers that are willing to hire them
2. Speaking out:  
Racial segregation is a real and eminent destabilizer to the prospects available for some international students. Institution and community members could be deliberately ignorant of the existence of racial slurs in language and behavior. Many of us choose to focus on the positive, but this is something that the student body (International and Canadians alike) should speak out on and create channels to change the normative.

## **Special Acknowledgements**

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### **Jackie Dowling**

Program and Project Coordinator  
International Centre

### **Alba Garcia Rodriguez**

Master of Marine Management Candidate  
Marine Affairs Program

## **Appendix 1: Summary of Panel Questions and Important Emerging Issues**

### **Question 1: What do international students really bring to a program, community and country?**

- New insights to global issues, drawing on the diverse standpoints that people have developed from their diverse experiences and interactions will provide a multitude of views on Global issues, providing a range of solutions
- Cultural diversity- presence of international students will change how people think, open people's minds as these students bring a diverse world views
- "International students bring a challenging spirit and passion; they are brave enough to go out of their comfort zone. Storm and steadfast in the bitter-sweet—mostly a bitter experience" -Hyeyoung

### **Question 2: There are diverse ways in which universities have equipped themselves to create a diverse and comfortable environment for International students. The Universities provide services to cope with adjustments. What is your take on these services, as recipients what changes (subtractions or additions) would you propose in regards to University services?**

- It is necessary to bridge the gap of communication between local and international students.
- "There is a clear distinction in approachability from where I am from and here... Dalhousie has done a great job!"-Somed.
- Too often the system operates much like the concept of "one size fit all" in terms of their service provision
- The focus of the learning institutions has been on orientation of students into university culture, but has failed to create integration; students still suffer from the 'outsiders vs. insiders' complex.
- Job precarity- most institutions organize job fairs to link students to prospective employers, however employers prefer to have International students as volunteers than long term employees. They prefer to hire a person with permanent residence or citizenship which places a number of students in a bind as to finding durable employments suitable to their credentials.

### **Questions 3: Do you agree that racism is a pertinent issue in Dalhousie and Nova Scotia on the whole and what are the possible practical solutions?**

- There's a preconceived notion that most or all black people are not from Canada
- "Teams (Groupings) should be diverse pulling from all races. Having all races is beneficial, as all of them will strive to be the best from their race, so will be able to push the team to achieve success"- Leili
- Detecting racism could be difficult at times, or are minorities deliberately naïve about the existence of racism?
- It can be evident through exclusive projects (even here at Dalhousie). Even though as a minority you strive to fit in, you are usually judged by your race.
- "There need to be more activities similar to this (Opening Minds), as it creates a forum or more channels for helping us as international students"- Hyeyoung.

### **Question 4: Do you believe yourself to be more of a cosmopolitan citizen able to integrate to the new overseas environment or a nation patriot who is more connected to their nation state identity?**

- It is important to form relationships of mutual respect.
- It's about being able to adapt. Most of the times we tend to identify with our own people (from similar programme or similar race) and socialize with them more, because this is where we are comfortable.

**Photos from Welcome Remarks to Intermission**



*Credits: Alba Garcia Rodriguez*

**Presentation of the Certificates of Appreciation to Panel Members**



*Credits: Alba Garcia Rodriguez*