



International Students' Association at York (ISAY)

Executive & Director Board

Student Government & Organization

—

York University

March 1, 2022

OPEN LETTER TO YORK UNIVERSITY

Rhonda Lenton, President & Vice-Chancellor

Lisa Philipps, Vice President Academic & Provost

RE: On the Matter of the Ongoing Russian-Ukrainian Conflict and the Affected International Students

On behalf of the international student body (and exchange students) – and the Executive-Director Board of the International Students' Association at York (ISAY) – I write this letter to bring your immediate attention to the increasingly escalating crisis between Russia and Ukraine. I am sure that you are aware of the current situation in Eastern Europe with its far-reaching consequences primarily effecting many international students from the same region.

Ukraine is not only experiencing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the country's sovereignty, peace and economy are negatively exacerbated by the current invasion. This insecurity also impacts the well-being and safety of international students and their families including those who currently remain inside Ukraine (registered for online/remote learning and perhaps exchange students in Ukraine, if any). Additionally, students who are physically in Canada are facing unprecedented levels of financial, academic, and mental health risks due to the uncertainties surrounding the safety of their families and friends back home. We strongly urge York University to take immediate steps to closely monitor and provide relevant necessary supports to these students by establishing an emergency Task Force (see Action Item).

Important to highlight is also the increasing sanctions being imposed by the United States, European allies, and Canada, which have agreed on Saturday to remove key Russian banks from the interbank messaging system, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). This means Russian banks cannot communicate securely with (Canadian) banks beyond its borders which is an extraordinary step that will sever Russia from much of the global financial system. Canada has also banned Russian planes from its airspace. These steps at punishing Russia for its blatant incursion into Ukraine ensures that Russian banks, and therefore families of Russian students currently in Canada, are disconnected from the international financial system. Consequently, this action prevents Russian students' ability to receive financial payments from their families in Russia to cover tuition fees, housing, and other living expenses.

Affected International Students: ISAY emphasizes that both Ukrainian and Russian students are not at fault for the actions of their respective governments so neither must be subjected to carry the burden of this conflict as a form of collective punishment. As such, they must all be provided equal access to necessary support without discrimination or prejudice.



ISAY is also concerned about the increasing Anti-Russian sentiment directed at peace-loving Russian international students who are at risk of being targeted in Canada, especially within our academia. We are all aware how Sinophobia (against Chinese students) played out due to COVID-19 in the past two years or so. We must stand for better humanity. We must do better to tackle these challenges to protect not only our students but also to build a safer future for all.

Therefore, ISAY proposes the following concrete **Action Items** to be immediately taken by the York University's leadership to fulfil its obligations towards members of our diverse community, particularly our *affected international students*:

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

1. Indefinitely deferring international tuition fees and payment deadlines for *affected international students* to a reasonably later date while also suspending late fees charges (interest rates)
2. Provide emergency bursaries, and expand current international emergency bursaries, to all *affected international students* from the region so they can continue their education uninterrupted. These bursaries should include covering their residence or housing costs as well as food and other living expenses
3. Consider providing living spaces within York University residences (at a greatly discounted rate, or wherever possible, free of charge) to those who are in a dire need, depending on student-specific circumstances
4. Prolonging student lease (residence contracts) for the duration of at least the summer months for currently *affected international students* who reside in York University residences so that they are not evicted from their rooms/apartments in April – cognizant that these students may not be able to travel back to their countries given the insecurity in Ukraine as well as flight (airspace) suspensions for Russian students
5. Raise funds from the larger Canada-wide Ukrainian Diaspora, York University community, Federal and Provincial Governments, to support *affected international students* from the region, especially those from Ukraine who are directly impacted by the war.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

1. Identify *affected international students* requiring academic accommodations
2. Extend academic accommodations (similar to the accommodation policy set out by the Senate at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020) to all *affected international students*, which shall be consistent with preserving the academic integrity of the curriculum and the academic standards of courses and programs. The academic accommodations may include:
 - 2.1. Allowing students to drop courses without receiving any grade (W) on their transcript if they are unable to complete their courses (withdrawal)
 - 2.2. Alternate scheduling of examinations at a later convenient time
 - 2.3. Alternate forms of assessment, for example take-home exams, provision of online instead of in-person exams, as well as considering final grade



- assessment for student who have completed 70 percent of the course load without the need to write final exams/essays
- 2.4. Providing flexible and extended assignment/project deadlines and simpler process for deferring exams (no proof needed for *affected international students*)
 - 2.5. Ability for students to retake the dropped course(s) at no financial cost, that is, they may be able to retake the courses in future semester(s) – course credit
 - 2.6. Ability for *affected international students* to continue pursuing their education (enroll into courses) at York University unhindered, for instance lifting the financial block on the Registration and Enrollment Module (REM) if they have outstanding tuition balances. We emphasize this process to be particularly prioritized for final or upper year students who are about to complete their studies
3. Regularly provide relevant and useful academic support information to *affected international students* to complete their academic courses during these difficult times.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

1. ISAY recommends President Lenton and Provost Philipps to establish an emergency university-wide Task Force that includes international student leaders on campus (ISAY) and relevant offices such as York International, Academic Support, Financial Office and Student Counselling which will closely monitor the situation as well as identify the needs of the *affected international students*. This Task Force will advise the university on the immediate necessary supports for the *affected international students*
2. Organize the provision of necessary supplies, such as food bank, hygiene products, et cetera, to students currently living in residences
3. Create mental health and support discussion forums for *affected international students*, particularly Ukrainian students to support their mental health and emotional well-being
4. Create custom weekly check-in forms (or similar system) for *affected international students* to fill out in order to monitor their well-being, mental health, and financial situation so York University has a better understanding of each student's specific needs

The International Students' Association at York seeks to fully represent the international student body by acting as a facilitator of diversity and an advocate of our student community's unity and needs. We aim to work with you President Lenton, alongside York University administration and the entire student community (student unions) to promote the campaign 'Fairness for International Students' and the principles of equity, accessibility to opportunities plus inclusivity within and outside our campuses.

President Lenton, Provost Philipps, we encourage you to stand in solidarity with Ukrainian international students and their families during these unprecedented times of war in their country amid the COVID-19 pandemic. We must also not



overlook the plight of Russian students as well. Studying abroad can be very challenging to students like ourselves. In solidarity with all international students, we urge you to consider the Action Items listed above and help promote the true meaning of what it means to be in modern academia, that is, a safe space where all have adequate and equitable access to key resources and education.

ISAY stands in solidarity with Ukraine's sovereignty and independence as we unreservedly condemn ongoing interventional wars and conflicts all around the world, which are gross violations of international law. ISAY also condemns all types of hate, racism, white supremacy, and imperialism in all their manifestations. We are concerned about the credible reports of racism against our counterparts of (African and Indian) international students who are treated with undignified manner at the Ukrainian-Polish border while fleeing from war as refugees. ISAY endorses peaceful co-existence among countries, peoples, and cultures for a better and a greater humanity rooted in fairness and equitable justice.

As we look forward to your immediate response, please do not hesitate to contact ISAY (contact info: bottom left below).

The International Students' Association at York (ISAY) avails itself of this opportunity to renew to York University, and all concerned parties of our diverse community, the assurances of its highest consideration.

Sincerely,

Issa Abdi Jamaa

President, International Students' Association at York (ISAY)

Senator, York University Senate

President's Ambassador, York University

CONTACT:

Issa Abdi Jamaa
President, ISAY

Email:

issa.jamaa.007@gmail.com

isayatork@gmail.com

Co-signatories: ISAY Executive & Director Board Members:

Kevin Varghese, Suyon Hwang, Tran Thu Uyen Cao, Mohammed Ahmedi, Het Hafiyani, Dak Nodoro, Kamsy Obiagwu, Ademi Yestayeva, Kinjal Patel.

CC:

Paul Tsaparis, Chair, Board of Governors

Mario Roy, Chair, Senate

Deans of Faculties (and Schools)

Lucy Fromowitz, Vice-Provost Students

Vinitha Gengatharan, Executive Director, York International



Letter Endorsements – List of York University Student Leadership:

1. Bethune College Council
2. Calumet College Council
3. Environmental and Urban Change Students' Association
4. Glendon College Student Union - Association Étudiante du Collège Glendon
5. Lassonde Engineering Society
6. Student Council of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies (SCOLAPS)
7. Student Senator Caucus (SSC), York University Senate
8. Vanier College Council
9. Winters College Council
10. York Federation of Students (YFS)
11. York University's Graduate Student Association (YUGSA)

