

Introduction

In an era of increased mobility, international students have become one of the fastest-growing migrant groups in Canada. They represented 14.7% of total university enrolment in 2017-2018, up from 8.2% in 2008-2009.¹ Existing research has documented various challenges international students face, from navigating a new academic system to dealing with financial pressures, and overcoming linguistic and social isolation.² Most of this research was undertaken in unilingual contexts. In contrast, our study examines the experiences of English- and French-speaking international students in the unique *bilingual* context of the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) and the Ottawa-Gatineau region. We focus on the influence of bilingualism on their academics and employment, and their perspectives on bilingualism and diversity.

The University of Ottawa

uOttawa is the largest English-French bilingual university in the world. While all on-campus services are offered in both English and French, not all academic programs and courses are available in both languages. It has also implemented policies to maintain its bilingual status, including: 1) a tuition fee rebate for international students studying in French, and 2) English or French as a second language courses for full-time graduate students at no cost.

In response to increased global competition in higher education, uOttawa has made significant efforts to recruit international students from a wide range of countries. In 2019, international graduate students accounted for 31.9% of all graduate students, of which over 90% were enrolled in English-language programs.⁶

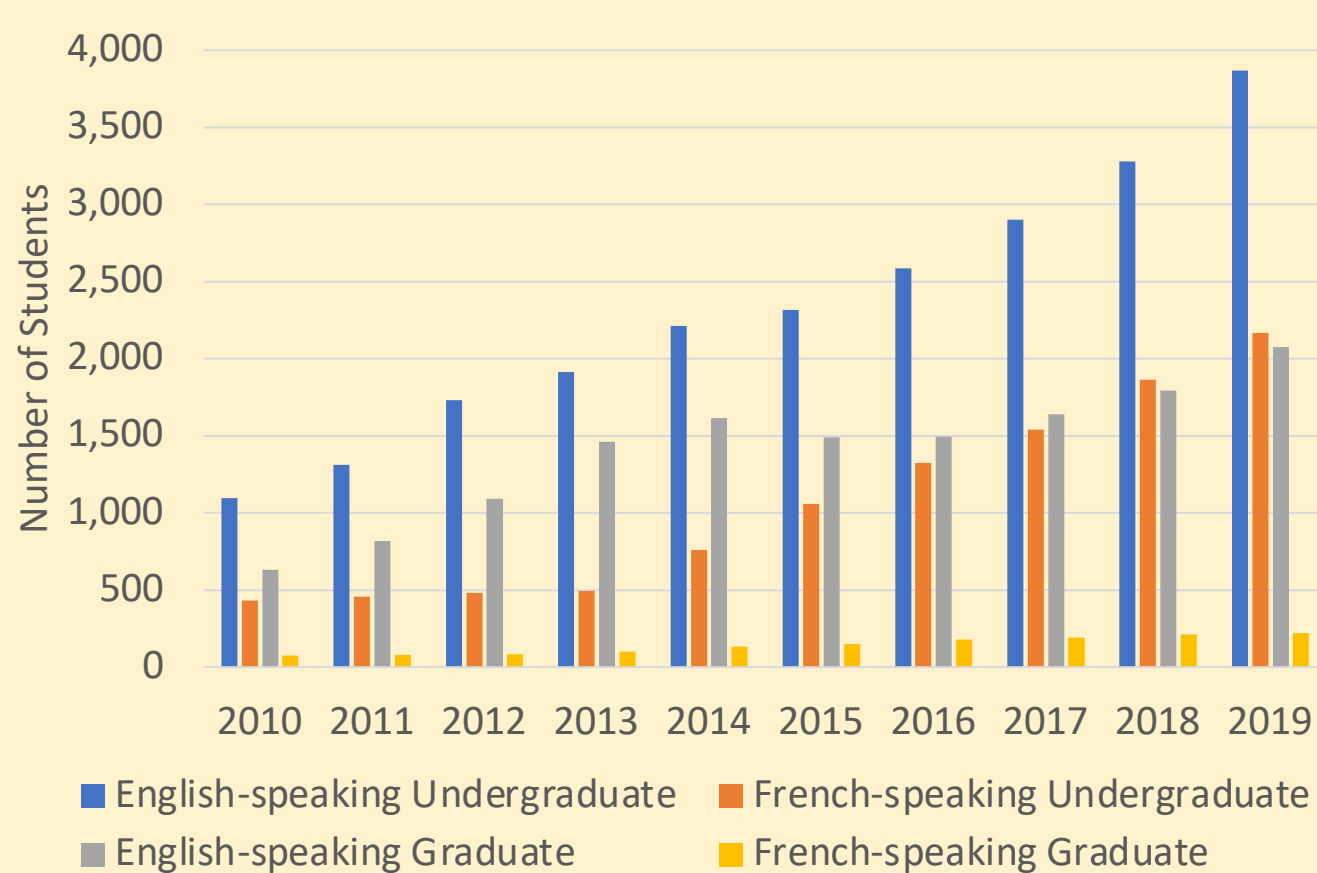


Figure 1. Number of international students enrolled at uOttawa from 2010 to 2019, by language and level of study⁶



Figure 2. A bilingual sign on the uOttawa campus

Academics

Among English-speaking participants, 11 were enrolled in English-language programs, and thus they did not perceive bilingualism as an academic challenge. 2 participants were enrolled in programs with bilingualism requirements, but they had contrasting experiences due to the different form of bilingualism operating in their programs.

For one of my [bilingual] courses, [...] sometimes when we don't understand, [the professor] will talk in English. But we have a lot of discussion groups and most of it is in English because everybody is more comfortable speaking in English. (female, South America)

Table 3. Challenges due to bilingualism reported by English-/French-speaking participants

Challenges reported	English-speaking participants (n=13)	French-speaking participants (n=6)
Academics	1	4
Employment	8	0

We have a lot of French professors and French students. [...] I went to a meeting and I couldn't understand about 60% of what was said during the meeting. Even though the meeting was supposed to be a bilingual meeting, a lot of it was in French. [...] I think sometimes people can default to French very easily if they're comfortable in that space and not consider that this is a bilingual university. (male, Central America)

Many French-speaking participants noted issues with inadequate French resources in their program of studies, including fewer courses offered in French, reading materials being exclusively in English, and a lack of Francophone students and culture in their departments.

The choices are a lot more limited. Forget about summer. Plus, in education we have sub-programs. [...] I'm in the health sub-program; there are even fewer courses. Inevitably we have to take whatever is available. No choice. (female, Western Europe; translated from French)

Perspectives on Bilingualism and Diversity

A few English- and French-speaking participants noted that bilingualism prioritizes the two *dominant* official languages; they thus questioned the lack of value given to other languages considering the growing presence of non-official language communities in the region.

I really think bilingualism is a kind of tokenism because there are apparently many more languages that are minority languages, not only French. Chinese has a big population or even German has a really big population, why only promote French and not Chinese? (female, East Asia)

Many participants from both language groups were supportive of uOttawa's bilingualism mandate because it attracts students and staff from a diversity of countries and thus contributes to increased cultural and linguistic diversity on campus as well as more tolerance.

Maybe that's one of the reasons why it's such a multicultural place. Because if you embrace both languages, you equally respect those languages and it shows there's not a superior one and you increase the possibility of other people coming here. (female, South America)

One of the jobs that I had several days a week was in the call centre (off campus). [...] when I talk to people on the phone, they would comment on my accent and other people around the call centre [...] they were not educated in a cultural type of sense, right? So, when I actually came to uOttawa, from then on, not many people commented on my accent because it's so common, you know. Here nobody notices. (male, Eastern Europe)

Ottawa-Gatineau

Known as Canada's National Capital Region, Ottawa-Gatineau is among a few regions in the country where both English and French are commonly spoken, albeit unevenly.³ The region is crossed by a significant interprovincial border that separates the linguistically distinct provinces and cities of Ontario and Ottawa (English-speaking), and Quebec and Gatineau (French-speaking). Official language minorities (Francophones in Ottawa and Anglophones in Gatineau) experience ongoing linguistic assimilation pressures.⁴ The arrival of immigrants is changing the balance between the two official language groups in the region, given that an increasing share of the population has non-official languages as their mother tongue.⁴

Table 1. Linguistic demographics in Ottawa-Gatineau CMA, Ottawa, and Gatineau in 2016⁵

Mother tongue	Ottawa-Gatineau CMA (Total = 1,309,210)		Ottawa (Total = 980,275)		Gatineau (Total = 328,935)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Official language	1,032,340	78.9%	743,155	75.8%	289,185	87.9%
English	635,215	48.5%	592,890	60.5%	42,325	12.9%
French	397,125	30.3%	150,265	13.8%	246,860	75.0%
Non-official language	232,925	17.8%	202,325	20.6%	30,595	9.3%
2 or more languages	43,950	3.4%	34,790	3.5%	9,155	2.8%

Note: Values are rounded to a multiple of "5" or "10."

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 English-speaking and 6 French-speaking international graduate students, both women (n=11) and men (n=8) across age groups, from 17 countries of origin, and enrolled in various Master's (n=9) and Ph.D. (n=10) programs across 8 distinct Faculties at uOttawa. Our sample allowed us to grasp a diversity of experiences and perspectives that mirror international students' diverse countries of origin and language skills in this era of globalization.

Table 2. Self-rated official language proficiency of interview participants

Self-rated official language proficiency		English-speaking participants (n=13)	French-speaking participants (n=6)
English	Elementary or no knowledge	0	0
	Intermediate	2	1
	Advanced or fluent	10	5
French	Elementary or no knowledge	10	0
	Intermediate	2	0
	Advanced or fluent	0	6

Note: One English-speaking participant did not self-rate their language proficiency.

Employment

For English-speaking international students, many confront a mismatch between the language skills they bring and the French-English bilingualism requirements for non-academic jobs on campus. 5 participants were working as teaching/research assistants (TA/RA), but even then being proficient in the other official language was considered advantageous.

I can't apply for any mentorship here [at uOttawa] because they need someone with French language. [...] you have other languages like Russian and Belorussian. Who cares about those languages? Because those aren't mainstream languages here. It's not very pleasant because you can't really use opportunities to earn money. (female, Eastern Europe)

With TA positions it's always better if you know both languages because some courses are offered only in English, but students might prefer French to speak to you. [...] so that would be nice if I could speak French as well to actually better connect with the student. (male, Eastern Europe)

Most participants pursuing degrees in the humanities, social sciences, and education were concerned about bilingualism requirements in the labour market (off-campus). In contrast, there is more flexibility for those in Engineering or when working for transnational companies.

I'm a Ph.D. student studying grand philosophical theories and I probably cannot get basic kinds of employment because they tell you "you need to be bilingual." (male, Central America)

All 6 French-speaking participants worked as TA, RA, and/or had non-academic jobs on campus. One noted that the bilingualism requirement favours Francophones because they are more likely to become bilingual when studying and living in an English-dominant environment.

Conclusion

- Bilingualism operates differently depending on the program of studies, which leads to varied language requirements and experiences.
- Bilingualism presents unique linguistic challenges and opportunities for accessing employment depending on individuals' bilingual skills.
- International students celebrate the linguistic diversity attributed to bilingualism, but they are also aware of its limitations in terms of supporting non-official languages.

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