

# Post-Secondary Student Housing Strategy

Niagara Region  
December 2024

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## A. Introduction

In August 2024, Regional Council approved the Attainable Housing Strategy, which outlines ways Niagara Region (Region) can better understand the housing context in Niagara and collaborate across sectors to support a range of housing options to address current and future needs. This Post-Secondary Student Housing Strategy (Strategy), a recommendation of the Attainable Housing Strategy, aims to better understand student housing issues specifically, as a distinctive component of Niagara’s housing market, and focuses on ways the Region, in collaboration with many partners, can support meaningful action to address the housing needs of post-secondary students in Niagara.

Post-secondary student housing is a dynamic part of the larger housing market, but with its own particular characteristics. As the housing crisis has grown, so has the focus on student housing issues – increasing competition by students for shrinking rental housing stock, decreases in funding, and increases in costs for post-secondary institutions building on-campus student housing are just a few. Though actions by key players in post-secondary student housing in Niagara (e.g., actual and planned on- and off-campus housing builds, homesharing programs, land use planning and bylaw work) have begun to address some of the student housing demand, there remains work to do to increase purpose-built rental housing for students and other residents seeking accommodation within their means. This Strategy identifies actions to build on existing initiatives and to improve, target and increase post-secondary student housing in the region.

This Strategy is informed by research on policy context, current and projected states of student housing stock, a review of case studies and best practices and their relevance for Niagara, and discussions with key participants in the sector including post-secondary institutions, developers, building managers, mayors and staff of local municipalities, community groups, and student organizations. The Strategy provides an overview of where we are, what challenges may lie ahead, which approaches may be effective to address them, and what options Niagara Region and its local partners may employ to ensure post-secondary student housing in Niagara is safe, integrated, innovative, available, and part of broader efforts to provide appropriate housing for all our residents.

## B. Scope

Post-secondary student housing in Canada and in Ontario have been informed by larger trends and policies affecting the housing market generally (e.g., increases in costs, decreases in rental housing stock, labour and supply chain challenges, high interest rates), and some affecting

post-secondary student housing specifically (e.g., decreased funding for post-secondary institutions, new federal and provincial policies regarding international student enrollment). Post-secondary students living in Niagara not only create a demand for housing, they also create additional demand for services, such as public health services and transit. While acknowledging the importance, value and impact of post-secondary students beyond their demand for housing, along with other student-related behaviours in housing – whether beneficial (e.g., as employees or economic contributors) or challenging (e.g., noise complaints, property damage, parking infractions) – these areas certainly acknowledged as contributing factors but are beyond the scope of this strategy.

This Strategy is also coming forward at a specific point in time, and its scope should be understood in the midst of numerous ongoing changes to student enrollment and post-secondary institutions that are and will continue to have significant impacts on student housing demand. Some are cultural, for instance, the observation from post-secondary staff that post-pandemic, there appears to be an increase in students from Niagara not choosing to live in their family home but rather in other on- and off-campus accommodation. Some are demographic: Niagara’s population is experiencing unprecedented growth, of which student populations form only a fluctuating part. Other changes relate to provincial and federal policies put forward in recent months (e.g., caps on permitted number of international students), which are already resulting in substantial changes to the student enrollment, institutional programming and housing landscapes in the 2024-25 academic year. It will take some time and likely multiple academic years to fully understand the impact of these continuing changes on student enrollments and subsequently on housing markets.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this Post-Secondary Student Housing Strategy is specifically on housing for post-secondary students, including:

- current and projected numbers
- type of housing
- location
- costs

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<sup>1</sup> As Canadian economist Rachel Battaglia notes, even the oft-cited cap in the number of international students permitted to study in Canada is just one factor related to housing needs: “The number of students that arrived in prior years, the share of applicants that go on to enrol and what students do when their permits expire also play a role.” Early data suggest and experts have noted that “it could take several years for the cap on international students to slow demand for rental housing in a meaningful way (Luymes).” These factors and related data and trends should be monitored in Niagara to better understand the regional student housing environment.

- best practices for Niagara
- who can contribute to solutions.

To support this focus, a key aim of this report has been to identify and collate data and research to serve as a basis for informed actions and policy decisions. Data collection has been challenging: there is a significant lack of quantitative data on post-secondary student housing. This is true not only for Niagara-specific data, but for most kinds of data related to student housing. In light of these limits, this Strategy is underpinned by two types of research. The first is jurisdictional research, including a scan of government policies, websites, databases, relevant academic papers and media articles in the field, and reviews of current and common challenges as well as best practices related to student housing. The second has involved primary research: interviews with key groups with critical interests in post-secondary student housing (e.g., local municipal staff, post-secondary institutions in Niagara and other jurisdictions, student groups, developers, local and national ‘Town and Gown’ organizations); a Niagara field tour of student housing sites; and a targeted questionnaire on student housing submitted to the four Niagara post-secondary institutions identified below.<sup>2</sup> This dual approach to the research was designed to fill in recognized data gaps, providing both a more detailed picture of post-secondary student housing in Niagara specifically as well as broader contextual and comparative information on student housing in which to situate Niagara’s challenges and potential solutions

This report concentrates on four university and college institutions in Niagara which now and in future are likely to enroll the greatest number of students: Brock University (Brock), Niagara College (NC), University of Niagara Falls Canada (UNF), and Sheridan College – Canadian College of Technology and Trades (Sheridan CCTT). Brock and NC are public institutions; UNF is private; Sheridan CCTT is a public-private partnership. Enrollment for 2023-24 across the four main post-secondary institutions was estimated to be around 30,000 students.

While there are other post-secondary programs and training academies in Niagara, they do not represent large student populations nor significant student housing requirements, as these programs usually have onsite housing (e.g., Niagara Parks School of Horticulture) or are online or hybrid programs (e.g., Trillium College). Private secondary schools (e.g., Ridley College, Niagara Christian Collegiate, Vineridge Academy) were also not included in this research as most institutions provide on-site accommodation for their students, and they were not identified as contributing significantly to the demand for student housing.

The information collected and considered through this Strategy is intended to inform responses to key questions about student housing in Niagara: are housing options for students adequate

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<sup>2</sup> A list of interviews as well as works cited and consulted can be found in the appendices.

in range and appropriate in condition? Will there be enough housing for students in the future? How does post-secondary student housing relate to the larger housing market, particularly the rental housing market, in Niagara? Can changes to student housing unlock rental stock for broader population? Who can affect post-secondary student housing, and how? Not all municipalities experience the same impacts of student housing issues, and not all solutions will be workable in all places. Within this diversity, this Strategy suggests a series of tactical and strategic actions directly related to understanding and improving post-secondary student housing in Niagara, and highlights where the Region as an upper-tier municipality has capacity to enable them, particularly in partnership with other groups. Though provincial governments and post-secondary institutions are often seen as exerting the primary influence on student housing in Canada, others such as developers and federal and local governments also have roles to play.

## C. Student Housing Environment

### Roles in Student Housing

Several groups participate in and influence post-secondary student housing. The table below provides an overview of key players and their roles with regard to student accommodation.

**Figure 1: Roles and Responsibilities in Post-secondary Student Housing**

GROUP	ROLE / RESPONSIBILITIES
<b>Post-secondary Institutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build, operate and plan for future on-campus housing</li> <li>• Assist students with locating and navigating issues around off-campus housing</li> <li>• Work with external partners providing a range of off-campus housing</li> <li>• Work with governments on issues related to student housing (e.g., funding, planning approvals, relevant policies and bylaws, transit, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Developers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build and operate purpose-built student accommodation (PBSAs) and other forms of rental units which may be used for student housing</li> </ul>
<b>Business owners/operators, Landlords</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage student housing in various forms, including multi-tenant housing, student rental buildings, hotels</li> </ul>
<b>Homeowners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May rent individual rooms or apartments to students in a private home on a homesharing or other rental basis</li> </ul>

GROUP	ROLE / RESPONSIBILITIES
<b>Local municipalities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and enforce plans, policies, bylaws, etc. related to rental housing which would include students (e.g., residential rental and parking bylaws, as-of-right accessory dwelling units, fire code inspection)</li> <li>• Establish ‘Town and Gown’ committees to facilitate issues around student housing (e.g., noise, parking, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Niagara Region</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement Regional Affordable and Attainable Housing Strategies</li> <li>• Consider student housing impacts and support in relevant core services (e.g., transit)</li> </ul>
<b>Provincial government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exert oversight of post-secondary institutions through Ministry of Colleges and Universities, and housing policy through Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing</li> <li>• Oversee and fund post-secondary institutions</li> <li>• Affect policy related to student housing such as planning approval waivers, tuition freezes and requirements that institutions ensure housing options are available for international students, and determine international student permit capacity for post-secondary institutions</li> <li>• Regulate banking, borrowing and investment for colleges</li> <li>• Oversee broader planning policy related to housing</li> </ul>
<b>Federal government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage student housing through loan and other programs (e.g., Apartment Construction Loan Program)</li> <li>• Affect enrollment (and by extension) student housing through immigration and other policy (e.g., limits on international student study visas and work permits)</li> </ul>
<b>Financial institutions and Investors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide financing for some forms of rental housing development including PBSAs, on-campus student housing, accessory dwelling units</li> </ul>

Though some groups will have greater levels of influence than others, all of these partners affect the post-secondary student housing environment and have a role to play to improve it.

## Student Housing – Context and Comparison

A variety of factors inform the broader context of post-secondary student housing. Some relate to larger social, economic, or cultural trends, or global events beyond the purview of any particular region or level of government. One example would be the increase in remote and

hybrid education during the pandemic, and the resulting implications for the nature and location of student learning, which has caused several shifts in student housing patterns. Another instance is general demographic trends reflecting a smaller cohort of post-secondary aged students in northern and western countries, and opposite trends in southern and eastern countries, which has increased the number of international students in northern and western PSIs.

Broad social, economic and vocational changes also influence student housing, for instance, the need for and interest in trades and construction-related fields. This in turn has led to changes in program marketing and enrollment, and focused attention on colleges which have more of these programs yet traditionally have enrolled greater numbers of students who live locally and have provided less on-campus housing than universities.

Some factors are more site-specific, and may relate to demographics, such as the composition of communities (e.g., age, nationality, culture), the size of post-secondary student population relative to overall population, the number of students from out-of-region, or the number of institutions in a municipality. Some are economic, like the cost of living, vitality of the local economy, availability and type of employment, or the availability and amount and type of housing stock. Other factors hinge more on issues of location: the size and density of an area, the number of or proximity to urban centres, or the proximity to key infrastructure and services such as transit, recreational facilities, or access to groceries.

These factors differ between each municipality in Niagara, and between Niagara and other comparator municipalities. As Figure 2 below suggests, municipalities that are similar in key indicators such as population or location can have very different post-secondary student housing environments even before factoring in other variables.

**Figure 2: Comparator Municipalities (2021)\***

Municipality	Number of Public PSIs	Population	Public PSI Students Relative to Census Population	Market Vacancy Rate**
Niagara Region	2 (uni, college)	477,941	5%	1.9
Hamilton	2 (uni, college)	569,353	8%	2.8
Waterloo Region	3 (2 unis, college)	587,165	14%	2
London	2 (uni, college)	422,324	13%	1.8



Sources: CMHC Rental Market Statistic Summary; Ontario Data Catalogue Open Data  
University Enrollment 2021-22

\*2021 is the most recent year for consistent source data for college and university enrollment

\*\*Municipal vacancy rates based on Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) – Niagara Region figure based on St. Catharines-Niagara CMA which excludes Regional municipalities of Grimsby and West Lincoln

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It is important to consider a range of variables when establishing post-secondary student housing context. For instance, as Figure 2 indicates, Niagara has a low overall market vacancy rate, which is a challenge, but also the number of students in public PSIs relative to census population is lower than in other municipalities. Niagara Region has the largest geographic size (1854 sq km, as opposed to London's 420.5 sq km) and the most local municipalities of the comparator communities in Figure 2 (12, as opposed to Waterloo Region's seven, with London and Hamilton being single-tiers), but is both rural and urban in nature, which affects matters of density, availability of transit services, location of housing, and more.

Another variable to highlight is historical considerations which can have a significant impact on post-secondary student housing environment. During the 1990s, post-secondary funding in Ontario dropped \$635M while enrollments increased, resulting in per-student funding levels which have yet to catch up.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, the Ontario government cut tuition fees for post-secondary institutions by 10%; they are currently slated to remain frozen at these levels through 2026-27.<sup>4</sup> These ongoing impacts to revenue contributed to a subsequent dramatic increase in international student enrollment, in part, because their substantially higher tuition costs (up to five times domestic student tuition rates) helped offset the funding gap created by the provincially-imposed tuition freeze, and because the domestic population of students has been decreasing due to an ongoing trend of lower birth rates in Canada. The increase in international student numbers, which was fueled partially but not solely by the financial need of PSIs, occurred at the same time that the housing crisis in Canada, which arguably manifested due to numerous contributing factors, was becoming more acute. At a time of low rental vacancy rates, particularly for smaller units, the increase in international student enrollment heightened awareness of added pressure on the availability of rental housing, as this segment of the student population are all out-of-region and require local housing.

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<sup>3</sup> TVO Today | Current Affairs Journalism, Documentaries and Podcasts. "Ontario Needs to Pony Up More Cash for Colleges and Universities" TVO.org, 6 March 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Province of Ontario Memorandum, February 27, 2024. As a local college noted, this underfunding was particularly difficult for colleges pursuing funding for capital investments, including student housing, which are not eligible for public funding through the provincial Minister's Binding Policy Directive. Unlike universities, colleges in Ontario require Ministry of Colleges and Universities and Ministry of Finance approval to incur debt.

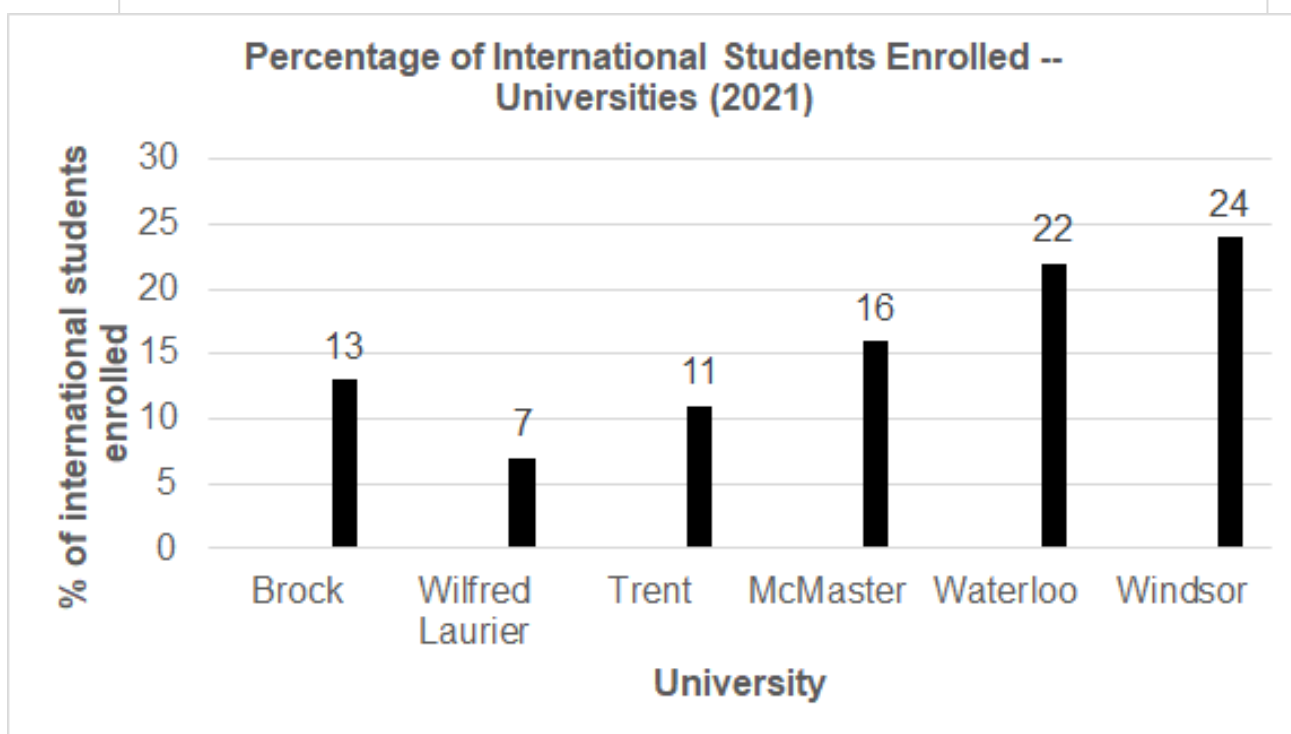
In response to the pressures of rapid population growth in Canada including the demand for housing in a constrained housing environment, the provincial and federal governments have instituted a number of policy changes related to immigration, including many in 2024 specifically targeting post-secondary student immigration:

- caps on the numbers of international students who will be admitted to the country (federal government) and to each PSI (provincial government);
- an increase in the level of financial support international students must demonstrate to be admitted for study in Canada (federal government);
- changes to whether and which international students may receive work permits following completion of their schooling (federal government);
- requirements that PSIs ensure their international students have housing options available to them (provincial government); and
- designation of five specific program streams international students enrolling in colleges must choose to be eligible for a work permit (federal government).

Some assistance has accompanied these policy changes – the Province has recently committed some short-term funding increases to PSIs and streamlined planning processes for post-secondary student housing. From the federal government, there have been additional tax breaks and access to existing loan programs – though as PSIs note, actual capital funding for on-campus accommodations has not been included. The combination of these recent changes and the way PSIs adapt to them will significantly affect international student enrollment, institutional finances, and data on where and how international students live (in addition to overall student housing data). It is likely to take several years to fully understand the impact of these policy changes on the broader housing market. While some believe these policy changes will alleviate some current housing pressures, others believe the impact will be minimal given the post-secondary student population in Niagara makes up only 5% of the total population, and that housing challenges in the overall available rental market will persist.

These broader changes affect Niagara institutions as well, but comparisons can be instructive. As demonstrated in Figure 3 below, Brock's share of international students relative to the larger student body is below many comparator public universities with similar overall student enrollment and in similar sized cities. Brock does not expect this number to grow given recent federal policy changes.

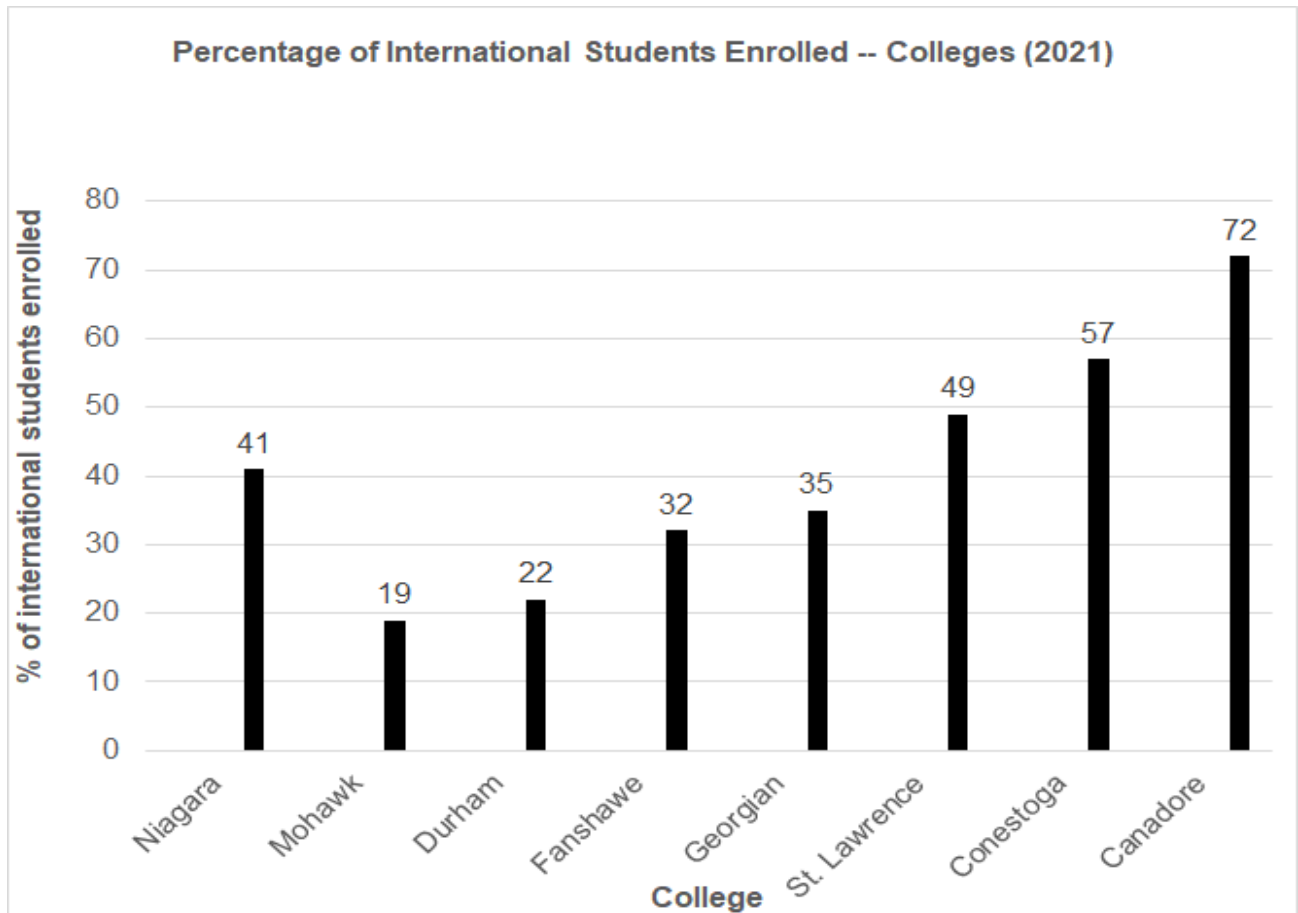
Figure 3: University International Student Enrollment Percentages (2021)



Source: Ontario Data Catalogue Open Data University Enrollment 2021-22

The same is true for NC, Niagara’s public college. Figure 4 indicates international student enrollment percentages in public colleges of similar size, showing that NC is on par with several comparator colleges in their enrollment of international students. Similarly, NC’s percentage is expected to decrease given recent federal policy changes.

**Figure 4: College International Student Enrollment Percentages (2021)**



Source: Ontario Data Catalogue Open Data College Enrollment 2021-22

Figure 5 provides enrollment numbers in Niagara’s four largest post-secondary institutions and the percentage of international students as a proportion of the overall student population. It should be noted that Sheridan CCTT is only allowed to enroll international students as per the current provincial operating requirements for this institution.

**Figure 5: Niagara Region Public Sector Institutions Enrollment**

Institution	Total Enrollment (Sept-Apr 2023-24)	Number of International Students	International Students as % of Total Enrollment
Brock University	19,044	2,317	12%
Niagara College	11,005	5,711	52%
U of Niagara Falls	40	34	84%
Sheridan CCTT	800	800	100%

Sources: Niagara Region Questionnaire on Student Housing 2023-24 and updates

Student housing, like housing generally, is affected by a range of complex and interrelated factors. Niagara will have pressures that vary from other communities with different student enrollment, different housing stock and vacancy rates, different planning and zoning policies, geographic locations of the institutions, and all the other variables outlined above. However, the region still shares with the majority of its comparator communities many of same challenges around the need to house post-secondary students in a time of housing pressures within the larger population seeking housing options.

## Student Housing in Niagara

Niagara’s post-secondary student housing landscape is affected not only by the broader variables noted above, but by variables specific to the area. The regional housing context, particularly regarding rental housing, most immediately informs Niagara’s student housing environment. The Region’s current housing environment, outlined in detail in the Attainable Housing Strategy, is characterized predominantly by single detached housing stock (70%). Recent years have seen an increase in intra-provincial migration to Niagara,<sup>5</sup> increasing numbers of residents in need of smaller rental units due to smaller family sizes, and due to affordability, limited opportunities for people to move out of rental into home ownership; a growing affordable housing waitlist particularly for those requiring smaller units; and an influx of refugees in Niagara several of whom will seek local rental housing when federally supported accommodation is discontinued. The demand for rental housing has increased significantly as a result of the above factors, yet between 2023-2030, completion of rental units is projected to be far below what is required to meet demand, and vacancy rates are at historic lows.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Clayton, Frank. “Residents Fleeing the City of Toronto, Peel and York Regions to Find More Affordable Homes.” Toronto Metropolitan University, June 18, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Niagara Region Attainable Housing Strategy (11): “According to...analysis by RBC Canada, past completion of rental units, where demand is poised to increase significantly, have been well

**Figure 6: Niagara Region Fast Facts**



Niagara Region’s population has continued to increase (6.7% from 2016-2021); in addition to external immigration, intra-provincial immigration to the region was the third highest in the province.



Vacancy rates in Niagara remain low (2.8% in 2023), and rental rates have continued to increase (e.g., increases of 10.3% for one-bedroom and 8.4% for two-bedroom average rents for apartments in 2023).



Close to 90% of the greatest need for affordable rental units in Niagara is for smaller units.

Sources: CMHC Housing Market Information Portal; Centre for Urban Research and Land Development; CANCEA 2021 Dataset Update.

Based on these facts and the analysis in the Attainable Housing Strategy, there is a demonstrated need for more purpose-built rental, more smaller units, more types of units, and more affordable units, primarily in urban environments near services and amenities. Challenges specific to post-secondary student housing in Niagara directly reflect these larger challenges present in the wider regional housing context in terms of need for rental units of appropriate price, size, location and availability.

Student housing in this Strategy refers to housing for those enrolled in post-secondary studies. This specific type of housing can take a variety of forms: either on-campus housing, which usually refers to housing provided by the post-secondary institution on or near the campus, like dormitories or institutionally-run accommodation managed by the institution and/or in partnerships where wrap-around services similar to those on campus exist to support students; or off-campus housing, which usually refers to student accommodation not provided by the institution, such as student apartments, co-ops, or rooms in other types of co-located spaces.

Post-secondary student housing comes in many forms, locations, densities and price points, and serves a variety of students (graduate/undergraduate, local/domestic/international,

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below what is needed to meet demand. This is also seen in the market with vacancy rates for rental dwellings currently at historic lows across the country and in Niagara.”

singles/couples/ families, people with different needs and abilities). Students typically move between types and locations of housing throughout their post-secondary careers.

**Figure 7: On-Campus Housing in Niagara**

Institution	Total Enrollment (2023-24)	Percentage of All Students in On-campus Housing
Brock University	19,044	13%
Niagara College	11,005	4%
University of Niagara Falls	40	0%
Sheridan CCTT	800	19%

Source: Niagara Region Questionnaire on Student Housing 2023-24

In 2023-24, approximately 4% of NC students and approximately 13% of Brock students were housed on campus. Brock opened a new a 300-bed on-campus dormitory in 2022 at a cost of approximately \$55M and has plans in place for additional on-campus housing, construction of which will be triggered by future enrollment numbers and available funding.

In 2023, NC signalled its plans to triple on-campus housing over the next four years including housing on both its Niagara-on-the-Lake and Welland campuses which will bring NC in line with Brock in terms of the percentage of student population that can access housing on campus.<sup>7</sup> The Welland residence is currently in the design process, with occupancy expected in 2027.

At the beginning of 2024, as a start-up institution UNF did not possess any on-campus housing options. In spring 2024 the university struck a partnership to lease a variety of facilities from private sector providers in Niagara Falls, to be managed by UNF to ensure housing for all enrolled students who need accommodation. UNF has longer-term plans to build more student housing closer to its downtown Niagara Falls campus as enrollment increases and programming expands.

Similarly, Sheridan CCTT has provided housing to 19% of its students under a partnership lease agreement with a private sector facility in Niagara Falls with staff, services and transit on-site, and has plans to expand student housing nearer its campus in Fort Erie as enrollment and programming grow.

<sup>7</sup> Milana, Alyssa. "Niagara College to Significantly Expand On-Campus Housing." InsideNC, 28 June 2023.

While Brock like most public universities will not be noticeably affected, for NC, UNF, and Sheridan CCTT, the impact of the federal government's new limits on international students and their effect on enrollments is still being determined. Regardless of these impacts, for the 2023-24 year, approximately 8% of Niagara's estimated 30,000 post-secondary students were housed in on campus (including institutionally provided) accommodation.<sup>8</sup>

All institutions note that most students prefer on-campus housing for their first year, moving off-campus in subsequent years – many universities, including Brock, have policies guaranteeing on-campus housing to any first-year student (Brock guarantees on-campus housing for any undergraduate student in any year of study who applies and pays the Residence application fee by a specified date). Though fewer college than university students typically opt for on-campus housing, Sheridan CCTT with its 100% international student population, does provide housing for many of its students which, though not on campus, is operated by Sheridan CCTT and functions similarly to on-campus housing with wrap-around services and transportation to campus from the residence site, a converted hotel in Niagara Falls. On-campus student housing options for all institutions responding to a Niagara Region survey had low vacancy rates (e.g., Brock on-campus housing was over 95% full for 2023-24, though it has never reached 100%). Primary reasons for students choosing on-campus housing according to Niagara's PSIs are convenience, safety, community life, and no commute.

With only 8% of Niagara's post-secondary students living on campus, it is abundantly clear that the majority of post-secondary students live in off-campus housing, in purpose-built student rental apartments, shared spaces (rented rooms) in residential homes, rented hotel rooms, rented rooms in multi-tenant rental houses, living in their family homes, and more rarely in purchased residences (in which rooms may be rented to other students).<sup>9</sup> All four Niagara institutions have dedicated staff to assist students with housing, including off-campus housing, and work with a variety of partners to ensure the availability of and access to off-campus accommodation. This may take the form of informal partnerships with providers of PBSAs, providing marketing support for available student rentals, partnering with homesharing programs, and providing information on tenant and landlord rights and roles.

An estimated 26,000+ post-secondary students live off-campus in Niagara.<sup>10</sup> Insufficiently reliable or consistent data were provided on how many students enrolled in Niagara's four main PSIs were from Niagara, or how many of these post-secondary students from Niagara opt for housing within or outside their local family homes. Key considerations for students opting for

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<sup>8</sup> From data provided on Niagara Region Questionnaire on Student Housing 2023-24.

<sup>9</sup> Some students in Niagara PSIs commute from out of region, but specific data on this was not available.

<sup>10</sup> From data provided on Niagara Region Questionnaire on Student Housing 2023-24.



off-campus housing include cost of housing, more housing options, proximity to work and to campus, access to transit, community, convenience, proximity to culture, and independence.

Post-secondary student accommodation, both challenges and approaches to address them, vary significantly from Thorold to Fort Erie to St. Catharines, from Welland to Niagara-on-the-Lake to Niagara Falls. What follows are some considerations regarding student accommodation and strategies to reduce housing pressures and promote workable housing options for all Niagara.

## D. Improving the Student Housing Landscape

This Strategy recognizes there are both benefits (e.g., economic, labour, cultural and demographic contributions) and challenges (e.g., pressure on public and social services, pressure on units traditionally used to address homelessness, parking, noise, and property maintenance issues) in having concentrated areas of student residents in our communities. Recognizing the importance of post-secondary students to our region, this Strategy focuses on the nature, need for and availability of housing specifically to ensure students thrive in Niagara.

Students, like all residents, have a right to be housed.<sup>11</sup> The focus here is on ways to retain the advantages post-secondary students bring to our communities while addressing their housing needs and the pressures they exert on Niagara's housing market, where they are part of a demand for rental housing that Niagara does not have the stock to accommodate. Tens of thousands of students requiring primarily attainable rental housing are a lot to accommodate in the strained Niagara housing environment. Students may create demand for housing that is also in demand by vulnerable and underserved groups requiring housing they can afford, or for dwellings that may be more suitable to families. Student room rentals, particularly in single detached homes, can increase rent levels for all similar types of housing. Renting multiple single rooms within a dwelling may make it more difficult to ensure both building and health and safety codes are enforced. Additionally, students rent dwellings temporarily (whether for semesters [four months], academic terms [eight months], or the duration of their study program [two to four years]) and may be less likely to complain about unsafe or inadequate housing at the risk of losing their accommodation.

Below are areas in which the data and information gathered regarding post-secondary student housing in Niagara suggest we can usefully focus attention, as well as some potential best

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<sup>11</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission Policy on Human Rights and Rental Housing.

practices that Niagara may consider to improve and strategically plan for greater housing availability and suitability for students for and all Niagara residents.

## (1) Data

We need better housing data,<sup>12</sup> and particularly more and better data on post-secondary student housing and its relation to the larger housing market. Outreach to various sources in Niagara revealed little and inconsistent data on basic questions about post-secondary student housing, as well as on its relation to local rental markets, affordable housing and other public services. This is an issue which has been flagged by municipal and public groups, researchers, planners, post-secondary institutions and governments at international, national and local levels, and it is a need in Niagara. Quantitative data around how and where students live off-campus, and how off-campus student rental affects different types of housing and the market in general, is not available but is important to track.

There are inherent issues in gathering this data, including the rapid shifts in student housing populations, but the size and impact of the sector have not been historically collected or monitored. Existing rental market data (produced by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, or CMHC) does not identify student households, while Statistics Canada's demographics provide few details on residential situations. Census numbers count domestic students' primary residence as where they are from, not where they may live while enrolled in school; similarly, students may list their "home" address with institutions as either the address of where they are from as opposed to where they are living near the school, as the latter address is more subject to change. Additionally, there are issues in tracking housing for non-domestic residents, though the January 2024 provincial mandate that colleges and universities ensure that housing options are available for international students may assist in generating information on how many and where international students enrolled in Niagara's PSIs are housed, which may in turn encourage better information on where all students reside. Ensuring we are specific not only about larger aggregate enrollment numbers, but how many students are in which campuses, some of which may not be located in Niagara, where they reside, and how many attend on-campus and how many attend remotely or in a hybrid model, will also be important in understanding housing need.

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<sup>12</sup> "We Don't Track Data as Well as We Should,' Ontario Housing Minister Says." Globalnews.ca, 14 June 2024.

## Niagara Best Practices: DATA



In 2024 Brock instituted what will be a regular survey on student housing, open to all students, designed to provide information on issues including scarcity, safety, health and wellness, needs, challenges, and the location of student housing.



All four Niagara PSIs consulted have housing coordinators and/or offices which could provide the contact and capacity for Niagara efforts to obtain and share student housing data.

Institutions are understanding the need for better data and planning for post-secondary student housing and are establishing or updating efforts to collect and review this data. NC has launched a Student Housing Strategy to identify how it will meet its students' needs; Brock has instituted a regular survey on student housing to inform its student housing work. It is also worth noting that even available data related to student housing may change quickly and significantly: we have only to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the vacancy rate, demand for, nature and location of student housing, or how new federal and provincial policies will affect housing demand and supply in the coming year, to understand how fluid the situation is and how challenging it can be to track or predict.

### Best Practices for Data:

- UTILE (L'Unité de travail pour l'implantation de logement étudiant) conducted the nation-wide FLASH 2021 project which surveyed nearly a million students in all 13 provinces and territories regarding their living situations. Updates to this survey and encouragement of similar surveys could assist with current information gaps.
- The International Town and Gown Association, including many Canadian members, has acknowledged that the results of its survey on student housing in summer 2024 would not be rich in quantitative data, which is recognized as a key gap. To this end, Canadian staff are working with groups in Ontario who are attempting to gather and gauge quantitative data around student housing. They and other researchers are looking particularly at ways that the Region of Waterloo, which has dedicated human and financial resources to this work, has been able to collect, collate and analyze data related to their post-secondary student population, including annual modelling of their student housing numbers and locations. The aim is to create a planning tool that may allow other municipalities to forecast post-secondary student housing information in similar ways.

## (2) On- and Off-Campus Housing Supply

### On-campus or institutionally-run housing

Increasing demand, low vacancy rates, and the fewer than 10% of enrolled students in Niagara that are currently housed on-campus all point to the potential need for increased on-campus housing. The increased cost of off-campus housing has also generated greater demand for on-campus housing, which has become more cost-competitive with market rates than in the past. The 2024 Provincial requirement that PSIs ensure that housing options are available for incoming international students may also add to that on-campus demand. It is notable that the four Niagara PSIs have been taking steps to increase the amount of on-campus or institutionally managed housing they offer through strategic, capital or campus master plans. The federal and provincial governments have recently put forward options to facilitate more on-campus housing, though dedicated capital for these projects is not included. Increasing enrollment of students who will require housing should be met with a commensurate increase in institutional housing units and in helping institutions secure the capital to build them when this need is demonstrated.

### Niagara Best Practices: On-campus or institutionally-run housing



A former secondary school site and hotels are or are in the process of being leased and converted to student residences by Sheridan CCTT and UNF.



Niagara College and Sheridan CCTT invest in transit from student housing in Niagara Falls to their campuses.



Niagara Regional Housing and Brock University partnered on a successful co-location project of a student in a seniors residence (ICER) which could be repeated and expanded.

### Off-campus housing

In addition to increased on-campus housing, a greater amount and variety of off-campus rental housing is needed. While several groups in Niagara have done good work to meet the demand, the need for students in Niagara to find accommodation that is affordable, usually in smaller rental units near key services such as transit, make them part of the large and growing group of Niagara residents with similar needs that are putting pressure on an inadequate rental housing supply. Though options for off-campus student housing such as homesharing<sup>13</sup> and ADUs help,

<sup>13</sup> NC, UNF and Brock have strongly promoted homesharing and have demonstrated that this is a viable option for students and residents who are over-housed. While still relatively small in

they are not of a scale to make any measurable impact on the larger housing pressures. As the Attainable Housing Strategy notes, “the first need is for more purpose-built rental of all types (ground-oriented, mid-and high-rise) in order to meet the current and projected housing demands of our community.”<sup>14</sup> An increase in all types of purpose-built rental, including but not exclusively PBSAs, will be part of addressing appropriate housing options for students.

Assisting students, particularly out-of-region students who may not be familiar with the area or market, to locate appropriate off-campus housing is also important. Most Niagara PSIs have housing offices and strong related resources for students. Incorporating more peer advocates could be a way to ensure members of traditionally vulnerable groups (e.g., racialized, Indigenous, people with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+) are able to secure appropriate housing.

Niagara municipalities with established PSIs in or near them expressed not only an interest in increasing rental and student accommodation, but also shared a preference for that housing to occur through intensification in downtown areas or in proximity to campuses. Targeting density of any kind close to key services and walkable communities is generally recommended as more cost-effective and sustainable. For students, issues of safety, economy and community make matters of location even more important. In discussions on post-secondary student housing, a majority of Niagara groups -- students, PBSA developers, PSIs and municipalities -- all noted the importance of the location of student housing in making it successful. Thoughtfully locating increased student housing density serves the needs of post-secondary students and also unlocks and preserves residential options for families and other residents.

### **Best Practices for On- and Off-Campus Housing:**

- **Build more student housing**

PSIs can be encouraged to review, enact, and expedite plans to construct more on-campus student housing, if demand is demonstrated and funding is available. Private and partnership opportunities for off-campus housing (McMaster and University of Toronto have examples)<sup>15</sup> can be explored and encouraged to increase PBSAs and off-campus rental.

- **Convert existing buildings to student housing**

Though the conversion of former office buildings to student housing in the post-pandemic era has garnered some attention in recent years, the lack of such stock in Niagara suggests

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comparison to the overall population, there is opportunity for further expansion and it is the most low-cost option for increasing housing availability in the market.

<sup>14</sup> Niagara Region Attainable Housing Strategy (4).

<sup>15</sup> “Private-Public Partnerships Are the New Face of Student Housing.” University Affairs, 4 September 2018.

other conversion options would be more fruitful and have proven more cost-effective.<sup>16</sup> There are examples of hotels or motels in suitable condition being renovated for use as post-secondary student housing in several places, including Niagara (e.g., both Sheridan CCTT and UNF do or will house students in hotels in Niagara Falls). Sufficient data has not been available to determine whether or to what degree students housed in hotels or converted hotels are in units of suitable condition, and whether or not they may have displaced other demographics previously housed in these long-term rental accommodations.

- **Intensify and Co-locate**

There are efforts underway to encourage the development of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on existing residential lots. The number of ADUs on a single detached residential lot as of right is generally increasing, and development charges are exempt on some of these units. ADUs are not solely for students however, and the number built, while helpful and to be encouraged, will not provide the material increase in unit numbers needed to meaningfully impact change in rental housing supply.

The presence of homesharing organizations is growing in Canada and Niagara. SpacesShared, one of the more prominent of these services which connects people (usually students) to others in the community (usually seniors) willing to rent a room in their home, is now partnering with Brock, NC, and UNF. Homesharing organizations differ regarding the nature of the agreements between parties, who is eligible/targeted (e.g., student renters as opposed to any renters) and what services may be offered. Niagara may be particularly suited to this model due to the large number of overhoused homeowners, particularly seniors, in the region. As these partnerships with local PSIs are relatively new, it may take time to assess the uptake in them and determine how many post-secondary students they may house. Like ADUs, these homesharing arrangements represent yet another option for student accommodation despite being similarly limited in number and scale.

Opportunities to co-locate post-secondary students and other groups in housing are increasingly being explored. The Intergenerational Community-Engaged Residency (ICER), a pilot project partnership of Brock and Niagara Regional Housing (NRH), saw a Masters of Gerontology student housed for a year in an NRH building with senior tenants, which proved successful and mutually beneficial;<sup>17</sup> though a small start, such opportunities could be scaled up, and other similar opportunities identified. Housing, especially for students in programs related to co-located services such as nursing, social work, or gerontology, could

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<sup>16</sup> “Hotel vs. Office: Different Challenges in Commercial to Residential Conversions.” BDCnetwork.com, 30 March 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Nicalaou, Victoria. “Brock University Student Who Lived with Seniors for a Year Emerges with New Outlook.” St. Catharines Standard, 6 November 2023.

be co-located with long-term care or rehabilitation facilities, early childhood students could be co-located with childcare facilities, etc.

## Funding and Financing

A key element underpinning on- and off-campus housing is funding. Insufficient funding accounts in part for the lack of adequate supply of rental housing of all types, and is a contributing factor to the inadequate types and amounts of housing being built. Decreased funding to colleges and universities in Ontario over the last few decades has frequently resulted in PSIs enrolling more international students to offset revenue shortfalls, as their tuition is significantly higher than those of domestic students. Commensurate housing for this increase in international students was not constructed or located, and only recently has the Government of Ontario required PSIs to ensure international students accepted to study at their institutions have housing options available. It is worth noting that it is not only international students who play a role in creating housing pressures in communities.

Though this has not been an issue to date in Niagara, an Ontario university recently received more acceptances for 2024-25 than it had on-campus units to accommodate<sup>18</sup>. This resulted in housing shortages for first-year students particularly, and prompted significant media attention. While this is not the situation in Niagara it is a cautionary tale of the issues affecting students, PSIs, and local housing markets and speaks to the need for a pro-active approach to housing in Niagara and the need for collaboration to attempt to mitigate against a similar situation.

Funding challenges exist in off-campus housing and in the private market. In all sectors costs have increased but access to funding in many cases has not. Until recently, if at all, existing sources of funding have not had program updates nor funding increases for years. The so-called “heads and beds” levy is one example: this amount paid by the province to municipalities for each student enrolled at a local post-secondary institution has not increased since 1987, and does not take into account that students may reside in municipalities (and use their services and infrastructure) different from those in which their institution is located.<sup>19</sup> Though more tax breaks have been put forward recently to incentivize purpose-built rental,<sup>20</sup> including student housing, the complexity, inconsistency and tenure of these programs suggest the challenges will continue until more predictable funding can be achieved. Similarly, private financing is

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<sup>18</sup> Mahler, Cameron. “Students, Parents Upset over University of Guelph’s 1,300-Student Waitlist for Residence Spots.” CBC, 20 June 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, Lana. “Recalculating ‘Heads and Beds’.” Nova Res Urbis, 10 Jan 2024.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the GST/federal HST portion exemptions for new purpose-built rental announced in May 2024. “GST/HST Rebate for Purpose-Built Rental Housing (PBRH).”

Canada Revenue Agency, 13 May 2024.

increasingly expensive at a time that many costs associated with these developments – interest rates, labour shortages, materials, land – have risen substantially. This is particularly true for rental development.

### Niagara Best Practices: FUNDING AND FINANCING



The PBSA business model has been successful in Niagara. Owners and operators of Niagara PBSAs referenced strong relationships with the educational institutions providing the majority of their tenants, and they coordinate with the PSIs on current and future student housing need.



There has been a substantial increase in the number of rooms available in Niagara through PBSAs in recent years. One prominent example, the Lofts in Thorold, added to its original nine buildings when it opened Parkway Lofts in 2023, featuring 543 more beds; more buildings with hundreds of beds are planned.

PBSAs are by definition purpose-built rental designed for post-secondary students (while it is possible for non-students to apply for accommodation in these buildings, specific aspects of PBSA housing result in very few non-students doing so). Unlike student rooms in less targeted types of housing, there is much less chance that students in PBSAs are displacing other potential renters for several reasons. PBSAs are successful, in part, because they work on a different business model, with more stringent financial guarantor and location requirements, which are hard to replicate in conventional rental housing. Though more is needed, it is promising that Niagara has multiple private sector companies already providing hundreds of purpose-built rental housing units. The ideal situation is for the market to organically provide the right product to meet the demands without government intervention. In so far as the government does have a role here, it would be to encourage development of PBSA rentals, for instance through incentives targeted to rental development and intensification in areas and at price points conducive to student housing.

#### Best Practices in Funding and Finance:

- **Advocacy**

Niagara governments and groups can advocate to upper levels of government, particularly the Province, for increased and consistent funding for PSIs and post-secondary student housing.



- **Expand and Explore Student Housing Business Models**

A promising option gaining traction throughout Canada in the last few years has come out of the non-profit sector, in the form of student-based non-profit financiers such as UTILE (L'Unité de travail pour l'implantation de logement étudiant) and Housing Our University Students Equitably (HOUSE). These groups, starting with UTILE's work in Quebec, have had success in developing affordable student housing, and they both continue to work on affordable student housing projects across the country, from York University to the University of Yukon.<sup>21</sup> Exploring how a more diverse range of providers might strengthen the local post-secondary student housing market could be useful in the longer term.

Finally, as one Capital Markets and Securities Bulletin noted recently, “[t]he rising demand in the underserved student accommodation market in Canada has created an entry point for private sector investment.” Public-private partnerships (PPPs or 3Ps) between PSIs and the private sector, long an investment strategy in the US, UK, France and Australia, are growing in Canada, in part because of their adaptability to partner needs and the range of methods and structures they have for raising capital.<sup>22</sup>

- **Promote student housing as an investment**

Though Canada is just on the edge of the robust market seen in other countries, it still appears true here that in the words of key investors in the student housing sector, “despite market volatility and interest rate uncertainty, student housing fundamentals... [mean] the sector will likely continue to outperform most other asset classes.”<sup>23</sup> One Canadian portfolio manager and investment advisor likes student housing both now and over the longer term, feeling it “is a buy and hold strategy within portfolios, with the ability to generate income alongside stable growth.... For us, it's very important right now.”<sup>24</sup> ReMax notes that investors from insurance companies to pension funds to private investors looking to diversify their portfolios “are increasingly exploring purchasing or developing investment property in the untapped and underserved student housing sector,” further suggesting that “[f]or better

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<sup>21</sup>Guy Lai, Linda. “A Student Housing Revolution is Underway across Quebec.” Montreal Gazette, 15 June 2024; and Keung, Nicholas. “Canada’s International and Domestic Students Are in the Grips of a Housing Crisis. Has This Group Cracked the Puzzle?” Toronto Star, 4 September 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Bruvels, Alex and Ouvedi Rama Naikensusan. “Capitalizing on the Underserved Student Housing Market in Canada: Industry Overview and Capital Raising Structures.” McMillan LLP, 5 Apr. 2023.

<sup>23</sup> “Back-to-School: A Student Housing 2024 Focus” Connect CRE March 2024. “I have a lot of stressors in my life,” [chief acquisitions officer with] Student Quarters’ [Andrew] Layton commented. “But I don’t stress much about the performance of my student housing portfolio.”

<sup>24</sup> “Why Student Housing Is a Buy and Hold Investment Right Now.” [www.wealthprofessional.ca](http://www.wealthprofessional.ca), 27 April 2023.

rates and terms, try creating partnerships with nearby colleges and universities, approaching the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CHMC), the Business Development Bank of Canada or smaller lenders in the community.”<sup>25</sup> Promoting these opportunities to 3P partners and investors and lenders of all types and sizes could result in important new student housing development partnerships.

## Policies, Plans, Enforcement

As two of the foremost researchers on student housing in Canada note, “[w]ithin the field of housing studies, there is comparatively little research on how student housing is considered in policy, despite its distinction from wider rental markets.”<sup>26</sup> More and better information is needed so that more and better post-secondary student housing can be encouraged through targeted policies, plans, and bylaws. Ontario’s Provincial Planning Statement released in August 2024 underscores this by asserting that planning authorities should “consider a student housing strategy when planning for strategic growth areas.”<sup>27</sup>

One of the few studies on student housing and land-use planning in Canada, specifically Ontario, was published in 2022.<sup>28</sup> Analyzing planning documents in Ontario’s urban areas with a primary public university campus, researchers identified four approaches used (often in combination) by municipalities with regard to student housing: restriction, diversion, intensification, and limited intervention. Brock served as one of four case studies in the paper, illustrating the diversion approach, which emphasizes development in areas away from established residential neighbourhoods. Though its discussion of Brock and its surrounding municipalities is instructive, the findings of the paper may also be helpful if generally applied to other PSIs to provide insight on how municipalities approach post-secondary student housing with a view to balancing local context with provincial growth management and intensification policies.

The City of Welland, for instance, in its 2017 Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw approved zoning provisions in the area close to the NC campus which permitted greater density (an intensification approach). Indications are that this has had the effect of increasing student housing near the campus while reducing it in other residential areas.

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<sup>25</sup> RE/MAX Canada. “Investment Properties: Spotlight on Student Housing.” RE/MAX Canada, 23 Dec. 2023.

<sup>26</sup>Revington, Nick, and Alexander James David Wray. “Land-Use Planning Approaches to Near-Campus Neighborhoods and Student Housing Development Patterns in Ontario, Canada.” Housing Policy Debate, 27 July 2022.

<sup>27</sup>Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Proposed 2023 Provincial Planning Statement 2.4.3.d; updated August 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Revington & Wray.

Enforcement and when required update of existing policies and regulations, including: building and fire codes, rental licensing bylaws, accessibility requirements, and landlord and tenant rules, are also critical ways to ensure the safety and security of student and indeed all housing.

### Niagara Best Practices: POLICIES, PLANS AND ENFORCEMENT



The City of Thorold has a residential rental bylaw that has proven effective in understanding who owns and rents residential units, and in addressing and enforcing issues associated with student rentals such as parking.



Student housing considerations have formed part of the Glendale District and Secondary Plans near the NC Niagara-on-the-Lake campus.



St. Catharines has recognized the impact of students on housing supply in its Housing Accelerator Fund initiatives, and is moving to advance policies such as four units as of right permissions, design guidelines and expedited turnaround times for building permits for ADUs.



The City of Welland in its 2017 Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw approved zoning provisions close to its NC campus permitting greater density, which has increased student housing near campus, while reducing it in other established residential areas.

More remains to be done, however, most particularly in one area: the persistent lack of responsiveness and timely hearings at the Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB) of Tribunals Ontario. The LTB tribunal is meant to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants, including eviction applications. Both landlords and tenants are unhappy with the LTB, which as of May 2024 had a backlog of 53,000 cases.<sup>29</sup> For landlords, attempts to evict tenants, including in some cases students from local PBSAs, for non-payment of rent as well as other infractions, take months and sometimes years to get a hearing, resulting in damage to the unit or building, issues for other tenants, and landlords' loss of significant revenue in rental arrears and other costs.<sup>30</sup> For tenants, including students, the even longer wait (on average several months more)<sup>31</sup> for the Tribunal to address potentially illegal evictions or unsafe living conditions results in tenants simply moving before a hearing takes place, or not even filing complaints, as

<sup>29</sup>Hennessy, Angela. ““No Fairness in This System”: Small Landlords Seek Ways to Protect Themselves amid Ontario Tribunal Delays.” CBC, 2024.

<sup>30</sup>The Small Ownership Landlords of Ontario estimate “[t]he accumulated loss revenue from nonpayment of rent amounts to approximately \$4.6 billion.” Quoted in Bill Hodgins, “How Does She Have More Rights to Our House Than We Do?” Peterborough Couple Say They Are Living through a Tenant Nightmare.” St. Catharines Standard, 20 June 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Hodgins.

they know their term or even degree may finish before the rental issues secure a hearing. The Landlord Tenant Board and Rental Housing Enforcement Unit rarely address cases in an amount of time that would lead to a resolution for students within their lease term, a fact many landlords seem to take advantage of and students are noticing.”<sup>32</sup>

Another concern is the treatment of students by some landlords. In the words of one Niagara PSI responding the Student Accommodation Questionnaire, “Many landlords do not use the Ontario Standard Lease, which often leads to issues surrounding improper evictions, privacy violations, maintenance issues and resigning issues. Students are often pushed to re-sign these non-standard leases well before the 60-day period arrives, creating unwarranted financial and mental stress on the students. Students are frustrated with the ability of landlords to act against the guidelines set out by the Residential tenancies Act.

Though the majority of landlords and tenants are law-abiding, these LTB tribunal delays have resulted in many landlords refusing to continue to lease their units, or developers opting not to invest in or manage rental housing, including in Niagara.<sup>33</sup> These negative impacts are particularly pronounced for small independent landlords for whom losses in revenue are even more consequential for household income, as is increasingly documented in media reports. The disincentive, due to rental arrears or hearing delays at the LTB tribunal, to make rooms or units within one’s primary residence available to the market only serves to exacerbate the issue of overall available units. Concerted efforts to reform the LTB tribunal as soon as possible is vital to protect student tenants, landlords, and maintain existing rental stock, as well as mitigate against a market that discourages developers and landlords from building and managing rental buildings for students and all residents.

### **Best Practices in Policies, Plans and Enforcement:**

- **Encourage local municipal policy review and coordination on policies, plans, zoning, bylaws which relate to student housing**

Niagara municipalities may usefully consider establishing residential rental licensing bylaws, or revising short-term accommodation bylaws to include residential rental policies, to better monitor the nature and amount of rental in their communities, including student rental. Hamilton instituted a pilot program in specific wards targeted at student housing, and

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<sup>32</sup> Niagara Region Questionnaire on Student Housing 2023-24.

<sup>33</sup> An embattled landlord re her experience with the LTB: “There is a housing crisis ... and yet housing providers like me have no interest in ever doing something like this again. I would get a part-time job to pay the mortgage and leave this place empty before I would ever rent it again.” Quoted in Hodgins.

lessons learned there may be helpful,<sup>34</sup> as well as from the successful local example in Thorold referenced above.

- **Advocate for changes to the Landlord and Tenant Board Tribunal**

A range of partners working in post-secondary student housing can come up with potential reforms, and spearhead or become part of a widespread initiative, including both landlords and tenants, urging the Province to immediately address the backlog at the Tribunal and improve its processes and response times going forward.

## (5) Partnerships and Coordination

A theme emerging at the macro- and micro-levels of post-secondary student accommodation is the need for more productive, creative and inclusive partnerships to address the evolving issues associated with student housing. Though there has been increasing attention on problems in post-secondary student housing by the public, those with roles in student housing, and the media, information, actions and reactions to these issues have been relatively siloed. Only two Town and Gown committees are currently active in local Niagara municipalities, despite a community of concerns throughout the region on several post-secondary student housing matters. Housing issues, including student housing issues, do not have a single solution: it will take the concerted efforts of many parties both to scope and prioritize the student housing issues requiring attention in Niagara, and to work collaboratively and creatively to address them. Coordinating on essential needs (more and better data, funding, process improvement, policy integration) and sharing best practices broadly across the student housing sector as well as specifically in Niagara will be critical first steps. Following these exchanges, cross-jurisdictional partnerships must be established to effect specific change and advancement.

### Niagara Best Practices: PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION



Initiatives outlined in local and regional plans around housing, land use, transit, and development increasingly recognize the importance of student housing as a focus of integrated efforts, including the Region's Attainable Housing Strategy, municipal zoning, Secondary Plans, and development policies.

Almost all other student-related community issues stem from the availability, type, and location of student housing and the regulations and services supporting it. The good news is that many of the solutions, models and partnerships arrived at collectively on student housing may also

<sup>34</sup>"Rental Housing Licensing Pilot Program." City of Hamilton.

prove transferrable on a larger scale: students are just a part of a larger housing issue, and addressing post-secondary student housing by generating more safe, affordable, and appropriate housing for them will have a cascading effect on the larger housing crisis by unlocking more rental housing. It is not enough to agree on the nature of the problem or highlight workable best practices: practical, measurable plans of action with specific timelines should also form part of this work to change student housing.

### **Best Practices in Partnerships and Coordination:**

- **Interdisciplinary partnerships**

There are models of cross-sectoral groups – from finance, non-profits, private enterprise, developers, various levels of government, and others – partnering to create student housing across Canada.<sup>35</sup> Working together, these consortiums are finding ways to leverage resources and processes to generate housing. An attempt should be made to fashion a diverse, Niagara-specific partnership to pool resources and expertise and to expedite planning, approving, financing, and building more post-secondary student housing, or possibly a pilot student housing project.

- **Coordinating efforts**

Given the multiple sectors involved in student housing, sharing information and coordinating actions can produce stronger outcomes, whether it pertains to sharing data, templates, best practices; partnering on innovative pilot projects, or advocating for resources or reform.

## **E. Recommendations**

Several actions are recommended to help understand, improve and plan for post-secondary student housing in Niagara. This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but outlines tangible, meaningful activities that can shape student housing in Niagara. Niagara Region will play a lead role in engaging, facilitating and collaborating to implement these actions: coordinating education and innovation opportunities; advocating for better data, funding, and accountability; and working with partners to ensure students and all Niagara residents have adequate, appropriate housing options. Even where others with greater authority and ability to direct certain actions are identified as the logical leads on some actions below, the Region will be actively supporting their work to advance Niagara's post-secondary student housing environment.

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<sup>35</sup> Build Now: Waterloo Region (Carmen Groleau) and Administrative Services Collaborative in BC (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training) are good examples.

Collaboration will be the key to timely and practical progress on all recommendations, and should be understood as central to all efforts. Working together in coalitions comprised of all major student housing sectors will be the true catalyst in moving beyond articulating problems into delivering practical solutions. The housing crisis, and the state of post-secondary student housing, has experienced frequent twists and turns, accumulating over years and involving many participants. It will require several voices and concerted effort and accountability to pioneer solutions, and time to implement them.

**Figure 8: Recommended Actions for Post-secondary Student Housing**

**DATA**

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>Adapt and implement data collection and analysis models</b>	1) Host forum on current status, sources, requirements, and tools for collecting student housing data 2) Develop baseline data collection across post-secondary institutions in Niagara	Niagara Region  PSIs	Immediate
<b>Monitor and support student housing data collection</b>	3) Monitor Niagara data on student and rental housing 4) Monitor and support ongoing efforts for student housing data collection (e.g., UTILE survey, Waterloo Region models) 5) Annual review and analysis of Niagara baseline data on student housing	Niagara Region	Immediate and Ongoing

**HOUSING SUPPLY**

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>Build more housing geared to/suited for students</b>	1) Encourage buildings suited to/geared toward students and broader rental construction in Niagara (e.g., incentives for	Niagara Region	Short-term and Ongoing

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
	<p>rental builds near transit, removal of process barriers)</p> <p>2) Investigate and promote co-location of student housing in new builds (e.g., create potential site list for co-location of housing and services, identify synergies between services and student study paths such as long-term care and gerontology, PSW programs)</p>		
<b>Repurpose existing stock for student housing</b>	<p>3) Encourage conversion of existing buildings or vacant/underused sites for housing geared to students (e.g., strip malls, parking lots, hotels, office buildings)</p> <p>4) Advocate for intensification of housing suited for students (e.g., accessory dwelling units, homesharing)</p>	Area Municipalities	Short-term and Ongoing

## FUNDING AND FINANCING

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>Explore expanded student housing business and financing models</b>	1) Host education session on innovative financing models and best practices for financing and managing student housing (e.g., Niagara models; Canadian models such as Ontario, BC, Quebec; and international models such as Australia, UK, US)	Niagara Region	Short-term
<b>Promote and advocate for housing geared to</b>	2) Share information on success of student housing investments	Investor groups	Short- to Mid-term



Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>students as an investment</b>	elsewhere and positive outlook and outcomes in Canada		
<b>Advocate for government funding for on-campus housing</b>	3) Coordinate with partners to advocate for targeted, consistent government funding for on-campus student housing	PSIs	Short-term

### POLICIES, PLANS AND ENFORCEMENT

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>Exchange information on local municipal provisions related to student housing</b>	1) Share information, existing templates for local policies related to student housing	Niagara Region	Short-term
<b>Advocate for reforms and service levels at the Landlord and Tenant Board tribunal</b>	2) Engage with sector partners including landlords, tenants, interested parties to ensure coordinated, broad-based advocacy 3) Compile Niagara-specific issues (e.g., unresolved submissions, time to resolve) with LTB tribunal and list of potential reforms for advocacy (e.g., a separate track for student-related complaints)	Niagara Region	Immediate

### PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
<b>Create, connect, and communicate with cross-sectoral working groups on student housing</b>	1) Facilitate a workshop on student housing in Niagara (overview, projections, best practices, next steps) aimed at creation of	Niagara Region	Immediate

Recommendations	Actions	Lead	Timing
	working groups for specific issue areas 2) Create and engage a cross-sectoral list of groups involved with student housing to consult and request support from for advocacy initiatives		
<b>Highlight student housing needs in related work</b>	3) Identify and highlight student needs in infrastructure planning and capital initiatives (e.g., transit, water and wastewater infrastructure) 4) Include student housing concerns in larger forums on affordable, attainable and rental housing (e.g., Attainable Housing Strategy)	Niagara Region	Mid-term

## F. Conclusion

Post-secondary student housing has faced massive change in the last several years, of all kinds and from all directions. Some of the changes have been problematic; some have been positive. The key actions that have brought student housing issues to the fore most recently, including those identified in this strategy, evolved from a wide range of circumstances and sources.

Niagara’s institutions and municipalities have had some successes in addressing post-secondary student housing, as outlined above. Now is the moment for Niagara to learn from its own diverse accomplishments as well as those of others, and to concentrate on integrated efforts. There is a need, together, to identify priority problems, compare data and research on the most effective ways to remedy them, vet these options in terms of Niagara’s specific context, and for the relevant sectors to jointly implement the most workable solutions. Niagara is better positioned than many places to address these problems and has an opportunity to capitalize on the good work being done here and elsewhere to continue to address the most pressing student housing issues in a proactive way. This strategy outlines what we face, what we can build on, and how we can build. Now is the time to begin the collaborative work required to improve student housing.

## G. Resources Cited and Consulted

### Resources Consulted

#### Local Municipalities

##### A. Interviews

Town of Fort Erie – January 2024  
City of Niagara Falls -- April 2024  
Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake -- April 2024  
City of St. Catharines -- May 2024  
City of Thorold -- April 2024  
City of Welland – April 2024

Comments solicited from Local Municipalities through Area Planners, October 2024.

#### Post-Secondary Institutions

##### A. Interviews

Brock University – November 2023  
Niagara College -- November 2023 and April 2024  
Sheridan College CCTT – February 2024  
University of Niagara Falls Canada – January 2024

#### Other Sources

##### A. Interviews

International Town and Gown Association – February 2024  
Niagara College Student Administrative Council -- February 2024  
Niagara Home Builders Association – February 2024  
Niagara Realtors Association – February 2024  
City of Waterloo – April 2024

## B. Presentations

Niagara Region Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Committee – October 2024

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**List of Works Consulted is available on request.**