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"I Thought We Were Friends": International Students Challenges in Navigating Basic Academic Regulations at a Private Canadian University

Irene Torres-Arends

Yorkville University, Canada

Email: itorres@yorkvilleu.ca

Yorkville University, 2000 Steeles Ave. West
Concord, ON L4K 4N1

Abstract

Misunderstandings about how the academic world operates are common among international students. This research investigated international students' understandings of academic regulations. Qualitative content analysis of 3,438 email messages indicate international students used a constellation of arguments to make academic requests/complaints to professors. They seemed to be unaware that their requests/complaints should be guided by the university's formal regulations. Analysis of requests/complaints showed that students perceive the academic environment to be governed by a complex set of informal understandings rather than being regulated by a straightforward set of institutional rules. International students' cultural transition process should be seen as a path from a complex constellation of arguments when making requests/complaints to a more limited set of behaviors governed by institutional regulations. Meeting the needs of international students is the responsibility of academic institutions. Curriculum re-design and a progressive learning strategy can play a central role in reducing complexity by communicating academic regulations clearly and consistently and by giving students pedagogical opportunities to develop the required skills.

***Keywords*:** Canada, international students, academic regulations, consciousness of rules, cultural changes

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Canada is a significant destination for international students. According to Global Affairs Canada, in 2018, a total of 721,205 international students studied at all levels in Canada; this is the largest number ever recorded (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). As the global movement of university students seems to be a feature of our time, more emphasis needs to be placed on understanding who these students are, how their cultural transition process takes place, and how academic institutions should respond to international students' needs.

The population of international students in Canada at the post-secondary level represents 16.02% of the total number of post-secondary students in Canada. In 2019 and 2020, 344,430 and 388,782 international students – respectively – enrolled in post-secondary institutions in Canada (Statista, 2022). In the last 10 years, a significant increase has occurred: "Between 2014 and 2018, the number of international students in Canada increased by 68%" (Global Affairs Canada, 2019) and by 98% in Ontario (Parkin, 2019).

The importance of Canada's international students derives not only for their large population but for their potential as future immigrants (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Merli et al., 2020; Sharma, 2020; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013). In 2014, the Minister of International Trade announced Canada's first-ever international education strategy: *Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity*. According to Trilokekar (2015), one of the most important priorities of the policy is to increase the number of international students who choose to remain in Canada as permanent residents after graduation.

From the perspective of policy makers, international students are "ideal immigrants" to Canada since their Canadian educational credentials make them very employable, and their Canadian academic experience represents an opportunity to understand and ease the integration process both into the Canadian workforce and into Canadian society in general (Scott et al., 2015; Sharma, 2020). Given these advantages, it is not surprising that 53,700 international students became permanent residents of Canada in 2018, contributing as productive and valued members of Canadian society (Global Affairs Canada, 2019).

The process of welcoming international students with the purpose of offering them a real option to stay in the country should focus on understanding what international students expect when they arrive in Canada, what their needs are, and how they understand their new academic environment. By expanding our understanding of these areas, we can give shape and content to immigration policy that considers international students a significant addition to the future of Canadian society. The present research was conducted in a private university in Toronto, Ontario, where international students represent a high percentage of the student population. This study was based on the premise that analyzing students' communications with their professors, and more specifically, looking at students' supporting arguments when make a request or a complaint, provides an extraordinary opportunity to study international students' understanding of their new academic environment.

The main question I asked was, how do international students understand Canadian academic regulations? Further, how do they expect regulations to be applied? Students' arguments in support of requests/complaints in their everyday communication via emails with their instructors were analyzed. I looked at these communications as a source of meanings that allowed us access to a significant set of values and beliefs that international students draw on to make sense of their new academic reality.

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Literature Review

International students in Canada come mainly from two countries, India and China (students from these two countries comprise more than 50% of the international student population) (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). These students attend a wide range of public and private academic institutions, including colleges and universities. Sharing the same national origin does not necessarily make international students homogeneous; both China and India contain culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and students can also be highly diverse in terms of their academic background, family support, and economic resources (Marom, 2022). What international students have in common is the fact that they all face, to differing extents, significant challenges (Berry, 2005) that affect their adaptation process (Scott et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; (Bascaramurty et al., 2021). The trends that are currently defining the international student population in community colleges and universities in Canada are the constant increments in numbers, the fact that they are predominately from India and China, and the fact that Vancouver and Toronto are their preferred destinations (Buckner et al., 2021).

To understand the characteristics of international students in Canada, it is helpful to note that academic institutions, through their admission criteria (e.g., English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, as well as academic records), define the international students to be admitted. Public institutions are characterized by a competitive selection process, while private institutions provide greater flexibility in their admission criteria, and frequently use recruitment agents to attract students (Legusov & Jafar, 2012).

Undoubtedly, Canadian academic institutions should acknowledge international students' diversity, not as a challenge but as an asset from where we can support their special needs. Canadian academic institutions need research-based, responsive learning solutions that enable them to effectively scaffold and support international students' rich diversity to facilitate their transition to become "ideal immigrants" (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Academic institutions that receive a significant number of international students should constantly review their policies, curriculum offerings, and student services. The policies of Canadian post-secondary institutions should be broad enough to support the diversity of international students; making their diversity visible to policy makers, especially for those students who may be aiming to call Canada "home." For the federal vision of international students as "ideal immigrants" to become a reality, the immigration policy needs to involve close partnership with academic institutions.

International Students' Understanding of Basic Academic Regulations

- "Professor … how much percentage of plagiarism is admitted?"

Academic rules or regulations (e.g., those that govern due dates, grade review, citation, and plagiarism) that are common in Western academia are not necessarily shared by all academic traditions (Garwood, 2022). This separation is illustrated by a question that international students frequently ask about the percentage of plagiarism that is acceptable. This question reveals that their understanding of plagiarism is not the same as that of Canadian teachers and educational institutions. Academic institutions cannot assume that students entering college or university in Canada come with an understanding of the Western conventions of academic writing and research (Beasley, 2016; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). The complexity of academic integrity in Canada has been well studied and documented and, given that the number of international students in Canada has increased significantly, it is essential to study the cultural dimensions of academic integrity (Christensen Hughes & Eaton, 2022). To explain why students from different cultures plagiarize when studying abroad, several authors have stated that for many students from the East, the

approach to learning in the West is contrary to their experiences in their own country. As Hayes and Introna (2005) showed, for Chinese students, using another author's words is a form of respect. James et al. (2019) observe that, for Chinese students, imitating the work of experts and providing standard answers is an important way to demonstrate their learning.

Kaur's (2019) study found that Indian international students in the U.S. were greatly concerned with the code of academic integrity. In India, these students mostly referred to their textbooks to do their assignments and did not have to worry about citations because they were tested more on their knowledge of the content of their textbooks rather than on the originality of their thinking (Kaur, 2019).

International students' academic background is not the only factor relevant to their experience studying in Canada. The set of cultural meanings that they attach to different types of academic requests and complaints is also relevant. In this context, they frequently encounter conflicts between what they consider to be their duty based on their culture of origin, such as helping their friends when asked to do so, no matter the consequences, and the regulations of their Canadian academic institution. In other words, the experience of international students in Canadian educational institutions is characterized by a conflict in values and beliefs, with two competing ethical orders: the duties-based order characteristic of the students' culture of origin and the right-based order of the new culture (Dworkin, 1977). This conflict must be understood not as a lack of knowledge on the part of the students but as a cultural difference that requires appropriate attention and guidance from teachers and administrators.

In the past, the University examined in this study made its academic integrity regulations available to students using various channels, such as providing students with the information during the admission process, on its library's website, and through the Student Centre. Recently, the approach to making these regulations accessible to international students has changed; instead of expecting students to look up the regulations and take responsibility for informing themselves, guidance is being presented by teachers in the classroom as part of the curriculum of a newly created introductory course and in workshops and information sessions for advanced courses.

Academic Regulations as a Sociocultural Stressor

− "Professor, I thought we were friends ..."

According to Berry (2005), "Acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (p. 698 " Decoding a new culture can be complicated and implies undergoing experiences that can be perceived as pleasant or unpleasant. The acculturation process involves what Berry (2005) terms "acculturative stress," which arises when the interactions between two cultures create events that vary from positive (eustress) to negative (dis-stress). The degree of social connectedness and English proficiency have been identified as indicators of acculturative stress among international students (Koo et al., 2021). In addition, the expectations that international students quickly understand the academic regulations in their new environment can also be a source of acculturative stress. Not understanding why the rules are applied represents another source of acculturative stress that may introduce misunderstandings that make academic adjustment a significant challenge (Oyeniyi et al., 2021). To reduce the stress experienced by international students that originates from their lack of understanding of academic regulations, educators are obligated to make sure these regulations and the reasons for them are clearly explained.

Theoretical Construct

In this study, international students' interactions with their professors were investigated from a socio-legal perspective by adapting Sally Engle Merry's (1990) definition of "legal consciousness." I propose that the ways international students use academic regulations, their actions, and the arguments they use to explain and support an academic request or complaint, can be defined as international students' consciousness of academic regulations. Studies of legal consciousness have proven to be a useful theoretical approach to understanding how individuals interact in society (Ewick & Silbey, 1998), and this approach is applicable to understanding international students' experience in their new academic culture. Research on international students' consciousness of academic regulations represents a rich opportunity to decode how their process of adapting to the new academic environment takes place. Looking at international students' experiences from the perspective of their consciousness of academic regulations provides a framework to answer the following questions: a) how do international students understand academic regulations? and b) how do they expect academic regulations to be applied?

Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was applied in the study using content analysis, based on Creswell's guidelines (2017). The data sources were originally designed to be diverse. We expected to be able to conduct interviews and focus groups; however, the COVID-19 pandemic required us to redesign the data collection procedures. As all the classes at the University turned to the Zoom platform, the primary way to contact undergraduate students was by e-meetings. When undergraduate students were invited to participate in the research during a Zoom session, only six out of 160 students agreed to participate, which would have provided a very limited sample.

The reasons that the students refused to participate in the research could be myriad and likely were related to a lack of experience in research participation (Heine, 2012). Moreover, given the invitation to participate was extended in April 2020, just when the pandemic crisis was unfolding, could also have contributed to the students' reluctance. We decided to use a single, but robust source of data: undergraduate students' historical communications (emails) sent between January 2018 and December 2019 to their teachers in 45 different courses; of the 3,438 student emails examined, 718 expressed either a complaint or a request. Utilizing content analysis as our central method granted us access to the world of meaning behind each request or complaint (Lü, 2018). What could have been seen as a methodological constraint caused by the COVID-19 pandemic became a strength of the research.

The 3,438 emails were anonymized by a third party, following the criteria of the University's Research Ethics Committee (REB), and categorized by email sender and type of request and complaint. Each type of request and complaint was assigned a unique code, which resulted in the following number and percentage of communications per category (see Table1).

Table 1

Types and Number (%) of Requests/complaints

Type of request/complaint	Code	Number (%) of requests/complaints
Assignment re-submission	1	189 (26.3%)
Due date exception	2	202 (28.13%)
Due date extension	3	82 (11.42%)
Grade review	4	196 (27.29%)
Plagiarism assessment	5	49 (6.82%)
Total number of requests/complaints		718 (100%)

To identify the arguments made in support of each type of request and complaint, our research team (two research assistants and I) worked in groups of two to validate the patterns of meaning that were identified and to establish the argument's category based on an interpretation of how students understood the regulations (Heine, 2012) and the moral beliefs behind these understandings (Shweder, 1991). The five types of requests/complaints were selected based on their high frequency of occurrence. The codification process followed three main steps: a) each request/complaint was codified based on their five types selected for the study (e.g., Code 1 "Assignment re-submission"), b) the requests/complaints were organized by code and c) patterns of the argument were identified. The analysis was based on the premise that "… ordinary talk means far more than it says and carries information about cultural beliefs and knowledge system that transcends the grammatical and referential aspects of languages" (Longacre, 1983 as cited in Shweder, 1991, p. 196).

Results

A multiplicity of arguments were found to be regularly used by students when they submitted requests/complaints to their teacher. A close analysis of each type of request/complaint argument allowed us to identify the following specific features:

Assignment Re-Submission

Assignment re-submissions are not regulated by the University, and thus belong to the sphere of informal regulations; however, assignment re-submission is a very frequent practice among students and professors. In this study, 26% of the students requested the opportunity to re-submit their assignment. The most common arguments that students used when requesting permission to re-submit an assignment were the following:

a) No explanation offered
b) Improve grades
c) Financial difficulties
d) The respawn logic argument (a.k.a. video game logic)
e) Wrong submission
f) "Treat me as your family"
g) Health problems
h) Technical issues

a) No explanation offered: Some students appear to believe they do not need to ask if they can re-submit an assignment; they just re-submit their assignment and assume the professor will accept it as the version to be evaluated. Flexibility is assumed to be part of the submission process. Whether "re-submission" is regulated or not is irrelevant. Flexibility is perceived as a sign of the professor's "humaneness." The following is an example of "no argument offered":

> "…Madam i submitted my assignment I know it is too late. Sorry for the delay. Kindly grade my assignment I mailed to you…" (Case N-212)

b) Improve grades. Students regard re-submission as a way to improve their grade. Since re-submission is not regulated by the University, professors have the flexibility to accept or not accept a re-submission. The following is an example of the "improve grades" argument:

> "… I feel really embarrassed is there anything I can do to boost my mark? … let me know if I can submit the previous assignment or is it possible to increase the weight factor of the final exam?..." (Case N-15)

c) Financial difficulties. For many students, failing a course is a significan issue since the financial support comes from their families or from their own work. The following is an example of the "financial difficulties" argument:

> "…give me one chance i can again send assignment with correct references with apa format… if i will fail this course i have to pay … fee this is very difficult for me…" (Case N-142)

d) The respawn logic argument (a.k.a. video game logic). From the perspective of students, submission and re-submission are options that seem to be always available. If an assignment has been identified as having a high percentage of similarities, students expect that by submitting a new deliverable, the previous academic misconduct will disappear. If a previous assignment is given a low grade, they expect the new deliverable they submit will erase their previous poor academic performance. The following is an example of the "respawn logic (a.k.a. video game logic)" argument:

> " I don't know who did identical work i submitted my work 3 days earlier. Im soo soo depressed now u may ask the other person who's paper is identical to me. I have another one I need to be graded professor please because i worked so hard for this assignment" (Case N-30)

e) Wrong submission. A wrong submission is any assignment that received a low mark or, based on Turnitin (the University's document assessment software), shows a high percentage of similarities. The student argues that the submission was made in error. The following is an example of the "wrong submission" argument:

> "… I did submit wrong file and u said that was the plagiarism … can u give me one chance for submit assignments again for pass the course?" (Case N-37)

f) Treat me as your family. Making reference to family relationship is a way to ask not for the application of the regulation but for special treatment. Not receiving special treatment by their professor is understood as a rejection behaviour or not being accepted. The following is an example of the "treat me as your family" argument:

> "… I was not well … EVEN IF YOU GRADE ME 22% marks than i will be passing … please help me i am like your son, i don't even have my family here…" (Case N-570)

g) Health problems. Students frequently report health problems, like having fever, stomach pain, or being sad. For some international students this is the first time that they are abroad, without family support; thus, addressing a health issue could be a significant issue. The following is an example of the "health problems" argument:

> "… i did not complete my assignment because i am ill from two days..." (Case N-138)

h) Technical issues. Having access to a laptop is, for some international students, a privilege they got from their parents when they were admitted; thus, they are not fully familiarized with it. The following is an example of the "technical issues" argument:

> "… my laptop stop working … i will submit it through email …" (Case N-313)

The students' expectation is that they have the right to re-submit their assignment, especially if the resubmission would allow them to improve their grades. They view assignment submission as a process that should be flexible and not time-bound with deadlines.

The "respawn logic argument" seems to illustrate well the logic behind a resubmission request. For the international students in this study, no matter how they perform on an assignment, their email requests/arguments indicate they believe they have the right to resubmit that assignment.

Due Date Exception

A due date exception can be granted under university regulations in extenuating circumstances; major illness, a death in the family, or similar extenuating circumstances are valid reasons for requesting a due date exception, and documentation may be required. In this study, 28% of the international students requested a due date exception. Based on the arguments that were identified, the students are facing significant struggles; nevertheless, very few cases could be considered valid requests. Among the most common arguments students used to request a due date exception were the following:

a) No explanations offered
b) Wrong submission
c) Health problems
d) Technical issues
e) Due date as a suggestion
f) Not understanding the assignment/no clear instructions

g) Personal challenges
h) Moodle account blocked

a) ***No explanations offered***. The following is an example of a "no arguments offered" type request:

> "I just noticed the quizzes i he missed. would i possibly be able to make up this oversite by taking them now. ive missed 1,2, and 3." (Case N-123)

b) Wrong submission. The following is an example of the "wrong submission" argument:

> "Actually my friend used my computer to make her assignment. That's why by mistake I uploaded her work." (Case N-107)

c) Health problems. The following is an example of the "health problems" argument:

> " … can u give me half percent for that bcz i did send medical notes to u …*"* (Case N-37)

d) Technical issues. The following is an example of the "technical issues" argument:

> "I was having problem with my computer … if you can give me one week then i will surely submit it." (Case N-151)

e) Due date as a suggestion. Students appeared to consider or understand due dates not as a fixed period of time; instead, they regarded the due date as a frame time which has no clear thresholds, so assignments are due but non-dated. The following is an example of the "due date as a suggestion" argument:

> "… i am not able to submit my second assignment there is no add submission option in the moodle and it is showing that it is overdue… change the time in moodle." (Case N-5)

f) Not understanding the assignment/no clear instructions. Students face a significant challenge understanding an assignment when a step-by-step set of instructions is not included. The following is an example of the "not understanding the assignment" argument:

> "I thought there should be clear instructions concerning the rules … I can write the whole essays or reflections without a contribution." (Case N-23)

g) Personal challenges. For some international students, the opportunity to study abroad represents a significant family sacrifice. To study, knowing that your family is homeless because of the educational investment they are making, is a concern that is not easy to manage. The following is an example of the "personal challenges" argument:

> "My parents are already paying too much fee for me they sold our house in … to pay my university fee. i can't ask them to send me more money. I PROMISE YOU I WONT DO THIS MISTAKE AGAIN." (Case N-570)

h) Moodle account blocked. Academic platforms (e.g., Moodle) represent a real challenge for students not used to administering their academic activities through software solutions. The following is an example of the "Moodle account blocked" argument:

> "I am unable to submit the assignment 1 because my account is blocked." (Case N-101)

Due Date Extension

The University's regulations regarding due date extensions state that submissions which are more than three days late will not be accepted unless the student makes an arrangement with the instructor. Even though due date extensions are part of the University's formal procedures, students do not seem to understand or follow these procedures.

Only 11% of the international students in this study asked for a due date extension. The most common arguments students used to request a due date extension were the following:

a) Every teacher gives an extension for wrong submissions
b) Formal request for an extension

a) ***Every teacher gives an extension for wrong submissions*****.** Students frequently submit the wrong file as the assignment. Providing a relevant name to the file and locating it in folders does not seem to be a common practice. The following is an example of the wrong submission's argument:

> "… i did not copy from a one that was mine … last term same thing happen with me … every teacher give extension for wrong submissions … i do not want to be fail. so you should give extension … " (Case N-37)

b) ***Formal request for an extension***. Asking for an extension, before to the due date, is considered a formal request which could – or not – include the reason why the extension is requested. The following is an example of the formal request for an extension argument based on fact that the student was not feeling well:

> "… ask u to give me extension for assignment 1 as I am not well." (Case N-24)

Grade Review

The University's regulations regarding grade reviews are clearly established. Grade appeals and academic assessments are based on the assignment's rubric. However, through this study, the resarch team learned that international students rarely understand grades as an assessment of their academic performance. On the contrary, they perceive grades as an "act of mercy" for which they can beg. Students who ask for a grade review based on the rubric are the exception. In this research, 27% of the students asked for a grade review. The most common arguments students used to request a grade review were the following:

a) Give me a passing grade

b) Grades as an act of mercy
c) Give me grades. . . I am not talking about the rubric
d) Is Moodle decreasing my marks?

a) "Give me a passing grade." Failing a course is an option many international students cannot afford. It represents not only a financial problem but also a delay on graduation time. If they need to beg for a passing grade, they will do it. The following is an example of the "give me a passing grade" argument:

> " … try to understand the problem and just give me passing. I will be thankful to you." (Case N-28)

b) Grades as an act of mercy. Even when students did an extraordinary assignment and obtained excellent grades, they tend to attribute their academic success to the professor's mercy. The following is an example of the "grades as an act of mercy" argument:

> "God will help you for your success. I will pray. Now u become one of my four professor… recheck my assignment ... To need to pass. Please help me." (Case N-11)

c) "Give me grades … I am not talking about the rubric." Grade appeals and assignments review is often perceived as an opportunity to not review the assignment, based on the rubric, but as an opportunity to ask for a grade improvement regardless of the feedback provided on the assignments. The following is an example of the "give me grades … I am not talking about the rubric" argument:

> "I wanted to tell you that i am going through some personal problems … help me in improving my grade. Thanks." (Case N–152)

d) "Is Moodle decreasing my marks?" The setup of the academic platforms introduce an unwanted set of challenges for international students who find difficult to access their grades and feedback on assignments. The following is an example of the "Is Moodle decreasing my marks?" argument:

> "… you marked my 5 assignment and … my marks was 59 instead of increasing my marks and decreased to 42 … it is due moodle or you decreased my marks." (Case N–291)

Plagiarism Assessment

Under the University's regulations, plagiarism is identified as a serious academic offence that could lead to being dismissed from the University or even losing the student-visa to stay in Canada. Based on the data obtained in the present research (see Table 1), almost 7% of the international students who submitted email requests/complaints in this study were involved in academic misconduct. Among the most common arguments that students used to explain plagiarism are the following:

a) The respawn logic argument (a.k.a. video game logic)
b) "Wrong submission … I have another one"
c) "I submitted first …"

d) Health problems
e) The help-each-other argument
f) "I had no choice …"
g) "I copied the ideas but the words are mine …"
h) "How much plagiarism is acceptable?"

a) The respawn logic argument (a.k.a. video game logic). The following is an example of the respawn logic (a.k.a. video game logic) argument:

> " … I am attach an entirely new assignment with a new perspective … It was my bad … is my first mistake ever on Turnitin I understand the pattern more now after this incident. Honestly, I didn't mean to cheat on my own assignment  , would I still pass in that assignment and as a whole course or should I resubmit but correcting the similarities from the existing essay?" (Case N-474)

b) "Wrong submission … I have another one." The following is an example of the "wrong submission… I have another one" argument:

> " … i he been reported for plazarism. The assignment which was submited, was submitted by mistaken … from my friend laptop in my course paortal that was i not known." (Case N–214)

c) "I submitted first …" Regardless of the origin of the assignment, copied or completely paraphrased, the student that first submitted on Moodle assumed the right to be recognized as the first to submit; therefore, with the right to use it. The following is an example of the "I submitted first …" argument:

> "Trust me …, this is my own idea i dont know who ever had this or not. But trust me i wrote this assignment by my own and i and the first in the class who submit it on the moodle." (Case N-93)

d) Health problems. The following is an example of the "health problems" argument:

> "I have something to confess. I submitted the same paper like someone else on the 2nd assignment.i am extremely sorry … I was also sic .so …" (Case N-16)

e) Help each other. A significant number of international students come from collectivistic societies where friends and family mean the same. Helping a friend in need is considered a moral obligation. The following is an example of the "help each other" argument:

> "… you give me plagiarism in assignment I … was in shock because I submit you wrong one … I lost my sense on that because of shoulder pain … But there was shuffling in assignment. But I make another … Even my friend don't know … please don't give us punishment … please don't cut my friend marks and please give me permission to submit it again." (Case N-411)

f) ***"I had no choice …"*** Some international students are the main source of income for their family back home which force them to place more effort in working extra shifts instead of being able to complete their assignments. The following is an example of the "I had no choice…" argument:

> "This is my first and last mistake ... next time this will not happen...please give me at least one chance…that assignment was submitted by mistake because...there was a huge problem in my family and my time for submitting assignment is almost over...but i he another one assignment which is written by me…please don't fail me..." (Case N-136)

g) ***"I copied the ideas, but the words are mine …"*** Students appear to believe that by typing/writing an assignment, this act itself makes the assignment content their own; regardless of where the ideas come from. The authorship right seems to be based on the writing/typing behaviour and not in the sources of the ideas. The following is an example of the "I copied the ideas, but the words are mine…" argument:

> "i dont know how it is showing plagiarism i did not copy from a other person plz can u give me one opportunity … i was taking ideas from internet buy i did not copy all assignment pardon me …" (Case N-37)

h) "How much plagiarism is acceptable?" Students talk about plagiarism in terms of "*how much is acceptable*" as a percentage problem instead of looking at it as a source appropriation without following citation requirements. The following is an example of the "How much plagiarism is acceptable?" argument:

> "hello mam how much plagiarism acceptable in assignment?" (Case N–60)

Based on the nature of the arguments that were made by the international students, it can be concluded that plagiarism is a much more complex issue than "just" a dishonest behavior (Adhikari, 2018; Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011; Baird & Dooey, 2014; Doss et al., 2016). Plagiarism should be understood as a conflict of cultural values where, on the one hand, the institution has a set of rules to be followed, and on the other hand, international students in many cases have a common cultural background, share the same computer, live together, and understand that helping a friend in need by sharing an assignment is not only acceptable but is in fact the right thing to do.

What has been defined as dishonest behavior may, in many cases, simply represent a conflict of values. Students, even if they perceive themselves to be honest, are faced with decisions in which they must consider values other than honesty. For example, a student could risk losing a friendship if they refuse to share their work with a friend (Bretag et al., 2014; Vandehey et al., 2007; Adam et al., 2017). Within higher education, the "helping-each-other" value and academic misconduct regulations collide in a complex dynamic with international students often believing their own moral code is the correct way of proceeding. In 2008, McCabe et al. conducted a study to examine students' perceptions of academic cheating in a collectivistic society. The study took place in Lebanon, and the results supports the conclusion that there is a higher level of cheating among Lebanese students. However, viewed through a collectivistic lens, one

could argue that the Lebanese students are behaving exactly the way they were raised to behave—working together to navigate a difficult task (p. 464).

International students in western institutions are often asked to work together, yet they are penalized if their work shows a high percentage of similarities; for international students, this can be difficult to understand. Self-reported collaborative cheating seems to be increasing, which is proof that the message is inconsistent, and students find themselves not knowing what is permitted and what is an academic integrity violation (McCabe et al., 2012, p. 38–39). Collaboration could mean different things to students from individualist and collectivistic societies. Moreover, collaboration, solidarity, and sharing can hardly be distinguished for someone with a collectivistic cultural background. Instead, these contradictory messages set the stage for misunderstanding and the construction of sociocultural dilemmas around plagiarism.

Discussion

The constellation of arguments that international students make when making requests and complaints to their professors illuminates the intercultural complexity they must navigate when studying abroad. They are either unaware of formal university regulations or believe that their requests and complaints need not adhere to these rules. On the contrary, a set of informal regulations that the students believe to be in place seems to define the academic dynamic. The nature of international students' understanding of academic regulations as evidenced by their email requests and complaints to their professors in this study can be summarized as follows:

a) Existing regulations were rarely referred to by the students.
b) When students referred to existing regulations, it often seemed to be with a purpose not related to the mandate of the rule.
c) Students frequently referred to informal understandings that impacted the way they made complaints/request.

The significant number and type of arguments that were identified constitute evidence that an understanding of basic academic regulations is not shared by international students. Informal agreements/negotiations between professors and students are not unusual, and sometimes they are needed to achieve balance. However, when students' behavior seems not to be based on a common set of meanings, a significant number of misunderstandings (and assumptions) can take place.

An analysis of international students' arguments in support of their requests/complaints indicates that many students expect that the application of academic regulations will be based not on the written regulations but on the relationships they have with the professors and staff. In consequence, if a student's relationship with their professor is considered a positive one, the student will not expect a low mark, an assignment rejection, or an academic misconduct report. Based on this expectation, international students clearly display what Conley and O'Barr (1990) identify as a relational orientation toward academic regulations instead of a rule orientation. Unfortunately, when students' requests are denied or their complaints are rejected, they are at risk of experiencing a significant amount of acculturative stress (Berry, 2005).

Finally, plagiarism needs to be addressed as it represents for the Western academic community an offense, a dishonest behavior; however, it is likely that a lack of knowledge about how to use sources and to cite and reference them also contributes to rates of plagiarism. As McCulloch states, "The difficulties

faced by international students in relation to plagiarism are said to often be more pedagogical than moral" (2012). Undoubtedly, some cases of plagiarism are dishonest behaviors, but not all cases of plagiarism can be defined as intentionally dishonest. The student whose paper was taken by another student without their authorization or who was pressured to share an assignment as proof of their loyalty cannot truly be considered dishonest or lacking in integrity. The conflicting situations that some international students face can place them in a position where right and wrong cannot be easily distinguished.

Implications and Conclusion

International students' cultural transition process in academic institutions should be seen as a path from a complex constellation of arguments when making requests/complaints to a more limited set of behaviors governed by institutional rules and regulations.

A curriculum re-design could play a central role in reducing complexity by creating content and regulations that are clear, specific, and consistently applied. A progressive learning strategy should aim to create among international students a consciousness of academic regulations in a non-punitive environment.

Reducing the complexity of students' arguments should be understood as a key element in social integration. In our study, the international students sometimes felt betrayed when their grade for an assignment—based on the rubric—was not what they were expecting, when missing the due date resulted in an assignment rejection, or when they were accused of plagiarism. They perceived that their arguments in support of their requests/complaints were considered "excuses" and were thus invalid, and this made them feel hopeless.

A strategy to reduce the complexity of students' arguments could be to expose international students to the Canadian environment to familiarize them with Canadian norms and values in the community and the workplace, as suggested by Scott et al. (2015). One of the most significant ways to support international students is by helping them understand that complaints, in any context, should be based on valid grounds and that an academic request should be seen as an exercise of a student's right and not as a plea for mercy.

Rules and regulations can be understood in different ways (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). International students' consciousness of academic rules tells us that they need help to recognize the intersection of cultures, relationships and rules. The cultural decoding process that needs to take place for students to be fully conscious of the new rules should not compromise international students' cultural heritage (Berry & Hou, 2016; Berry & Sam, 2013). On the contrary, any misunderstanding should be seen as an opportunity to help students re-formulate their constellation of arguments to a limited set of options that help them make sense of the norms of their academic institution. When academic institutions accomplish this task, international students who have identified Canada as "a place to stay" will be better equipped to join Canadian society.

The central question that we need to answer is *how can academic institutions help international students successfully decode their new culture?* These research findings have made international students' beliefs and needs visible and have been used as the basis for implementing several recent initiatives at Yorkville University to address the needs of international students, including a) improving the career and wellness services offered by the Student Success Centre b) designing a specific course to help international students successfully navigate the expectations of Canadian post-secondary institutions, and c) amending the institution's academic integrity policy to reflect a pedagogical instead of a punitive approach. For example, students who run afoul of the academic integrity regulations now have an opportunity to receive explicit instruction, either in a face-to-face or an online workshop, on how to cite and reference sources and how to

generally follow academic integrity guidelines. After successfully completing this workshop, the student is permitted to resubmit their assignment.

Academic institutions in Canada should offer international students opportunities to decode their new culture. It is not enough to make information available to students; universities need to ensure that they have a range of hands-on courses specifically created for international students to develop the sociocultural understandings and communication skills needed to navigate the Canadian academic environment. The skills-based sociocultural program called ExcelL™ (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership), created by Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (Mak & Buckingham, 2007; Mak et al., 1999), could be used to guide curriculum design efforts. Offering international students a series of skills-based, competency training courses as part of their academic program could help to reduce the complexity of students' interaction with their new academic environment by easing the path from "Prof, I thought we were friends" to a less complex sociocultural interaction.

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IRENE TORRES-ARENDS, LL.M., Fulbright Scholar, is a professor in the General Studies Department at Yorkville University in Canada and a Learning Sciences doctoral student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary in Canada. She received a grant from the Bluenotes Community and Explorance Inc. to conduct this research, which she presented at the Bluenotes Global 2020 Congress. Her research focuses on legal culture, legal ethnography, the sociology of law, cultural changes, and international students. Email: itorres@yorkvilleu.ca