

## International Student Transition to Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

Merab Mushfiq<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada*

\*Corresponding author: Merab Mushfiq Email: [mmushfiq@wlu.ca](mailto:mmushfiq@wlu.ca)  
Address: Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada

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### Abstract

*The number of international students has been increasing in the last decade in Canada. International students are bringing revenue and boosting the local and federal economy. However, they may also face various challenges as compared to domestic students because of cultural and language differences. These students need proper support to transition into Canadian culture and academic environment. The purpose of this research was to find out the challenges that these students face as international students. A semi-structured interview was applied to elicit the experiences of international students studying in Canada. The data indicated that international students go through acculturative stress, and a lack of communication skills makes it even harder to connect and build relationships. Several implications have been indicated for support services that can enhance a smooth transition for these students along with social-cultural awareness so that they feel embraced at Canadian post-secondary institutions while away from home.*

Keywords: Canadian post-secondary institutions, higher education, international students, international student transition, student engagement

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### International Student Transition to Canadian Post-Secondary Institution

International students may face various challenges when they arrive in a new country often with no family or friends to support them. Most international students can struggle in the first year because it is an initial transition phase. Some of the struggles and challenges these international students may face including loneliness, language barrier, different academic environment, culture, and lack of social support and network, deteriorate international students' confidence leading to stress, depression, and eventually drop-out from the institution (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Andrade, 2006; Calder et al., 2016). These students rely heavily on university-led support services and activities to engage and form social

networks; however, access to social support networks is greatly reduced as these students arrive in a new country (Chong & Razek, 2014; Martirosyan et al., 2019) It is the post-secondary institutions' responsibility to help international students transition smoothly into the institutions' culture and community to promote equity, diversity, inclusivity, and social awareness. To sustain the growth of international students, it is critical for host institutions not only to offer the best quality of services to international students but also to provide appropriate guidance and support to them to become responsible and engaging members of the community.

There is a strong need for gaining a better understanding of factors influencing international students' engagement to improve services and support for international students' success in Canada. Institutions need to have conditions where student engagement and social-cultural activities can support international students' success, retention, well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Bowden et al., 2019). The purpose of this paper is to detangle factors that cause increased challenges for international students and provide recommendations for a smooth transition to postsecondary institutions. The research questions that were explored in this study were as follows:

1. How do international students describe their experiences of adjusting to Canadian post-secondary institutions?
2. What are some challenges that international students face as they arrive at a new country?

## **Literature Review**

### **Acculturative Stress**

Berry (1992, 1997) defined acculturative stress as a type of stress experienced during acculturation that negatively impacts mental health by causing anxiety, depression, fear of rejection, and identity confusion. Bhowmik et al. (2018) described some of the most common acculturative stress examples in their study include language barrier, discrimination, cultural differences, housing and transportation issues which lead to homesickness and force international students to self-isolate (Rajab et al., 2014). Self-isolation and homesickness can negatively impact one's ability to function and especially hinder their ability to navigate academic activities. Self-isolation leads to depression and loneliness which leads to a minimum to zero opportunity to socially interact with peers and make friends. Sawir et al. (2008) conducted a study where 200 students were interviewed and 65% of the international student expressed that "they suffered from loneliness because students felt they had no one to talk to, staying alone and managing everything by themselves was overwhelming" (p. 168). A sense of belonging is another challenge that they these students go through as they lack their social network and family support. Rivas and her colleagues (2019) did qualitative research and described the experiences of participants with a sense of belonging. These students look for various ways to get involved and to make friends but it is not an easy road.

International students mostly do not want to put additional stress on their families back home and that is why they refrain from discussing personal issues, academic struggles, and mental health challenges with their friends and family (Andrade, 2006). Akhtar and Kroner-Herwing (2015) described homesickness, isolation, and obstacles to not making friends and social networks as described by international students because they felt they had no family support or similar presence of relationships in the host country. When proper support is not provided to these students then their mental health could be negatively impacted which further could lead to drop-out, failing courses, and overall depression.

### **Language Barrier and Academic Difficulties**

International students can struggle to communicate correctly in English in Anglo-Saxon countries mainly because of speaking different languages in their home countries. The language barrier is considered one of the primary stressors for international students (Misra et al., 2003). International students are given admission to post-secondary institutions based on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) tests. Some post-secondary institutions accept other forms of English language tests such as Duolingo, the Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPPI), and the Pearson Test of English (PTE). Even those students who achieve higher scores in these standardized English language tests struggle in the academic environment because of various factors such as different academic settings, citation format, students' and professors' expectations, and cultural differences (Andrade, 2006).

Education in English is mostly required because it is an internationally recognized language. In countries where English is not an official or first language, there is now more focus on introducing and teaching in English (Rao, 2019). Despite the focus on teaching in English in schools and post-secondary institutions, international students still struggle with academic writing, understanding lectures, conversations with peers, and interaction in the classroom because of the different

ways they have been taught English at home institutions. This can be very different from expectations and student requirements from the host institution (Cennetsku, 2017).

Coming from diverse backgrounds where teaching pedagogies are different, and curricula are based on a cultural and/or religious basis, international students usually struggle with critical thinking analysis which is one of the basic requirements in Western education (Shaheen, 2016). Writing a paper with critical thinking is challenging and a hard concept for international students as they are more aware of traditional practices where they follow teacher guidelines and believe the books (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). One of the teachers in Shaheen's (2016) study mentioned that international students are not aware of critical thinking writing assignments and that is one of the reasons they have a hard time understanding and putting it all together. A teacher in this study mentioned that most of her international students write their assignment in their native language and then translate it into English, which mostly leads to wrong interpretations (Shaheen, 2016).

Writing an assignment or paper in the native language seems appropriate to international students as they are comfortable, and it takes less time to write because they are familiar with writing mechanics in their native language however, when it comes to writing it in English, it is challenging because the meaning is lost, and the quality of writing is compromised as well. These students also have a hard time in class when they have to attentively listen to their professors and take notes (Kuo, 2011). Note-taking is usually encouraged so that students can study after class but if notes are not written properly or miss important concepts that were discussed during lectures, they can easily confuse students.

Language barriers cause poor academic achievement and increase the societal and parental pressures from back home to be successful in academics. International students feel lost and lose confidence in their abilities to learn, read, write, and speak because of accent differences (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Language proficiency causes these students to lie to their parents and make-up stories because they are not comfortable sharing their emotions and struggles because of societal expectations (Sien et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2015).

### **Residence Challenges**

International students' on-campus residence is usually more expensive than domestic students and hence, most international students look for accommodation off-campus because it is a bit cheaper. The off-campus residence also gives freedom to cook food so these students can make their ethnic food and are not restricted to eating in on-campus dining halls (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). However, international students struggle to find affordable and suitable accommodation in proximity of the campus (Calder et al., 2016). It is important for these students to factor in commuting, bus routes, and bus passes when finding an off-campus residence which means these students have to navigate various challenges while finding accommodation off-campus.

Additionally, the on-campus residence has many restrictions such as the use of showers at certain times, food services hours of operation, and noise level policies as compared to an off-campus residence which aids these students to cook, study, and talk to their families back home. In the beginning, it is hard to navigate grocery stores, bank institutions, accommodation, transportation, and financial management institutions (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). The difference in food and finding ethnic recipes and items is also another adjustment that takes time to navigate and get used to. Specialty food items can be expensive as well, which international students need to budget for.

In the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reporting, an international student stated that during his first year of higher education in Canada he stayed in a one-bedroom basement apartment with three other students and paid \$400.00 CAD a month (Ricci, 2019). Finding an appropriate accommodation is important for these students so they can start feeling at home, however, due to various accommodation challenges, these students feel alone and deprived of friendships and a sense of belonging (Worsley et al., 2021). As the number of international students is increasing, finding accommodation can cause mental health issues.

### **Coping Strategies**

The mechanism of the coping process plays a fundamental role in managing stress where cognitive and behavioral efforts are made to manage both external and internal sources of stress (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). International students can be hesitant and unwilling to consult counselors for psychological needs and assessment. A very limited number of these students can overcome feelings of homesickness, loneliness, depression, and anxiety by using their own self-help techniques. In Sarvanan et al. (2019) study, 29 international students participated in the psychological assessment for depression and homesickness. Only nine students recovered from depression and homesickness and another 20 students did not recover. These nine students were then interviewed to explore more about how they were able to recover. Additionally,

the other 20 students were also asked to complete a questionnaire which explored the reasoning for not being able to recover from depression and homesickness.

These nine participants spoke to their family and friends that they missed, played sports, participated in physical activities such as sports clubs, had positive thinking and attitude, and connected a bit deeper in religious activities motivated them to stay stronger and helped them manage stress and homesickness. The other 20 students who were not able to recover faced various issues which involved language barriers, academic and family stress, loneliness, and social engagement. Berry (1992) argued that the presence of stressors is common; however, these stressors can be minimized if there are proper coping strategies and resources available. In one of his studies, Berry (2005) found that participants were able to cope with stressors when they were able to integrate into the host culture while maintaining their culture of origin and experienced less acculturative stress.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilizes Berry's acculturation stress theory (Berry, 1992, 1997) as the framework for understanding international students' transition into a new environment in a Canadian post-secondary institution. While there is literature available for international students in the USA (Cennetsku, 2017; Jackson et al., 2013; Misra et al., 2003; Kuo, 2011; Wu et al., 2015), Australia (Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Kambouropoulos, 2014; Sawir, 2008), and Europe (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Sovic, 2009), there is limited research on social adjustment and transition for international students in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Utilizing Berry's acculturative stress theory (Berry, 1992, 1997), this study analyzed international student's experiences, stress factors, and challenges while they were adapting to North American university environment and culture. This study was designed within a social constructivist paradigm which explores the factors that play a role in lived experiences and while there are multiple realities within this paradigm it is also focused on 'how' and 'what' revealed by the information disclosed in the data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher wanted to collect individuals' lived experiences and wanted to discover and describe the meaning of the participants' lived experiences in a Canadian post-secondary institution.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research method to investigate international students' experiences (Punch, 2013) using semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to freely talk about their opinions, perceptions, and lived experiences (Vagle, 2018).

#### **Context**

University 1 (U1) is being referred to the institution in Southwestern Ontario, Canada where this study was conducted. This institution in the Southwestern region of Ontario is in the top 6% of universities worldwide based on quality of education, alumni employment, research performance and more than ninety nations represented in the study body. International student enrollment in recent years has gone up and according to the strategic plans, the aim is to increase the enrollment of international students in the upcoming years. In order to protect the identity of the participants, they were assigned codes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom an online audio/video conferencing tool that lasted about 30 to 45 minutes in length. The detailed research plan was submitted to the Research Ethics Board (REB) and research was conducted once the approval was obtained.

#### **Participants**

Ten participants took part in this study with six being current international students and four recent alumni who attended the institution as international students and graduated within the last five years. All these participants were at different stages of their degree programs (first-year undergraduate to graduate students) and professional lives. Since the number of participants was more than one individual, this study was suitable for phenomenological design as it was focused on lived experiences (Vagle, 2018). The International Department and the Career Centre sent out mass emails to current students and recent alumni and participants who showed interest in discussing their lived experiences were given brief details about the research study. Once they expressed further interest in participating in this study, they were given the format of the study as well as the consent form.

All participants were provided with the consent form in advance of data collection and had details about the nature of the study, potential risks, benefits, their rights as participants as well as their ability to withdraw from the study at any

time before and during the interview. To keep anonymity, participants were assigned codes from P1 to P10. Before the data collection, participants were encouraged to ask questions. Participants were also given the chance to ask questions before the interview and at the end of the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The thematic analysis approach was employed to capture the participants' unique experiences and perspectives, which could only be understood within their specific context (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To conduct the analysis, data was collected and subsequently coded. These codes were then grouped into potential themes derived from the gathered data, and appropriate themes were assigned to the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Results**

The data revealed that international students encountered numerous challenges and experienced a wide range of emotions during their first year, reflecting the tumultuous nature of this period. Participants felt that they needed to be equipped with better communication skills to be able to make friends, participate in class, have the confidence to speak to professors and be able to write effectively and properly. P1 noted: "I want to improve my language skills to talk better. I have no confidence. I have no friends to talk [to] where I can improve. It is very hard for me to make friends."

Another participant from China struggled with the language barrier mainly communicating within a North American context and Canadian culture. P5 was a recent alumnus and completed a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and was working in British Columbia:

professor gave the assignment to look up a tweet on Twitter. I had no idea what a tweet was ... Not a well-known app(application) back home ... I was clueless and did not ask for help because I felt shy. (P5)

Most participants initially felt lost because they did not have a solid foundation of proper communication skills. Another participant mentioned that due to a lack of communication skills, I did not interact during the lectures and did not participate in any activities (P4). A participant from Pakistan (P8) also shared the struggle with communication especially because of a disconnect about South-East Asian culture on campus. Similarly, P9 did not participate in any activities while studying at the institution because of not having proper communication skills. He felt shy about talking to anyone and mostly spent time alone in his apartment watching movies and playing video games.

### **Finding a Suitable Residence**

Certain international students choose to reside outside of campus due to the anticipation of lower expenses and the ability to prepare their customary cuisine, which may prove challenging within the campus dormitory. P10 never lived in the residence and thought that there was no way for her to make social connections because she was off campus. P3 was from Syria and did not live in the residence but wanted to participate in different activities to stay connected with the campus community so that "I can call it my home (P3)" however, felt a bit of hesitance because of not living in the residence. P3 wanted to live on campus but because of the higher residence fee, it was impossible to afford. P6 felt that because he did not live on campus there was a disconnect to get involved in various clubs and organizations.

Living on-campus would have made a difference, but it is "expensive and does not suit my lifestyle." P7 did live in the residence and struggled in the first year due to various reasons such as lack of communication skills and courage to participate in different activities in the residence hall. However, P7 felt more comfortable in the second year and luckily found a job as a residence staff and since then learned a lot about different activities and participated in various events. He elaborated: "Because I found a job in the residence, my dormitory fee was reduced quite a lot and I was able to afford it." Overall, his confidence was boosted, and established one of the clubs on-campus in which he was very interested.

### **Finding a Community**

P10 from Sri Lanka also reported difficulties in finding socio-relational activities on campus but discovered opportunities outside of the campus by visiting temples and observing festivals. Another participant from Europe (P2) faced many difficulties in finding her community on campus and even though she knew some people from Europe living locally. She had a hard time connecting with her peers, and did not have friends who would share traditional cuisine and culture. P8 struggled to find his own South-East Asian community in the region. He felt a lack of support and was alone. He grew up in Dubai and lived in Saudi Arabia and had a great circle of friends and family but initially had to go through a tough time finding his community. However, he was very interested in bringing awareness of South-East Asian culture on-campus and

became a President of the Pakistani Association Club on-campus and contributed towards cultural awareness. P9 had no friends while completing his degree and hence mostly stayed quiet and focused on schoolwork to stay occupied.

### **Lack of Canadian Work Experience**

P7 wanted to know more about resources, such as work opportunities, professional development, workshops, or webinars that are being offered on-campus that was especially available for international students for being successful but unfortunately, could not find anything helpful. He was not sure where to look for resources, especially in the first two years in terms of integrating into the host culture to successfully land a job. He also struggled with job search and interview skills because he was not able to connect with the different services available on campus. P10 showed frustration with not being able to work full-time during the academic year due to visa guidelines.

However, in the summer, when full-time work is allowed, it is hard to find internships or co-op positions as an international student because she felt she was not given proper resources for interview skills, job search strategies, employer agencies, and other resources that would be beneficial for international students. Most participants expressed that not being aware of resources or the lack of resources on-campus or in general for international students made it challenging to cope with stress, anxiety, and transitioning into Canadian culture and academic environment. Additionally, participants mentioned that social connection, peer networking, professional development opportunities, and awareness of events would be essential to adapt to a new environment.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to discover factors that cause increased challenges for international students and provide recommendations for a smooth transition to Canadian postsecondary institutions. From the findings, it is evident that international students need proper support system and programming to meet their needs. There are many ways where institutions can provide support and develop various resources to help international students to feel at home in a host country. As prevalent in literature and through interviews the language barrier, finding a community, social-cultural awareness, and ability to make friends were some main challenges which participants felt hindered not only because of their communication skills but also the ability to make friends, ask for help during class, provide an opinion, or participation in group work.

#### **Smooth Transition**

It is significantly important for international students to feel welcome and build relationships right from the beginning. International students need to adjust to the host institution's policies, culture, and environment. After interviewing, it is evident that there is a significant need to have better opportunities and events so that these students can get acclimated to the university's culture. The very first interaction for these students happens during orientation week. The orientation week usually happens before classes on-campus and is also known as an introductory week or freshmen's week (Riordan et al., 2018). During this orientation week, international students get to interact with international support staff, other students, different support staff providing various services, and faculty members. While each institution has its own way of designing orientation week, it is important to re-think orientation week so that it can meet the needs of students. Introducing icebreaker activities throughout the week with faculty, staff, and domestic students would help initiate conversations. Meal vouchers for the on-campus food court and a gift card for an off-campus ethnic restaurant. This will be helpful for students to visit and enjoy their ethnic cuisine.

Additionally, it would not put pressure on students to cook food if they were living off-campus. Ethnic restaurants may not always be present around campus, and alternatively, they may offer cooking classes during orientation. Through the collaboration of the campus food court and international department, there should be an international food week in which its food court includes ethnic food varieties from various regions throughout the world. Representatives from various services should be invited and given an opportunity to speak with students. Drop-in sessions in the first few weeks so that students can get familiar with different services that are being offered across campus such as tutoring, counseling, accessibility, and services. Campus tours are usually offered during the orientation week. However, most of the campus tours happen once or twice. It is important to have multiple campus tours so that international students get familiar with the campus, and do not have to struggle to find their classes and other services on campus.

Peer mentoring is important for international students to have mentors who can help them get accustomed to their host institution. As participants during the interviews mentioned, there is a disconnect between international and domestic students and mostly international students build relationships with other international students and not with domestic

students. If domestic students can help international students as mentors, then it would be easier for international students to get familiar with domestic students and build social connections. Berry et al. (1989) also described the importance of peer relationships, social networks, and developing friendships to adjust to a new culture which indirectly reduces stress.

Student associations and clubs can play a positive role in promoting and encouraging students to join clubs and organizations where they can have the opportunity to interact with others (Calder et al., 2016). Student associations, international departments, and student support services collaboratively introduce buddy programs where international students can be paired with domestic students and can talk about the host country's culture and learn more about the surrounding. Meaningful friendships and social networking can gradually help international students to adjust smoothly (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Additionally, weekly and monthly events can be useful where different activities and guest speakers can interact with them to provide resources and information about different support systems available on- and off-campus.

### **Social-Cultural Awareness**

As international students are increasing in Canada, it is important that institutions focus on raising awareness of social-cultural understanding and knowledge in the institutions' community. Social-cultural awareness increases positive relationships, decreases stereotypes, fosters growth and development, and broadens values and knowledge (Ameny-Dixon, 2004). International students on campus want to contribute to campus culture and mostly look for different ways to get involved. Social-cultural awareness can be incorporated in many various ways such as creating multiple events, international festivals, clubs, and organizations' involvement and events catered for all students and the community.

Some examples to create awareness of social-cultural aspects to the campus community would be to introduce a flag day, international festival, movie nights, and cuisines of the world programs and initiatives. International students would be delighted if flag days were introduced in higher education institutions because that would give them a sense of belonging and allow them to represent themselves. Proper resources and measures should be introduced for international students so they can feel like they belong. This would eventually help them to achieve their academic goals while they develop a sense of belonging (Chris et al., 2015). Students should be encouraged to promote their culture by wearing ethnic clothes, dancing, and singing, as well as given the opportunity to represent their culture and country in any form they would like. An international festival should be arranged once a term or annually where international students sign up for different activities such as cooking classes, dancing classes, and other traditional values and cultures they want to represent.

Having multiple booths in an auditorium and inviting community members would be an added advantage for students, and the community. Even various clubs and organizations should participate to advertise their clubs and organizations, which would also be an opportunity for them to get to know other students across campus. Movie nights, especially those displaying ethnic movies would also be another way to bring students together and to learn about other cultures. Introducing cooking classes or ethnic food themes throughout the semester in the food court would be another way to build student relationships. International students can show some cooking skills and traditional cooking styles to local community which would help them to interact with their peers and feel a sense of belonging

### **Limitations**

Despite the contributions of the present study, the study also had a few limitations. The sample size of a total of 10 participants for semi-structured interviews was quantified via thematic analysis. While the sample size is small in number, participants represented their lived experiences which helped the researcher to identify needs and improve programming and the required support system that is needed. The value and experiences which international students brought might be applicable to many international students across the world. All the participants were either currently enrolled or recently graduated from the same institution. Even though all the participants represented one institution, the recommendations can be applied at any institution geared towards internationalization, student engagement, and international students. Even though participants showed strong interdependence of acculturative experiences to their transition in Canada, future research is needed to quantitatively measure their transition experiences among different postsecondary institutions in relation to their acculturative experiences.

### **Conclusion**

International students are a great source of diversity and cultural experiences while also contributing to the revenues of the Canadian economy. It is important to shift our focus towards these students so their needs can be met and eventually remain competitive. As Canada's landscape of immigration, internationalization, and international student enrollment is evolving and increasing, it is important to focus on their needs too. From the interviews, it was evident that international students face various challenges as they arrive in a new country where everything is new for them. While support services catered especially towards international students are necessary, it is equally important to provide the resources and support that is needed for them to adapt to a new environment, culture, and academic learning.

All the initiatives and programming for international students would reduce their stress, depression, and anxiety and ultimately would help them to cope with acculturative stress. To retain international students and stay competitive, it is important to make sure that all the efforts are being made for a smooth transition to an academic environment and the surrounding community. Proper leadership, institutional planning, and financial planning are required to take innovative steps to ensure a smooth transition and awareness of social life and cultural values to establish long-term goals for these students. Additionally, proper training and resources should be developed for faculty members, support staff, and other stakeholders so that everyone on-campus would be able to emotionally connect with international students and guide them toward the right people and resources.

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**Merab Mushfiq**, MEd, is a student affair professional and works at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her research focuses on international students, support services, and student engagement in higher education. She holds an MEd with student affairs concentration and has more than five years of experience in student support services. Email: [mmushfiq@wlu.ca](mailto:mmushfiq@wlu.ca)