Journal of International Students
Volume 15, Issue 2 (2025), pp. 183-203
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
doi: https://doi.org/10.32674/56b7kr09

Exploring the Needs for Indigenous Allyship among Postsecondary International Students in Canada

Xuechen Yuan
University of Windsor, Canada

ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study taps into the salient features of knowledge mobilization and sociocultural conditions that shape postsecondary international student experiences with Indigenous cultures and commitment to allyship—a consistent gap identified in the literature. In the qualitative phase, international students from a Canadian university participated in a semistructured interview inviting them to share their Indigenous learning experiences and reflections on their allyship. The quantitative phase involved international students who completed a questionnaire, interpreted with principal component analysis (PCA) and correlation analyses. The findings highlighted several themes underlying international student–Indigenous allyship: multicultural contexts, sources of learning, perceptions of indigeneity, cultural similarities, and sociocultural barriers. Key gaps emerged in the relational contexts of allyship, access to cross-cultural opportunities, and weaving Indigenous-led knowledge in curricula. Most importantly, the findings suggest that the international student–Indigenous allyship is a complex sociopolitical process beyond acculturation and intercultural competence, which requires critical discussions on international students' roles in settler colonialism and decolonization.

Keywords: International students, Indigenous allyship, multiculturalism, decolonization, settler colonialism

International students, defined as foreign students on a study permit without permanent residency status, make up a large portion of the postsecondary student population in Canada (Government of Canada, n.d.). As of 2023, the numbers have climbed to 1,040,985, with a remarkable 63% growth over the last five years (CBIE, n.d.). Despite their unique needs, they are not typically recognized as

equity-seeking groups (Tamtik et al., 2021). Instead, discourses around international students often focus on the internationalization of education, positing that international students are segregated from domestic students, which inherently conflicts with the initiatives of indigenization that focus on holistic international education development (Beck & Pidgeon, 2020; Heleta & Chasi, 2024; Perry & Bethune, 2024; Wainaina, 2022). The two initiatives often work in silos and rarely intersect (Buckner et al., 2022; Tamtik et al., 2021). Moreover, most scholarly work on decolonization has overlooked the perspectives of international students (Park & Francis, 2023). This gap obscures the need for international students to partake in decolonization and results in limited specific policy initiatives addressing their roles in reconciliation (MacElheron, 2022; Perry & Bethune, 2024). As evidenced by Chen (2021) and Park and Francis (2023), many international students in Canada remain ambivalent about settler colonialism due to little or no "Indigenous education and orientation [upon their] arrival to Canada" (Akhmetova, 2019, p. 67).

In light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) *Calls to Action*, which urges all levels of the education sector to educate students on the realities of Indigenous peoples in Canada (TRC, 2015, p. 8), this research attempts to explore how this mandate could be applied to educate postsecondary international students in Canada. I would like to examine the key aspects of knowledge mobilization and sociocultural conditions that influence international student participation in decolonization. This may open a venue for educational stakeholders to contextualize decolonizing mission statements and curricula from international student perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the literature on the role of decolonizing curricula, multiculturalism, and contextual needs in international student–Indigenous allyship is reviewed. These thematic areas guided this research study.

Decolonizing the Western curricula

The colonization and cultural disruption of Indigenous peoples in Canada have had long-lasting and ongoing impacts on education (Littlechild et al., 2021). Historically, Indigenous peoples, along with early immigrants from the late 1800s, faced overt systemic discrimination (Srikanth, 2012). The pervasive and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples is connected to the founding principle of violence that established Canadian nationhood, the *Indian Act*, which historically denied them equal citizenship, cultural and legal rights, and now still rights to their lands (Lawrence, 2004). Through the Western imposition of educational institutions, colonial histories and Indigenous traditions are either misrepresented, filtered through a Eurocentric lens, or remain comfortably invisible to settler populations (Regan, 2010; Tuck et al., 2014).

Educational institutions perpetuate colonialism while holding promise for decolonizing education. At the core of decolonizing education is what Wallace-

Casey (2022) describes as "changing the hearts and minds" of students to reimagine their relationships with nature and social institutions (p. 5). Justice Murray Sinclair, the former chair of the TRC, has argued that education is key to reconciliation (Harrison et al., 2018). However, reconciliation cannot occur if the fundamental colonial structures are unchallenged (Battiste, 2013). For example, Littlechild et al. (2021) and Vanner et al. (2024) highlight the "hidden curricula" that emphasize a "historical thinking" of colonialism to normalize ongoing colonial structures. This strategy remains prominent in postsecondary education, leading to the absence of an Indigenous-led approach that centers on ethical accountability and allyship. Various studies have documented settlers' denial of Indigenous perspectives and resistance to position themselves in relation to settler colonialism (Littlechild et al., 2021; Wallace-Casey, 2022; Vanner et al., 2024).

Indigenous allyship in a multicultural context

Battiste (2013) described decolonization as "a process that belongs to everyone" (p. 9), which includes international students. Parallel to decolonization, the context of globalization sees international students as important actors, or allies, who can listen to and support Indigenous peoples in need of sovereignty and decolonization (Marom, 2016). Allyship is beyond being "performative;" allies must realize that they are "already in relationships," be it "complicit in systems of oppression" or be "in a helping relationship" (Pardy & Pardy, 2020, p. 240). Similarly, Aveling (2013) and Knudson (2015) argue that allies must situate themselves as "guest" to the land, know their limits, and respect boundaries. Thus, colonial power dynamics are always reflected and deconstructed in allyship.

However, Indigenous allyship is a convoluted topic in an era of multiculturalism. Many scholars argue that multiculturalism is a modern form of colonialism, made possible by silencing the colonial subjugation of Indigenous peoples by downplaying them into an ethnic mosaic in which international students are a part (St. Denis, 2011; MacDonald, 2014; Ozyonum, 2023; Srikanth, 2012). Historically, multiculturalism was a national strategy, first introduced in 1971 and later legislated in 1988 (the *Multiculturalism Act*), as an ad hoc approach to manage cultural diversity and reduce racial discrimination (St. Denis, 2011). However, in many ways, multiculturalism shields Canadians from being accountable for decolonization by instilling a flawed sense of intercultural competency—a neat colonial logic to position Indigenous and international students as useful resources for Canada's global reputational capital (Chatterjee et al., 2022). From the perspective of international relations, multiculturalism is a cornerstone of Canada's nation-building project, which serves to mask the operations and logics of white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy among institutions (Thobani, 2007).

While not so openly protested in Canada, Indigenous leaders have opposed multiculturalism since the 1960s by refusing the entwinement of Indigenous rights and sovereignty into the multicultural framework (Srikanth, 2012). Moreover, St. Denis (2011) and Shin (2022) argue that multiculturalism promotes social division, which pits Indigenous peoples as oppressors of "innocent" Canadians

and settlers of color (e.g., international students). Chatterjee et al. (2022) resonate with this statement, suggesting that universities are complicit in sustaining a fragmented form of inclusion that reinforces the discursive divide in "the conversations on internationalizing and indigenizing" (p. 10).

Like Indigenous peoples, international students are also concerned about the inability of multiculturalism to address deep-rooted racial discrimination (MacDonald, 2014). These concerns are often depoliticized (Hart et al., 2016) and flagged as inexorable challenges of studying in Canada (Park & Francis, 2023). However, as MacElheron (2022) and Yuan (2023) note, the struggles that international students face are also parallel to the systemic privilege they hold but defensively deny. Like early European settlers, migrants might benefit from colonization "in search of greener pastures [and continuing] to cling to their cultural roots" (Srikanth, 2012, p. 19). By acquiring a new national identity, migrants implicitly partake in settler colonialism, contributing to settler homemaking and the commodification of land (MacDonald, 2014). In *Decolonization is not a metaphor*, Tuck and Yang (2012) critically argue against settlers' "move to innocence" and "[deflecting] settler identity" (p. 11), a phenomenon that applies to all international students and hinders their allyship development.

International student needs for Indigenous allyship

Transforming settler consciousness

Becoming an Indigenous ally requires critical inquiry into settler consciousness, although it is not an end goal in itself for reconciliation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). International students and all settlers are required to think beyond dichotomies (e.g., who is the settler and colonizer) that treat social status groups (e.g., gender, race, religion) as discrete, separate, and fixed units of analysis (Puar, 2007). Acknowledging this, postsecondary institutions currently fail to prepare international students for decoding their complex relations with colonial institutions and their roles in dispossessing Indigenous peoples (Chen, 2021). The status quo of settler disembeddedness in Indigenous cultures remains intact if there is limited support for cross-cultural engagement to reconcile disparate worldviews, legal statuses, and sociocultural conditions (Ermine, 2007; Higgins et al., 2013).

Acculturation and belongingness

Many factors lead to the emotional estrangement of international students with Indigenous peoples. For international students, gaining acceptance in Canada requires certain degrees of acculturation to colonial and multicultural narratives (Yuan, 2023). Akhmetova (2019) suggested that resisting the settler-colonial status quo may jeopardize their chances of being granted a new life in Canada. Chen (2021) further emphasized that the pursuit of social mobility and the instrumental need to accumulate *capital* hinder international students' willingness

to challenge the status quo. Moreover, the need for cultural adaptation among international students, including a commitment to citizenship learning, is inextricably linked to the duration of their studies, especially for sojourners planning to return home after graduation (Boucher, 2006). While their legal statuses are temporary and precarious, Perry and Bethune (2024) reported that international students establish a sense of belonging to Indigenous communities via a decolonizing land-based pedagogy. Similarly, in a position paper, Yuan (2023) noted that the experience of community-based research helps migrant researchers "reconnect with own cultural roots" to make changes in both Indigenous communities and their own communities (p. 34).

Reflection of coloniality

The complex and multilayered geopolitics of Western imperialism compels many international students from Global South countries to study abroad. Park and Francis (2023) reported that while some international students in Canada recognize coloniality in both their home countries and the Indigenous lands they reside in, they tend to focus on lamenting the colonial legacies of their home countries while using common stereotypes about Indigenous peoples in Canada to defend Western superiority. Park and Francis (2023) described the internalized stigma experienced by international students about settler rules in their home countries. The shame entices students to idealize Canada as a humanitarian, tolerant, and benevolent state—a process Park and Francis (2023) refer to as the "obfuscation of coloniality." However, on a positive note, by making coloniality visible, international students may begin to recognize their own indigeneity in addition to their settler status (Yuan, 2023).

Rationale for the study

Given the complexity of international students experiencing injustices as settlers of color, MacElheron (2022) calls for a comprehensive methodology to examine the unique factors of postsecondary international student–Indigenous allyship in Canada. Currently, a few Canadian empirical studies on this topic focus on international student experiences (Arumuhathas, 2023; Chen, 2021; Kang, 2023), citizenship learning (Perry & Bethune, 2024), decolonial internationalization (Lin, 2019; Wainaina, 2022), Indigenous-led curricula (Kerr et al., 2022), and student support services (Dumontet et al., 2019). As a result, the present study attempts to contribute to and bridge gaps in the literature, addressing the following:

1. What are international students' acculturation experiences, current perspectives, and sources of knowledge about Indigenous peoples in Canada?
2. How do they relate to international student–Indigenous allyship?

METHOD

The data for this study were collected from international students at Algoma University, a diverse and growing school where nearly 50% of the student body consists of international students across Brampton, Timmins, and Sault Ste. Marie campuses (Algoma University, n.d.). This study focuses on the Sault Ste. Marie campus, which is built upon the site of a former residential school within the Robinson–Huron Treaty, established in 1850. Sault Ste. Marie, also known as Baawaating in Anishinaabemowin, is the traditional territory of Anishinabek communities. Given Sault Ste. Marie is the home to many urban and on-reserve Indigenous communities, it is important to understand the potential for cross-cultural engagement between international students and Indigenous peoples in the region. This study was approved by the Algoma University Research Ethics Board.

Participants

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, consisting of semistructured interviews and questionnaires. I utilized both convenience and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. First, recruitment posters were displayed across the campus, with two QR codes that directed students to either a calendar invite to the interview or the questionnaire. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to leverage existing research relationships with students to recruit more participants. Free, prior, and informed consent was secured from participants for both phases, where confidentiality and anonymity clauses were clearly stated to them.

The first phase, semistructured interviews, was conducted from April to July 2023 either in person in a meeting room at Algoma University or online via Zoom, which serves as a pilot study for developing the questionnaire. Each interview took 30 minutes. These interviews were audio-recorded, and to ensure confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts and subsequent research findings. A total of seven international students (five males and two females) participated in the discussion of their lived experiences and knowledge of local Indigenous cultures. The findings from the interviews informed the creation of the questionnaire, which was later completed by 50 students (28 males and 22 females) via Google Forms from September 2023 to May 2024. The questionnaire took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

Upon completing the questionnaire, participants can enter a draw to win the $25 Amazon gift card. This incentive was necessary to alleviate potential sampling and positive response biases, as it helped attract a diverse range of participants. Most (46 out of 50) survey respondents were first-year students who had lived at Sault Ste. Marie for less than a year, which provides an opportunity to examine their perspectives on Indigenous allyship during their freshman year.

Instrument

The interview questions were grounded in themes that emerged from the literature, including lived experiences at Sault Ste. Marie, settler consciousness, reflection on indigeneity, and sources of learning. The preliminary thematic areas identified from the interviews informed the development of the survey questions. The questionnaire mainly consisted of 5-point Likert-type questions. There were also open-ended questions, asking participants to briefly share their understanding of Indigenous cultures, first impressions upon hearing about Indigenous peoples, and then barriers to engaging with Indigenous communities. The open-ended questions were coded for qualitative analyses.

Data analysis procedure

The findings from the semistructured interviews were coded via NVivo 14. In addition to the themes that aligned with the literature, several additional themes emerged. Statistical analyses of the questionnaire were conducted with version 29 of IBM SPSS Statistics. I perform PCA to reduce the dimensionality of the Likert-type questions. The components retained from PCA were further analyzed with Spearman's rho correlation, inputting relevant variables. Compared with Pearson's r, Spearman's rho is more suitable for data collected with Likert scales (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). The benefits of dimensionality reduction include 1) simplifying datasets for correlational analyses, 2) identifying and removing less relevant/important questions to prevent overfitting, and 3) facilitating the validation of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Qualitative findings

The participant information is coded in Table 1. In total, the analyses of the semistructured interviews revealed seven major themes related to international student–Indigenous allyship.

Exposure to cultural diversity

All seven interview participants talked about their exposure to cultural diversity during their enculturation in their home countries and how it helps them adjust to new cultural environments. They all expressed curiosity and openness to learn about new cultures, connecting this adaptability to their multicultural upbringing. "Growing up in a multicultural environment, that is one of my natures that I want to learn something new about the people… I was exposed to all the religions, I had never any doubts about new cultures" (P2).

Similarly, P1 mentioned that childhood exposure to different cultures fostered the "mindset that [peoples] have many ways of living and culture." P3 emphasized that her respect for diverse cultures was rooted in understanding

complex colonial history: "The history of [my hometown] is complex... there have been many influences from Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh cultures. Sometimes there is a lot of tension there because some [groups] want to establish dominance, but that is why I want to respect other cultures."

None of the participants explicitly mentioned how their exposure to cultural diversity turned into active advocacy for Indigenous peoples, while their discussions focused exclusively on learning about and respecting other cultures. This raises the concern that participants may subconsciously frame Indigenous cultures as a part of multicultural learning experiences in Canada, which downplays the unique sociopolitical context of Indigenous peoples.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: Participant information

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Degree Pursuing	Duration Living in the City
P1	India	Female	Business	1 year
P2	India	Male	Human Resources	2 years
P3	India	Female	Finance	2 years
P4	Pakistan	Male	Political Science	1 year
P5	India	Male	Law	5 years
P6	UAE	Male	Business	3 years
P7	Japan	Male	Biology	2 years

Source of learning

All the participants noted that they had prior experiences learning about Indigenous cultures at Sault Ste. Marie. This motivated them to participate in this study. Most participants shared their experiences attending Indigenous community events such as Powwow and "learned many things from Indigenous peoples", such as smudging (P2). "These are not common practices in Japan, so it is interesting to learn" (P7).

Consistent with the literature, among participants, learning from Indigenous peoples appeared to facilitate a sense of commitment to connect with Indigenous cultures and the responsibility of wanting to be an ally.

> I love to go to Powwow; I love to see different Indigenous communities around. They have a beading culture, I love beading. They have dreamcatchers, I love making dreamcatchers. I have connected to Indigenous cultures in recent times… I try my best to know the reality of the stories (P2).

Most participants in this study reported having taken some elective Indigenous Studies courses. P4, who had not taken these courses, mentioned how his awareness of Indigenous issues stemmed from hearing a land acknowledgment: "I heard [land acknowledgment] from a professor when I was starting my first class… so that is the phrase that stays with me." This highlights the importance of including land acknowledgment across all courses, presented in a genuine way.

However, almost all the participants reported that, in addition to the elective courses they took, Indigenous knowledge was not integrated into their mandatory program courses. “Indigenous content will not be in any like business courses” (P2). “I'm considering taking more [Indigenous courses], but my focus has mostly been on the business program to get my credential and pursue accounting” (P6). Some participants expressed discontent with the lack of Indigenous-focused curricula in university programs.

> Every department needs to know the local culture… Sometimes, people do not know how to address Indigenous peoples. Imagine a teacher saying something that is not intelligent to say, but they said it in class to Indigenous students. That ends up triggering [them] (P5).

In addition to the gap in Indigenous knowledge, the participants expressed that Indigenous content was taught mostly on the basis of textbooks. P7 commented on curricula in his home country. The quality of teaching courses on Indigenous peoples was “very thin and only surface-level… They are taught mostly based on textbooks and what professors teach from those textbooks… they do not have any experiential understanding.” Similarly, P4 expressed that such reasons impacted his decision to not take elective Indigenous courses.

> I believe that going to people is better than getting the textbooks to read… rather than just going to the professor and asking them who just studied for like past 4 years and just trying to convey the knowledge that he got from books… You're just learning the theory of things.

The participants preferred to learn “with” Indigenous peoples rather than “about” them. For instance, P5 “likes to go and talk to an Elder in the community. We have Elders at Algoma University. I usually go to her and say, ‘Hey, I'm having a question about this.’”

Experiences of learning

Most participants admitted that they had little to no prior knowledge of Indigenous cultures or even the term “Indigenous” before arriving in Canada. As evident by P7, “In Japan, nobody knows about Indigenous cultures.” However, they shared their transformation from initial unfamiliarity to evolving awareness via acculturation and even drew connections between Indigenous cultures and their own cultures. P7 shared, “Indigenous events have been a fresh and interesting experience for me. They believe in spirituality, which is different from what Japanese people believe.” P3 shared her interest in the traditional attire of Anishinaabe, leading her to make some friends from community events: “I found their dress completely different than mine, which was so interesting.”

During the questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe their first impression of learning about Indigenous peoples in Canada. The responses yielded themes categorized into curiosity, surprise, positivity, and bias. Many

participants reported curiosity and surprise upon learning about Indigenous cultures, implying that such cultures were considered novel but, overall, positive learning experiences that gauge their further interest. Notable examples included "Interested in knowing more because we do have Indigenous in India," "very excited when I heard about it for the first time," "I just learned that the Algoma U was a residential school where Indigenous children were harmed and even killed," and "I felt like what happened was not fair." Finally, only a small number of participants demonstrated first impressions based on stereotypes and misguided judgments such as "they don't want to work" and "It is now on the verge of extinction; hence, the programs are provided for its preservation."

Personal understanding of indigeneity

The participants understood the following themes: land connectedness (P4—"they have sacrificed themselves for the land"), resilience (P5—"after so much religious conversion… it is still alive and here around us to tell their stories"), spirituality (P6—"it is a spiritual connection with oneself, with everyone around them, and with the whole universe"), evolving identity (P5—"it is not about tracing their heritage, it is more about how connected they are now to their culture").

The above themes imply that participants define Indigenous identity in relation to the multicultural context where settler colonialism takes place but lack elements of definition from their heritage country context. This highlights the need for Indigenous curricula to be responsive to international student self-positionality. For example, P3 argued, "I never heard about 'Indigenous' in India because people don't recognize Indigenous peoples. Everyone in India would be called Indian." Similarly, P4 noted, "[they are] considered a 'minority' being a part that is less in number, although they were in the country before us."

Additionally, P5 shared how the term "Indigenous" is framed in his home country, where such a notion might have been depoliticized and romanticized as local ecological diversity.

> Being from India, I have heard the word [Indigenous] a lot while I was growing up in my school. Something is Indigenous made… It is made and developed in India. Therefore, that was kind of the word you usually hear. However, Indigenous Canadian culture was definitely new to me.

Personal reflection on indigeneity

Consistent with the literature, participants utilized their learning about Indigenous Canadian histories to reflect on the colonialism of their home countries and its lingering impacts. The sentiment of solidarity with Indigenous peoples is evident. For example, P5 noted, "Indigenous peoples have to fight in the 21st century for basic human rights… I believe what is in British philosophy about colonization is to destroy their culture. It happened in India, and that is why I feel so connected to Indigenous peoples here." Additionally, according to P4:

> The motivation that leads me to be a part of supporting Indigenous peoples is their history… When I was in India, I literally did not know anything about Indigenous culture. However, when I'm in Canada, I start to realize the [similar] struggles Indian people have also gone through over the years.

However, even when participants were specifically prompted to reflect on their personal relationships with settler colonialism in Canada, none of the participants acknowledged how they were complicit in colonial harm through the occupation of land and resources. There was no explicit or implicit recognition of their settler status or systemic privileges.

Perceptions of cultural similarities

An important theme that emerged from the interviews was the resonance of Indigenous cultures with the participants' own heritage cultures, although they initially expected a more Westernized way of living. Some participants drew cultural parallels in traditional practices, where they used their lived experiences in an attempt to interpret Indigenous knowledge. "Is this the culture here?... Indigenous Peoples [here] had traditions similar to India… Our family [in India] also practice smudging but have a different name for it" (P3). Additionally, P5 stated:

> I feel that there are many similarities between Hinduism and Indigenous cultures here. Like the way they do drumming, we have a similar culture in India. You see them worshiping fire… we have Puja, Hawan, and Yajna. They have seven grandfather teachings… we were having [similarly] in India until some point… Like in [Indigenous] culture, knowledge and tradition are passed on and told orally. Similar teaching has occurred in Indian Gurukuls. These were Indian Indigenous schools in the past, where knowledge was passed on to the students through oral transmission.

In addition to cultural similarities, participants conveyed that learning about Indigenous cultures evokes a "home-like feeling," a sense of "belonging," and self-empowerment. Moreover, the participants expressed the reminiscence of "vibes" and "peace," which made them want to continue residing there rather than just being sojourners. For instance, P4 noted, "I'm a small city guy. [My city] was smaller than Sault Ste. Marie, but it is the same vibe. I love peace, so I try to look for peace wherever I go."

Barriers to international student–Indigenous allyship

According to both the interviews and survey results, the participants reported barriers uniquely related to their precarious status in the host country. For example, P2 reported fear of losing status: "Most of the students are scared... they think what if we did something wrong, it will affect our status. It is the lack of

knowledge that people are not connecting with them." This lack of knowledge was also related to insufficient curricula where Indigenous knowledge was not taught properly in a comprehensive way to all students—"Sometimes it is just because of the language barrier... even if I am taking Archaeology and Anishinaabe courses, I don't understand what professors talk about" (P7). Ethnocentrism was also noted as a barrier in which international students "strongly prioritize staying in their own culture… [and] may believe in their own traditions so much [that] they may not want to learn Indigenous knowledge" (P4).

Many participants mentioned a high workload and a shortage of time as the primary barriers. P4 shared his dilemma of working multiple jobs: "I do not have enough time to be there for them. When you're an international student, you're gonna be doing two jobs and studying." "True, there are emails saying that, so-and-so is happening. However, then you do not get much time to attend" (P5).

Not surprisingly, some participants highlighted experiences of systemic racism and the fear of not being accepted as international students. With respect to systemic racism, P3 noted that "many jobs need workers to have permanent residence or from the local community." Additionally, P3 shared personal encounters with discrimination, which initially made her worried that "[Indigenous] People here will not accept us as international students." P2 discussed his generally positive experiences with the Indigenous community at the university but briefly commented on the lack of trust engendering international student–Indigenous allyship: "Few [people] are very close, they did not even want us to know about their culture." The survey results aligned with these reflections, where five out of 11 respondents expressed social anxiety, past experiences of racism, and feelings of being an outsider.

Quantitative findings

The following quantitative analyses were conducted on the basis of the qualitative results. The findings presented results from PCA based on the survey data (11 survey items were obtained). Before conducting PCA, I assessed whether the data were appropriate for PCA. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy yielded a value of .68, which was above the acceptable value of .6 (Kaiser, 1970). Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated that the correlations of the data were strong enough for PCA, $\chi 2 = 236.794$, $p < .001$.

The PCA retained three components with eigenvalues above 1, which explained 25.68%, 21.41%, and 20.44% of the total variance, respectively. The three-component structure was also validated by a scree plot, which shows a clear "elbow" after the third component, where the slope of the line starts to level off. Overall, the three-component solution accounted for 67.53% of the variance. The reliability of each component was considered overall acceptable, ranging from .653-.852 (see Table 2).

In alignment with the literature and emerging themes from the interviews, the first component was named life adjustment (see Table 2), which relates to participants' senses of belonging in the city. The top item (loading .86) represented a sense of reminiscence. The second item (loading .827) measured

how likely/unlikely international students were to remain sojourners after study. The third (loading .78) and fourth items (loading .67) assessed opportunities and life satisfaction, respectively.

The international student–Indigenous relationship was described as the second component. The top item (loading .898) was related to learning about Indigenous cultures. The second highest loaded item (.82) corresponded to the fear of not being accepted as an international student. The other two items described international students' priorities and interests in not only learning "about" but also learning "with" Indigenous communities.

Finally, the last component evaluates whether students practice their own heritage culture. The items were measured as follows: practicing culture in home countries (loading .879), practicing culture in the host country (loading .734), and practicing one's own religious beliefs (loading .517). This component indicated the role of students' commitment to their own culture in impacting their personal connection with local Indigenous cultures.

Overall, the three components extracted from the survey data generally aligned with the themes and subcategories that emerged from the qualitative findings, making them suitable for further correlational analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the needs for international student–Indigenous allyship.

Table 2: Cronbach's alpha and factor loadings

Life Adjustment	Factor Loading
Sault Ste. Marie reminds me of the place I grew up in.	.86
I want to live in Sault Ste. Marie for the long term and does not want to relocate.	.827
There are lots of opportunities in Sault Ste. Marie.	.78
I am happy with living in Sault Ste. Marie so far.	.67
% of Variance	25.68
Cronbach's Alpha	.852
Student-Indigenous Relation	
Learning about Indigenous cultures is not my priority.*	.898
I am worried that Indigenous community may not accept me.*	.82
I am more focused on completing my studies here than engaging with Indigenous community.*	.764
I am interested in attending local Indigenous community events.	.516
% of Variance	21.41
Cronbach's Alpha	.764
Practicing Own Culture	
In my hometown, I attend many community events related to my cultural tradition.	.879
I practice my own culture and traditions here.	.734
I am a religious person and follow religious practices.	.517

% of Variance	20.44
Cronbach's Alpha	.653

Note. Extraction Method: Principal component analysis; Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization; *: Reverse coding

The results of Spearman's rho correlation coefficient testing the relationships among all three components and relevant variables are described in Table 3. Racism ("I have experienced racism here in Sault Ste. Marie because of my identity") was included in the analyses as a barrier to student-Indigenous relationships in the qualitative findings.

Unexpectedly, the international student–Indigenous relationship did not appear to be significantly correlated with any variables, despite the qualitative findings that suggested a tangible association. However, the findings revealed several new findings.

The correlation matrix indicated that participants who actively practiced their cultures reported better life adjustment ($p<.01$), whereas experiencing racism was negatively correlated with adjustment ($p<.05$). Moreover, female international students were slightly more likely to practice their cultures and engage in relationships with Indigenous communities, despite the weak association ($p>.05$). It was also found that female students reported higher life satisfaction in the city ($p<.05$). The findings are further elaborated in the discussion section below.

Table 3: Spearman's rho correlation

Variables/Components	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5
X1. Life Adjustment	–				
X2. Student-Indigenous Relation	.100	–			
X3. Practicing Own Culture	.545**	.023	–		
X4. Gender	.285*	.157	.209	–	
X5. Experiencing Racism	–.168	–.21	–.286*	.003	–

Note. **$p<.001$; *$p<.05$.

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on several needs and strengths of international students for engaging in Indigenous allyship within the settler colonial context of Canada. Indigenous allyship, as defined by the settler awareness of colonial complicity, self-location, systemic privilege, and decolonization accountability, was not actively reflected upon by international students in the study (Aveling, 2013; Knudson, 2015; Pardy & Pardy, 2020). This implies a significant gap in international students' understanding of the relational aspects involved in Indigenous allyship. For many international students, studying abroad in Canada may involve anything that constitutes Canadian learning experiences, including but not centering on knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Although students generally exhibit curiosity and openness in learning about Indigenous cultures,

they frame them as "something new" to learn. Despite the importance of intercultural learning, Indigenous knowledge has appeared to be downplayed into a multicultural mosaic (Ozyonum, 2023). This obscures colonial dynamics and inadvertently depoliticizes international students' learning in Indigenous contexts. Thus, it is important to direct students to think more critically of multiculturalism as colonialism in the making.

In this study, international students shared learning about Indigenous peoples via community events, university courses, and informal interactions. At Algoma University, students can gain meaningful experience from visiting the decolonized history exhibition space at Shingwauk Hall, which is accessible to all students and visitors (Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall, n.d.). This space represents an Indigenous-led effort by residential school survivors, partnered with local First Nation communities to decolonize education. On the other hand, the woeful absence of Indigenous-led knowledge in university programs, in which knowledge is available only in specific elective courses, reflects the compartmentalization of knowledge. This silo reflects the lack of Indigenous-focused curricula centered on decolonizing accountability, leading university programs to not be responsive to Indigenous cultures and international student needs, reinforcing a predominantly Western way of knowing (Tuck et al., 2014).

Both educational and personal contexts shape international students' commitment to allyship. International students arrive in Canada with limited exposure to Indigenous knowledge and little to no expectations as allies. Therefore, postsecondary institutions play necessary roles in supporting their learning. Despite the underrepresentation of Indigenous course content, international students generally preferred learning "with" Indigenous peoples. Notably, students who attended Indigenous community events demonstrated stronger personalized connections with Indigenous sociocultural contexts. Consistent with Perry and Bethune (2024), this study revealed that community-based Indigenous learning evokes a sense of belonging in international students, particularly when sociocultural similarities remind them of their cultural roots (Yuan, 2023).

With respect to barriers, the study revealed challenges such as a lack of trust, discrimination, limited access to experiential learning, language barriers, and time constraints (Higgins et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the responsibility of cross-cultural engagement appeared to fall solely on the students themselves, while they navigated the challenges of acculturation with limited institutional support (Ermine, 2007). For some students, their precarious status in Canada adds uncertainty by not knowing if their status would be in jeopardy by being involved in decolonizing advocacy and resistance (Akhmetova, 2019).

Additionally, international students' reflections on indigeneity were implicitly filtered through their national and self-identity contexts, raising concerns about cultural appropriation. As seen in Canada, students demonstrated that Indigenous identity is subsumed under the national identity, romanticized and underrecognized in their home countries as well (MacDonald, 2014). In connection with self-identity, some students resonated with the resilience and interconnectedness of Indigenous cultures at a personal level. Their shared

experiences with colonial history became a basis for empathy and allyship. However, fewer students have recognized and reflected on the ongoing global impacts of colonialism. This requires attention, as decolonization should not stop at simply amending past mistakes but rather contests the ongoing settler–colonial dynamics where students themselves also play a role (Littlechild et al., 2021).

The complex and relational nature of Indigenous allyship makes it difficult to be numerically predicted. The quantitative findings infer that while maintaining one's cultural traditions may be beneficial for adjusting to a new environment, it does not necessarily result in increased engagement with Indigenous cultures but rather a general appreciation of culture. This might be due to the nature of acculturation, which involves engaging with various local cultures, such as Western, diaspora, Indigenous, and other racialized communities. Acculturation requires individuals to balance their own identities while navigating different cultures and culture shocks (Oberg, 1960). Alternatively, they may prioritize performing their own cultures while remaining uninvited guests on the land (Srikanth, 2012). Since the questionnaire was completed primarily by freshman-year students, the quantitative findings reflected the experiences of newcomers. However, when interpreted alongside the qualitative findings, these findings suggest that as new international students acculturate within Indigenous contexts, they may begin to explore cultural similarities, develop a sense of belonging, and engage in deeper self-reflections on Indigenous topics (Perry & Bethune, 2024). Therefore, all students, regardless of sociocultural attributes, must be presented with community-based and Indigenous-led learning opportunities.

Regarding this study's limitations, first, the sample size was small, and the data were drawn from one institution. To minimize overfitting, features of international student–Indigenous allyship may not be fully captured in the questionnaire. Second, although the study attempted to reach students from diverse cultures to ensure broad representation, the uneven distribution of the international student population at the university resulted in sampling that was not fully representative of the entire international student body (all interviewed participants were from Asia). Additionally, there were differences in the participants' profiles between the qualitative and quantitative phases, which impacts the consistency of the mixed-methods findings.

Implications

Based on the results, I call upon all university stakeholders to create orientations and experiential learning opportunities aimed at introducing new students to Indigenous knowledge. Second, university curricula must embed local holistic knowledge, irrespective of programs, led by Indigenous knowledge keepers. Next, classroom discussions and assignments need to encourage activities such as self-location and reflection on identity. Additionally, barriers to international student–Indigenous allyship need to be addressed by stakeholders such as nonprofit organizations, student unions, and international student offices through culturally sensitive interventions to make students feel supported, safe, and fully engaged in university learning. Universities may partner with local

service agencies and funding bodies such as Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation to increase community-based internship/placement opportunities that do not exclude international students. Finally, in rethinking the intersections of internationalization and indigenization, postsecondary institutions can better prepare staff, faculty, and students to create decolonized institutions committed to Truth and Reconciliation. Future research could explore these topics further, especially how institutional approaches to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization and Indigenous allyship could be more responsive to students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Identifying evidence-based best practices could build upon insights from this article.

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Osagie Okonufua (University of Windsor) and Muhammad Kiani (Brock University) for their research advice on data analyses, manuscript review, and editorial efforts. This paper would not have been possible without their expertise.

In the preparation of this manuscript, I did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.

REFERENCES

Akhmetova, R. (2019). *The role of recent newcomers to Canada in reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples* [Master's thesis, University of Manitoba]. MSpace. https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1993/34231/Akhmetova_Roxana.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Algoma University. (n.d.). *About us*. https://algomau.ca/about/

Arumuhathas, S. S. (2023). Navigating perspectives: Unpacking the discourse surrounding international student experiences in Canadian higher education. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education, 14*(3), 46–54.

Aveling, N. (2013). 'Don't talk about what you don't know': On (not) conducting research with/in Indigenous contexts. *Critical Studies in Education, 54*(2), 203–214.

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit.* UBC Press.

Beck, K., & Pidgeon, M. (2020). Across the divide: Critical conversations on decolonization, indigenization, and internationalization. In M. Tamtik, R. D. Trilokekar, & G. A. Jones (Eds.), *International education as public policy in Canada* (pp. 384–406). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Bochner, S. (2006). Sojourners. In D. L. Sam, & J. W. Berry (Eds.). *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 181–197). Cambridge University Press.

Buckner, E., Chan, E. & Kim, E. G. (2022). Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion on

Canadian Universities: Where do international students fit in? *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale, 51*(1), 39–56. https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v51i1.14613

Chatterjee, S., Shahrokni, S., Gomez, B. & Poojary, M. (2022). "Another university is possible?": A study of indigenizing and internationalizing initiatives in two Canadian postsecondary institutions. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale, 51*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.5206/cieeci.v51i1.14829

Chen, C. (2021). (Un)making the international student a settler of color: A decolonizing autoethnography. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *13*(5), 743–762. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2020.1850513

Dumontet, M., Kiprop, M., & Loewen, C. (2019). Steps on the path toward decolonization: A reflection on learning, experience, and practice in academic support at the University of Manitoba. *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie, 29*, 196–216. https://doi.org/10.31468/cjsdwr.745

Ermine, W. (2007). The ethical space of engagement. *Indigenous Law Journal, 6*(1), 193–203.

Government of Canada. (n.d.). *Definition of "international students."* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004-x/2010006/def/intlstudent-etudiantetranger-eng.htm

Gravetter, F. J., & Wallnau, L. B. (2017). *Statistics for the behavioral sciences*. Wadsworth Publishing.

Harrison, S., Simcoe, J., Smith, D., & Stein, J. (2018). *Pulling together: A guide for leaders and administrators.* BCCampus. https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationleadersadministrators/front-matter/introduction/

Hart, M. A., Straka, S., & Rowe, G. (2016). Working across contexts: Practical considerations of doing Indigenist/anti-colonial research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 23*(5), 332–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416659084

Heleta, S., & Chasi, S. (2024). Curriculum decolonization and internationalization: A critical perspective from South Africa. *Journal of International Students*, *14*(2), 75-90.

Higgins, M., Madden, B., & Korteweg, L. (2013). Witnessing (halted) deconstruction: White teachers' 'perfect stranger' position within urban Indigenous education. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 18*(2), 251–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.759932

Kaiser, H. F. (1970). A second generation Little Jiffy. *Psychometrika, 35*(4), 401-415. http://doi.org/10.1007/BF02291817

Kang, P. E. (2023). *Searching for equity: A holistic analysis of East Asian international student experiences and policy implications–A case study of a Canadian university engineering program* [Doctoral thesis, University of Toronto]. TSpace. https://www.proquest.com/openview/4cb4eb5953983b2322c5adef51d6b3f8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Kerr, J., Malcolm, M., & Swan, K. (2022). Navigating colonial space: A case study of an Indigenous student-led decolonial movement in Canadian higher

education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 22*(16), 217–231. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v22i16.5615

Knudson, S. (2015). Integrating the self and the spirit: Strategies for aligning qualitative research teaching with Indigenous methods, methodologies, and epistemology. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 16*(3), 1–28.

Lawrence, B. (2004). *"Real" Indians and others: Mixed-blood urban Native peoples and Indigenous nationhood*. University of Nebraska Press.

Lin, G. (2019). *Decolonizing the social imaginaries of British Columbia's international education phenomenon* [Doctoral thesis, University of British Columbia]. UBC Theses and Dissertations. https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0376237

Littlechild, D. B., Finegan, C., & McGregor, D. (2021). "Reconciliation" in undergraduate education in Canada: The application of Indigenous knowledge in conservation. *Facets (Ottawa), 6*(1), 665–685. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2020-0076

MacDonald, D. B. (2014). Reforming multiculturalism in a binational society: Aboriginal Peoples and the search for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie, 39*(1), 65–86. http://www.jstor.org/stable/canajsocicahican.39.1.65

MacElheron, S. (2022). *Crossing the divide: Reconciling international student migration and Indigenous Peoples* [Conference Presentation]. Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada. http://hdl.handle.net/1880/114682

Marom, L. (2016). A new immigrant experience of navigating multiculturalism and Indigenous content in teacher education. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 46*(4), 23–40. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v46i4.186108

Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, os-7*(4), 177–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405

Ozyonum, E. (2023). Let's talk about decolonial internationalization. *YU-WRITE: Journal of Graduate Student Research in Education*, *2*(1). https://doi.org/10.25071/28169344.17

Pardy, L., & Pardy, B. (2020). Decolonizing non-Indigenous faculty and students: Beyond comfortable diversity. In S. Cote-Meek, & T. Moeke-Pickering (Eds.), *Decolonizing and indigenizing education in Canada* (pp. 229–246). Canadian Scholars.

Park, H., & Francis, M. (2023). Fraught subjects: Decolonial approaches to racialized international students as "settlers of color in the making." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *47*(1), 212–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2211649

Perry, J. A., & Bethune, L. R. (2024). Decolonizing citizenship learning with international students: Exploring the possibilities through photovoice. *Journal of International Students, 14*(1), 97–118. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i1.5125

Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times.* Duke University Press.

Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall (n.d.). *Home*. https://reclaimingshingwaukhall.ca/

Regan, P. (2010). *Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth telling, and reconciliation in Canada*. UBC Press.

Shin, H. (2022). Decolonizing Indigenous-newcomer relations in the teaching of English in education. *International Journal of Educational Research, 116*(102091). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102091

Srikanth, H. (2012). Multiculturalism and the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. *Economic and Political Weekly, 47*(23), 17–21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23214913

CBIE. (n.d.). Infographic. https://cbie.ca/infographic/

St. Denis, V. (2011). Silencing Aboriginal curricular content and perspectives through multiculturalism: "There are other children here." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 33*(4), 306–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2011.597638

Tamtik, M., Beck, K., Chatoor, K., & Pather, T. (2021). *Exploring a (new) praxis for internationalization: Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Decolonization (EDID)* [Webinar]. CGEI Events. https://source.sheridancollege.ca/cgei_events/2

Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada.* University of Toronto Press.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to action.* https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/Indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf

Tuck, E., McKenzie, M., & McCoy, K. (2014). Land education: Indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonizing perspectives on place and environmental education research. *Environmental Education Research, 20*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.877708

Tuck, E., & Yang, W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1–40.

Vanner, C., Goyeau, J., Logan, M., Ryan, K., Weenie, A., & Mitchell, C. (2024). Teaching about missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people: Implications for Canadian educators. *Canadian Journal of Education, 47*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.5883

Wallace-Casey, C. (2022). Teaching and learning the legacy of residential schools for remembering and reconciliation in Canada. *History Education Research Journal, 19*(1). https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.19.1.04

Wainaina, E. (2022). *Decolonizing graduate education: Considerations for integration and internationalization of a Master of Education program* [Master's thesis, Brock University]. Brock University Digital Repository. https://dr.library.brocku.ca/bitstream/handle/10464/16400/Brock_Wainaina_Esther_2022.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Yuan, X. (2023). Confucian or confusion? Analyses of international students' self-rated intercultural sensitivity and its sociocultural predictors at Canadian universities. *Frontiers in Education, 8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1239177

Yuan, X. (2023). Reflections on Indigenous allyship: Perspectives from an international student and emerging scholar. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education, 14*(3), 28–37.

Author bio

Xuechen Yuan (James), a PhD student, studies cognition and learning at the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, Canada. His research focus encompasses social and cognitive psychology and international student experiences. Xuechen previously worked as a junior researcher at the Department of Sociology at Algoma University on Indigenous research.
Email: xyuan3@lakeheadu.ca