

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES:
TRANSITIONING INTO WESTERN POST-
SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**by
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Abstract

Despite the ongoing challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has had in the number of international students able to come to Canada, over 500,000 students chose to study at Canadian institutions in 2021 (erudera, 2022). Many post-secondary institutions focus on acclimatizing international students to living in Canada versus what to expect in the classroom. The aim of this research was to explore the educational experiences of international students transitioning into Canada and a western post-secondary pedagogy. This qualitative research project interviewed three international students who were studying at a northern Canadian college for at minimum one semester in 2022 to ascertain what areas the students are being supported in, and where it is lacking. Analysis of their interviews revealed that instructors have a pedagogical bias in their educational expectations of international students. This resulted in students facing many of the academic challenges in their Canadian education. A recommendation emerging from this research is training for staff and faculty in internationalizing curriculum.

Keywords: International students, western education pedagogy, qualitative, support, transitioning, educational experiences.

Dedication

To my mother Grace, who saw capabilities in me that I did not. I wouldn't have taken this chance without your belief in my ability to do it.

Thank you to my cohort, my wonderful instructors, and the friends I made along the way; I have grown and changed in ways that I never thought possible.

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Introduction

International students have been an integral part of Canadian post-secondary education since the 1990s when Canada was admitting approximately 31,000 a year, doubling in the early 2000s to 68,000 per year (Statistics Canada, 2015). In a report on the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic on international students applying to Canada by the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), it showed that “in the five years before the pandemic struck last year, the number of international students in Canada had climbed by more than 80%” (ICEF Monitor, 2021, para. 3). Although there was a drop of enrollment of 17% in 2020, there were over 500,000 international students studying in the country (ICEF Monitor, 2021). In the last 5 years, the amount of international students coming to Canada for post secondary alone has increased, with the majority of those students coming into post-secondary in 2021 with a Bachelor’s Degree (160,842), Master’s Degree (45,438), or a Doctoral (20,871) (erudera, 2022).

Through eleven years of instructing both domestic and international students, I have noticed a pronounced difference between class interaction as well as assignment understanding that has a deeper issue than language barriers. In my personal instructor experience, I have seen many international students struggle to adjust to understand the wants of the instructor as well as how to complete tasks, such as citing sources and journaling, that many of us learned in our own educational experiences and just expect our students to

know. I have also observed a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding in how our international students are taught and expected to learn in their home countries from not only myself, but fellow faculty as well.

While Canadian colleges and universities are working to decolonize classrooms, like Vancouver Island University (Burke et al., 2020), and the College of New Caledonia (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022) but there is still an outdated belief that international students will automatically understand how to interact with instructors and fellow students as soon as they come to Canada. Research done by Antonia Darder in her paper on critical leadership and social justice in education states that, “in today’s corporatized university, college students have become consumers who can now choose across a variety of educational products, rather than cultural citizens who must grapple to understand themselves and their world...Knowledge has been reduced to a market commodity, to be bought and sold to the highest bidder (Darder, 2018, p. 140). Many post-secondary institutions and instructors focus on helping transition these international students into a Canadian way of life, but do not even consider that learning expectations will be different as well.

Looking at the demographic of international students coming into Canada, it has been determined that the majority are from India with 180,275 study permits given in 2020. The People’s Republic of China is second with 116,935 permits given, with all other countries making up under 20, 000 permits each (Statistics Canada, 2020). In previous review of the literature, I have learned that although the government of India has been working to make higher education in

India to be more inclusive to varying social groups in the country, there is still a lot of issues facing higher education in India. These issues in India in turn cause further issues when the students are transitioning to Canadian higher education. This lies, in part, with the push for more and more educational institutions in India to cover the growing need for post-secondary education; however, this “sudden and dramatic increase in numbers of institutions without a proportionate increase in material and intellectual resources. As a result, academic standards have been jeopardised” (Agarwal, 2006, p. 18). This is even more prevalent in the rural areas of India, where many of our students are coming from.

According to the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, the colleges there have been privatized and are “extremely poor infrastructure and facilities with just a few teachers. Apart from concerns relating to deteriorating standards, there is reported exploitation of students by many private providers” (Agarwal, 2006, p. 18). With such disadvantages, research into how to best support international students in their pursuit of further education in Canada is necessary. My research explored the experiences and needs of international students in the context of learning and a perceived educational divide between how they were educated in their home countries and in Canada.

Literature Review

Internationalization and the procurement of international exchange students to post-secondary institutions has been a growing strategy of Canadian universities and colleges to “brand and position themselves in a competitive market” where internationalization is “largely adopted as a measure to support the economic sustainability of the institution” (Ilieva et al., 2014, p. 2). The question we must ask, now, is how sustainable will this competitive mindset regarding international student interest remain when there are already issues being raised in much of the research. With just over 500,000 international students studying in the country (ICEF Monitor, 2021) even after the pandemic, the focus now should be on the experiences of international students and consistent internationalization of educational practices.

Transitioning from living and learning in one culture to a completely new one is a stressful time for any student and making sure that the overall experience is a good one allows for not only student retention but in maintaining a good standing for future students. According to research from World Education Services (WES), creating “positive educational experiences are dependent first and foremost on academic experiences; however, non-academic services also play a critical role in improving retention” (Ortiz, 2014, para. 18). This research was essential for many institutions in looking into how to make international students Canadian education experiences good enough to encourage others to

study in Canada. The main focus in many other research and literature, however, has fixated on a better experience living in Canada.

Although international students come into Canadian post-secondary with a vast educational background, there are still some areas where globalization and internationalization are falling short. Promotion of academic services at institutions needs to be taken up by instructors as well as the institutions. It is a cultural academic expectation in Western education that students should have access to services to help them in their post-secondary journey. For international students however, this is not the case as many of the support services we as Canadians take for granted are not a universal educational norm. It is the fundamental differences in both cultural classroom and teaching norms and a “lack of awareness and unfamiliarity with the system” (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2019, p. 176) that can negatively impact the educational experience and adjustment of international students.

Research papers from international students living and studying in Canada from countries such as China (Li, DiPetta, and Woloshyn, 2012; Liu, 2016) examined international students’ experiences of living and adjusting to life in Canada. These studies found that the majority of students coming from China come to study in Canada because 1) they like the environment and believe it is safer, 2) that it is easier to obtain a Canadian visa, and 3) that although the cost of studying was cheaper than other countries, the quality of education was good (Li, DiPetta, and Woloshyn, 2012). In Liu’s research, it was noted that while it is safer and affords a good quality of life, studying in Canada is still a

large culture shock involving language barriers and “unfamiliar classroom norms” (Lui, 2016, p. 4).

Other major themes in international student research falls under whether or not the courses and programs international students have studied make them ready for the workforce in Canada (Reichert, 2020; Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). While other research identified cultural and social integration of international students and explored the effects on quality of life and education in Canada during the first year of study for international students (Zhou and Zhang, 2014). It was noted that during the first year of study at a Canadian institution, the biggest hurdles international students had to overcome, outside of newly acquired independence and loneliness, was different education values and difficulties relating to domestic students ((Zhou and Zhang, 2014).

Very few reports and journals, however, inquired into the nature of studying and learning in Canada and how it differs from the international student’s education and understanding from their own home country. Of those studies that do exist, they found for many international students feel too intimidated to speak up, as well as, dealing with language barriers largely affected academic success (Guo, 2011) as many didn’t want to be a burden, or felt they were not communicating well enough to talk about it. Others focused on how racism, discrimination, and ineffective support programs, where the focus was on completing tasks and not helping students learn certain academic skills (Klodt, 2019), affects academic success as well as student satisfaction.

Many international students are faced with vastly different circumstances from the educational systems they are used to. This includes not only “classroom norms, teaching and learning styles, procedures, discourse and communication, and professor-student and student-student interactions... [but also a] lack of awareness and unfamiliarity with the [support] system [such as student support services] (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2019, p. 176). This coincides with the issues of cultural differences and educational expectations, such as needing extra help with academic writing and citations (Lyakhovetska, 2003), and adjusting to varying class times, workloads, and the difference in learning and teaching styles (Pidgeon and Andres, 2005) that continue to segregate international students from others in post-secondary institutions.

Current and previous researchers believe that information from the studies can also be used to bridge gaps in understanding between domestic students and instructors regarding international students. Providing this information may help negate the feeling of alienation and isolation that many students feel while acclimating to life and education in a new country (Guo, 2011).

English language proficiency remains a focus in literature available; and while that is a factor in some aspects, it is the internal, often unintentional, bias of instructors and staff that a ‘west is best’ teaching style that creates “mismatches in culturally rooted academic expectations [that] can strain international students’ interactions and relationships with professors or academic advisors” (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2019, p. 176). And while English language proficiency is an important factor in an international students’ academic success

and experience, and although there are required levels and test scores to be met, bigger difficulties are often found within the classroom.

Even having passed all of these language tests, “international students still struggle in understanding lectures and academic content, writing reports and presenting ideas in lecture rooms” (Weerakkody & Jerez, 2018, p. 28). Other concerns and issues came from trying to understand different accents [in English], rates of speech, and pronunciation (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). American researchers Martirosyan, Bustamante, and Saxon (2019) touch upon this further, proposing English language programs that focused on language culture, exchange, and conversion; targeted writing support where staff are knowledgeable on how to work with international students; social and cultural events to facilitate multicultural exchange; professional development programs on taxes, job search, and resume building; and family support.

Current critiques of western post-secondary pedagogies lie with the issues of western idealism and the colonial mindset regarding educational superiority. Internationalization in post-secondary institutions in this instance is criticized for the focus on how it approaches internationalized pedagogy “within the realms of the ‘rich world’s’ value systems and ethnocentrism” (Stier, 2004, p. 89), dismissing knowledge gained prior.

Stier (2004) also posits that western idealism of a universal internationalization of education focuses on what western education can offer and the education received from other countries is often looked at as not having

anything to offer and for the students, “‘their’ competencies are devalued—many times even without being given proper attention” (Stier, 2004, p. 89).

Teaching and learning style differences create another challenge for both international students and faculty. Many students come from countries where the education system is collective “where the education is teacher-centered, and teachers are treated with a higher level of gratitude and respect” (Weerakkody & Jerez, 2018, p. 29). Transitioning to an education system that is student-centered and informal can be quite difficult and many students get lost in the cultural and academic shock of it. Policy and institution-wide measures need to be created to help with the transition.

As Stier (2004) states:

Finally, it seems paradoxical that much of the measures implemented to promote and facilitate internationalization aim at an increased level of international or global convergence—of ideas, educational systems and ideologies—at the same time as things such the respect and value of pluralism are stressed (p.89).

Research completed in the last decade shows that there is a need for more research focusing on internationalization in post-secondary institutions to overcome the “lack of understanding of the perspectives, practices, and experiences of the participants” (Beck, 2012, p. 136), as well as the unintentional ‘othering’ done by instructors when international students don’t display the preferred behaviours of domestic students (Beck et al., 2007). Emerging data

shows that the focus on internationalization of institutions lays mainly with obtaining and retaining international exchange, leaving the faculty, on an individual level, to “address the complex needs of students navigating transcultural literacies, [with the result being] inconsistencies in student experiences” (Beck et al., 2013, p. 91).

In order to address these inconsistencies, there needs to be a supported and structured internationalization that is consistent at an institutional level at minimum. Current ideologies in higher education need to be re-evaluated as well. Postcolonial theories and perspectives need to be addressed if we are to reach the “global citizenship” touted by many post-secondary institutions looking to remain relevant to perspective international students. Lynette Shultz (2012) looks at global citizenship and equity education as the next step that we, as institutions and educators, need to focus on. In order to be fully inclusive and foster globalization of education needs to move “toward ‘situated and dynamic pluriversalities’ which includes and represents the majority voices of those that end up positions outside or peripheral to dominant Western models of knowledge” (Shultz & Jorgenson, 2012, p. 4).

In research completed by Kumari Beck (2012), there are “several key gaps in Canadian research on internationalization [that] relate to a conceptual confusion in the field; the lack of understanding of the perspectives, practices, and experiences of the participants” (Beck, 2012, p. 136). The focus of institutions needs to move from how to gain international students to internationalizing the classroom through a global pedagogy. Beck worked on a

pilot project of 'Inclusive Teaching' where, like Canada's current focus on indigenizing the classroom, anti-racist and anti-oppressive frameworks were used to gain insight into international student issues and come up with ways to design course content inclusive to diverse classrooms (Beck, 2008).

A 2021 study conducted at a Belarusian-Russian University examined instruction and support provided by the university faculty to international students (Marinenko, 2021). [How many] Instructors were given a questionnaire with three questions on activities used to support international students. Results showed that many instructors felt that "it was important to visualize information" for the students, and "incorporated more comprehensible input by using simple language, explaining terms, avoiding slang, and colloquial expressions" (Marinenko, 2021, p. 582).

Implications of these studies and the above literature is that more research into student academic experiences needs to be undertaken. The evidence reflects what western post-secondary institutions need to look at in the future; how to support international students academically through more involved institutional and faculty assistance.

Research Purpose

The purpose of my proposed research project was to explore the educational experiences of international students in higher education and assess if post-secondary institutions are providing enough support towards the transition from the context of their home countries to that of a Western education system. Through this research, and the emerging themes, it is my intention to also inform and instruct administrators and educators in how to interact with and support international student's that are having difficulties transitioning to studying and learning in Canada.

Research Question

My research question was "What are international students' educational experiences transitioning to a College in Canada?" and from that, "How can Colleges better support international students transition to Post-Secondary Education?"

Methodology

The research methodology used to gather this data was through qualitative design as my study was exploratory in nature and I wished to better understand the international student experience from their own stories (see Appendix 2).

Site of Study

Research was conducted at the College of New Caledonia campus in Prince George, BC, in partnership with International Student Services.

Recruitment of Participants

International students who have been or are enrolled at CNC during the academic year of 2021/22 were invited to participate in this study with the help of the College of New Caledonia's International Student Services (ISS) Center. I partnered with the International Student Services Center as they have direct contact with all of the college's international students. The Center sent out an email with a letter of invitation to students that would be interested in this participatory research (see Appendix 2). There were incentives given for participation in the form of "thank you for your participation" gift card from either Starbucks or Tim Hortons for the amount of \$15.

Inclusion criteria for participation was focused on students who have taken classes at the site of study for at least one semester and come from an advertently non-English-speaking country. I anticipated at least having 6-8

students to interview from a varied group of students that represent the majority of international students that have come to study at the College of New Caledonia. This included students from India, South Korea, China, Japan, and Nigeria. Proportionately, there was a chance that the majority of volunteers would be from India (34%) or from China (22%) as they represent a larger portion of international students that have come to Canada to study (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). However, all five participants were from different countries and only one student was from India.

Study Design

During May 1 2022 to June 20 2022, I conducted 5 semi structured interviews, where 10 questions exploring international students' educational experiences and looking to gauge if any needs are not being met were asked. Interviews averaged an hour in length and were done one on one with students over an extended period of 3 weeks.

Of the five interviews, 2 were completed via Zoom and 3 were in person. Data gathered from these interviews will be used to offer colleges and universities suggestions for creating inclusive course construction, student retention, and overall student experience for international students coming to study in Canada. Participant information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Pseudonyms	Semesters at the College	Gender	Previous Education	Country	Education in Canada
Participant 1	2 semesters	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Azerbaijan	Post Diploma
Participant 2	2 semesters	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Vietnam	Post Diploma
Participant 3	2 semesters	Male	High School	Japan	University Transfer
Participant 4	2 semesters	Female	Bachelor's Degree	El Salvador	Post Diploma
Participant 5	4 semesters	Female	Bachelor's Degree	India	Completed Diploma

These interviews were private and confidential, conducted as one on one, semi structured, informal gatherings of experiences. This gave me insight into the varied educational experiences international students have and how post-secondary institutions can better help them transition into a new way of learning and support them in a better way.

Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word Dictate from the taped interview recordings. Recordings in face-to-face interviews were recorded via my Samsung Phone Digital Voice Recorder so that they could be easily transferred to a computer. Zoom transcribed the interview as it was taking place, with only minor edits for mistranslation from the AI.

To maintain credibility, I transcribed the recorded data within 24 hours of the interview, as well as any field notes I had taken. Transcriptions provided by Zoom and Microsoft Word were read while listening to the audio to make sure transcription is correct. The recorded data was saved on the Simon Fraser

University's secure server (i.e., Vault) under my password protected profile so that only I will have access to the data. The recordings were saved with only references to the participant number of the international student so no personal information of the interviewee was required. The transcripts of the interviews were read and reread in order to get a qualitative analysis to the responses and note any common themes that emerge.

Findings

The question I set out to answer through these 5 student interviews was “What are international students' educational experiences transitioning to a College in Canada?” and from that, “How can Colleges better support international students transition to Post-Secondary Education?” During the interviews, there were several questions that all of the participants, regardless of education level or background, wanted to delve deeper into. These questions asked about teaching strategies and assignments, working together with international and domestic students, what they were unprepared for academically, as well as what was the most challenging aspect of learning in Canada.

The findings that emerged during my research revealed that there were several areas where international students encountered challenges when transitioning into western post-secondary institutions: lack of knowledge in Western classrooms and classwork; classroom interactions; and western teaching strategies. I will also be breaking the themes down into subthemes and the issues related.

Lack of western classroom and classwork knowledge

Participants expressed many of their academic challenges centered on classroom and classwork expectations of them. Many had no previous experience of working on certain types of writing, like research papers, as well as being hesitant in clarifying expectations for assignments.

Writing and citations

The first notable theme that emerged focused on writing assignments and researching topics in the classroom. A large issue experienced by all of the participants in the research project was that of a lack of knowledge in writing research papers, citations, and what would be considered a credible source. Participant 3 has a unique experience as compared to the others as they transitioned from high school in Japan to western post-secondary, whereas the others all had post-secondary backgrounds prior to coming to Canada. As he explained “In Japan, I studied how to write English, so I know how to write, but I did not [know] citation, or essay format.”

Both he and Participant 1 spoke of a lack of writing other than English practice or opinion essays.

We had one assignment, it was [a] very big assignment and I spent all week writing it; it was seven/eight pages. I do all my best, I did write all references, the only thing I don't write [are] quotations but I write references as [I was taught]. The teacher give me an F. I was like what, why? [I took] an appointment to speak to [the instructor]. They said it's like ‘oh you don't add a quotation’ and I thought okay [but] I write references and why do I need to add quotation if it's my opinion? I write about my opinion. After several minutes of discussing, she told me that ‘no, I don't need your opinion I need your research and writing based on this research’. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 had transitioned to Western education younger than the others, coming from Vietnam to the USA and then to Canada. This participant noted that in the classroom she saw many other international students in her classes struggling with the same issue of adapting to new teaching styles and academic writing.

I know a lot of my classmates struggled in English class specifically because they're not used to, like, doing research paper, looking up academic sources and like writing like a research paper. So, I know specifically in English class. A lot of my classmates struggled because they're not used to. That kind of like, teaching style where you have to, like, do your academic research and citing. (Participant 2)

Many of the participants noted that they did receive some help in learning how to write research and how to cite resources, but it was usually only an hour session in the library on how to cite resources and where to look. Every single participant, however, stated that they had no previous knowledge of why citations were needed, let alone how to do them. As Participant 2 explained:

Oh my God, I'm still not used to citing papers. It's something that's not we didn't have to do that in Vietnam, like citing and like crediting. I'm still getting used to like proper citing and referencing, so that's one big thing here that I still kind of struggle with when I do assignments. And I'm sure a lot of like my classmates struggle with the same thing. Academic sources and what's academic, what's not what's credible? ...They're not used doing that. And yeah, just, I guess writing is really hard for international

students because you have to, you have to know a lot of vocab, too, to write like a cohesive like writing piece.

For some classes we have like library sessions with James and he would go over like. Academic research and all of that. But it's like, I mean a session of like an hour. It's sometimes not enough. Like you kind of like have to have time to get used to the whole thing [the idea of citing and writing research]. (Participant 2)

Unclear lectures, assignments and exams

Several spoke on feeling a lack of guidance or support from instructors when working on assignments in class or completing labs. Isolation and a sense of being alone in learning came up across the interviews. Participant 1 speaks about the concerns that they experienced negative reactions from instructors:

If we are making some draft version [of an assignment], and if we show the teacher, at least I expect to see, to hear her or his mind. Like I am the right way or [not]? But when they ignore or like 'I don't have time' or just, like 'oh I can't read all of them just go ahead and do by yourself.' Come on, I can't do that I [am not] a teacher. (Participant 1)

Some participants mentioned being hesitant to ask for help, worrying about how they would be seen by the instructor or penalties they may incur. Participant 2 speak to the student independence expected by instructors and not wanting to bother them.

When you're in lab, you're kind of on your own. I mean like there are, there your professors there and the TA's there to help you. But it's like. You're

kind of pretty much doing the experience on your own. And you kind of have to like try to figure that out, which going from an educational background in Vietnam where, like, they tell you what to do and then going from that to here where you kind of like just have to do everything on your own and like try to figure that out. That was challenging for me. Because sometimes I would, I would hesitate to ask questions too, because I feel like I'm just. Bothering the teacher or the TA or. Like at first, I would really hesitate when I asked for something because I feel like, like I should know the material and I shouldn't be asking for these things. (Participant 2)

This unintentional alienation of international students where they are treated like any domestic student and expected to just know what the instructor wants extends past just being hesitant to ask questions about assignments to simply not going to the instructor about any questions because of the uncertainty of classwork expectations and what constitutes cheating. As participant 5 explains:

Academic conduct policy and procedures, no doubt they are given this policy that has the terminology or words that are law. Not anyone [everyone] can understand. If they can be described well, like, this is what academic misconduct means, this is what plagiarism means... That was totally new thing because, for us, for like as a new international student for me this is like "I'm asking a favor for my instructor" or "he will be punishing me because I don't know about the stuff?" Our assignment is a grading things, it needs to be right [perfectly] on the final day. I shouldn't be asking

help from my instructor about it. And then we have proofreading services available on campus as well.

Tutor services and all that. Not most of the student go and often use it because they think that, again, my instructor will see that I'm doing the cheating because I took a help from another instructor toward my thing [assignment]. (Participant 5)

This lack of classroom and assignment knowledge also proved challenging when it came to exams. Several participants noted that midterms and exams were stressful not only because of regular test issues, but due to the types of exams given to international students.

Exam is another part, it's a nightmare for students. Because, you know, I have my friend who studied in Toronto in some other college. And I when I ask that do [they] have some exams, 'we don't have it test exam'. I said how does the teacher give you like your grade? She said this teacher give us lots of presentation and case study, assignment or group project which we need to make in real life...I also think that some of this test method, I think it's in the old. Its past. Because, even if a student passed exam, it doesn't mean that he's smart. If this student is fail, it doesn't mean that he's stupid. So that's why this exam doesn't shows the real knowledge...Otherwise, like we get lots of stress. I start to lose my hair because of this exam because I get lots of stress. (Participant 1)

Multiple choice exams, especially, pose several issues when teaching international students, such as the questions not capturing what was actually

learned in the classroom, but having to remember new vocabulary and the chance of translation mistakes on the part of the student. This is a big worry for

Participant 4:

You know type of thing so far that has been the most difficult part in my learning in these two semesters? I'm so afraid of midterms and finals 'cause I know there will be a lot of multiple-choice questions and I'm not the best at choosing the right [one] when you have, like, kind of the same answers...It's different when you have so many choices and all choices are kind of similar...Yeah, 'cause [the] issue is that, you as a native English speaker, it might be so easy for you to say 'Participant 4, come on this is easy!' But that's your understanding. But in my case, it's going to be more difficult, right? So that's why I feel that I'm not learning with those type of portions [questions]. And it'll be so different in Spanish, like, if you will give me those questions in Spanish, I will, I will go 'Yeah, of course. This the right one is the correct one.' But in English, like, I have had a hard time. (Participant 4)

Classroom interactions and difficulty speaking with peers

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews was difficulty with interactions in the classroom. As in much of the literature, English language proficiency was a big part of the fear participants expressed when talking about not only social interactions, but in classroom interactions as well. However, it was noted that language was only a part of the issue when interacting with fellow

classmates, both international and domestic students, and instructors. Cultural mismatches and perceived power imbalances posed several challenges as well.

Language barriers

The most common issue students touched on when talking about working and interacting with other students, was fear of not being able to communicate properly, as many had the ability to read and write English, but not speak it. A few said they would gravitate to those from their own country or who spoke their language before anyone else. Participant 3 felt like he was underprepared as he learned English beforehand, but didn't practice speaking it: "I think its language [that is the hardest for me]. I, 'cause I'm not good at speaking English language so, it's the most I think. Especially when I was in Japan, I don't practice speaking because there's no speakers."

Other participants felt like they couldn't talk with their peers, for fear of getting made fun of or being misunderstood.

So, as international student, I was very afraid to sit with domestic student and study with them. Considering my second language is my English. And then our [domestic] students are not trained enough. Like, they're young, like, [they don't know] how to behave with the person [another student] whose language is not English. As a professional, we understand it, but as a younger person [to someone] who's not speaking proper English, we were just, they're just like "don't bother to talk with them" or whatever. So that was very challenging. Again, [for international students] it's a huge, huge phobia [for] international students to come and sit with the white

person. And even not with the white person, I would say. Anyone who doesn't look like them. As an Indian I would be preferred to sit with an Indian person who speak my own language as compared to sitting someone from Nigeria, England, or Australia or Canada. (Participant 5)

When asked “what was the most challenging thing about learning in Canada?” the majority of participants talked about the language barrier issues they had and how it affected them in the classroom. Lack of confidence in speaking English limited students’ interactions with instructors about assignments or questions they had or participating in discussions and groups was something both Participant 2 and Participant 4 spoke heavily on. Participant 4 chose not to speak on occasion, even to other international students, as she stated “So we'll come from different cultures, different mindsets. And some of them will be shy. Some of them will be like, no, I rather not speak 'cause probably, if I participate, I would not be saying this correctly or my participation will not be strong enough.”

For Participant 2, the fear was due to her lack of confidence in being able to ask the right questions or seeming unknowledgeable:

I would say the biggest problem for me was English because as any international student, English is not my first language. So even though I was considered like a good at English in my country because we did, you know, we were taught English and it was a subject in my country...But when I came to the states, it was completely different. Because we were taught more like on the grammatical side of it [in Vietnam]. So, like not

speaking and listening. So, then I remember we had an assignment like. Like a homework assignment. Very simple. It's just, you know, like my biology teacher told us to just go home and create an account on this website. So, then we can do our homework later. That was the assignment. But I could not understand that. So, I was too scared to talk to anyone about it, didn't have any friends either, so I ended up not doing that. And I was very like, I was stressing myself out for the whole night because it's like, 'OK, I know I have a homework assignment, but I don't know what it is'. But I can't talk to anyone about it. I can't ask anyone. So that was scary for me and I think the language was like the biggest thing.

(Participant 2)

Power Imbalances

Language proficiency issues was an expected topic, but the other challenges that were touched upon by participants involved a cultural perceived, or real, power imbalance in the classroom. Many of the students spoke of how where in their home country, teachers were the focus of the education system and were seen as the experts. This not only places them in a position of high authority, but demanding of respect as well. This was a big cultural shock for a lot of them, as many of the instructors they had here wanted to be addressed on a first name basis and openly welcomed questions.

Going from Vietnam to here or like with other international students I know, like the international students in my class, they're kind of like... not like struggle[ing], but like they have problems trying to call the instructors

with their first name, because it's not common in a lot of our countries to address your instructors or someone you like, respect, by their first name. It's just not like something we do, so that a lot of people would say Sir and ma'am. (Participant 2)

Participant 5 also talks about how it is not just the issue of names, but feeling as if they are being disrespectful by even asking some questions in class. They don't want the instructor to think they are questioning their knowledge of the subject.

Because the developing countries our student come [and see] instructors as their commander, really high level, so they don't feel comfortable to open up. So, back home [in India] instructors are kind of strict, and they carry themselves a little differently than the students just because they were teaching like hundred and 50 students and all at one class. And they carry themselves as more kind of professionals, and how should I put that like I'm "upper" than you. That's how I put it. Yeah, like a boss and employee relationship, I would say. They are more knowledgeable than us and then they, they are here to teach and then we need to be very silent if they are teaching, and the culture that we grow from our instructors were taught as our rules. So, like, second parents, after our own parents whatever they say you have to agree with it. (Participant 5)

Some students see the power imbalance as that of holding the power of whether or not the student is able to continue in the program versus having to go back home as a failure. The stress of the instructor holding power over the life

and livelihood of international students came up as a big stressor for Participant 1. They talked about feeling demotivated by instructors who did not see the struggles of international students, and felt as if some instructors saw international students as all the same:

During our learning period, they [the instructors] should see the difference between students. And giving the same grade for student who [has] not studied and [one who has] studied, it's unfair and it's really demotivate[ing]; like what's my different then? I am not feeling myself special and sometime I think I am so stupid, since this person gave me this is grade [but] I studied a lot. Here teachers also give us opinion but not every time. Like it depends on what kind of assignment or presentations. Like we can ask them everything and, in general, I'm not like prefer to every time ask teachers, because I tried to do it myself.

(Participant 1)

Interactions between students in classroom settings is where cultural mismatches and academic dissatisfaction started to be discussed. They felt a power imbalance here with the not only communication barriers and educational backgrounds, but gender as well. Group work was a point of contention with many of the participants in this respect. For Participant 5, this was due to both a sense of cultural and gender imbalance of students, but unclear expectations of the instructor to the students.

Tell them [international students] how to work along with the group for work because as a Canadians, if you're working in the group, if someone

is not working [you] are very honest with [your] peers and marking. They [international students] are coming from cultures, where there may be like gender differences, or something like that and then it's because that's how they are grown up from 18 to 20 years they still have between them like that gender is higher than me oh that's dominating one so I'll just give him out of, even though they never did any work, so I will just give them the higher marks. So, setting that expectation at the very end, can be very helpful. And then, so that only one person is not ended up being the whole group work and then giving the grades to everyone. (Participant 5)

For other participants, the power imbalance was stated to stem from students that they perceived as not working as hard as them:

For example, we have one project, and we were three people and I'm like. The second guy he was also smart, I know that he will do his job, even if it were submitted nine minutes before it's due day because he always make everything at the end. So, the third person I don't expect so much from this person...only me and this person is working on one assignment, which was 11 pages, it was very difficult just and he and me we can't say that this person, like in self-evaluation, we can't say it like 'This person don't do anything'. Like I'm not that person who just, I don't want to make something bad for that person... (Participant 1)

Other participants commented on the topic that they believed that some international students are only taking classes to gain permanent residency in

Canada. Their experiences doing group work has created other issues as the participant's classroom expectations were not being met either:

Because I thought that like I was really excited to come and study here specifically in Canada, because I knew this was like a very, you know, multiverse [multicultural] country, but I'm a little bit disappointed at this point from my international student classmates because not all of them are pursuing this program because they like it...they...just came and chosed this program because...they thought it was gonna be easier to get their PR [permanent residency]. And then this create conflicts in Group assignments, because they didn't put that much effort, you know, and learning as I would...Like they they're more interested now in in just finishing their program, you know, and work full time and get their PR and that's it. (Participant 4)

Education systems are not a universal experience

Overall, the biggest challenge outside of language barriers in academic endeavours, was the huge difference in teaching styles and education systems. All but one of the participants mentioned that their expectations for how they would be taught in Canada was completely different from the reality of a western classroom.

Student focused learning

As stated previously, all had issues with certain concepts, like research and citations, being completely new to them. One participant spoke of feeling like expectations were very high and grading was inconsistent.

I can't say I don't like the teacher no teachers perfect, but their teaching method I don't like it. For example, some teachers, sometimes don't understand that we're students, not teachers, because some of their expectation is so high. Like, sometimes they demotivate us. Like, for example, I am a student who always study, I always like to get good grades. But when I see that I do all my best, I tried to and they don't give us a chance to fix something. It's disappointing because I see that the person who is not study is also, for example, get C and I am the person who is try do my best to get C [as well]. Because teacher expect very high like and I tried to explain that teacher, you know we are only students, we are, for example in my second semester. Some of our other student it's the first education, so I think that they [the instructors] should guide us if they see [us not understanding]. (Participant 1)

Other participants had very high expectations of the education they would receive here, but were unprepared for the difference in learning in a student-focused system. They were unaware of the many services available to students as in their home countries, students were expected to listen to the instructors, take notes and relay the theory back in assignments and exams.

We're not used to use E books. We had, I guess, I had access to the same co-host database that we get from here from the College. I had access. Yeah. When I was a student in the university [in El Salvador], I just don't use it. We never taught how to use it. I love that you, like in here [the database] there are courses that are zoom meetings where you can actually just go and [watch]. To learn how to do research, you can come to the library. You have all this research is available, but the college maybe, the college advertised that to you, right? We don't have that in El Salvador. (Participant 4)

Services available to students are not being utilized by many international students who need it simply because they don't realize the services are available and instructors will not penalize them for using the services; it is actually encouraged.

Student Services is not a common thing in all the international countries, it's only the instructors who can help you. But over here we had options of instructor and getting help from outside [class] as well. And the second thing is writing exam, early or late. This is not something. This is your...a back-home thing. You have to write your exam, if you're sick that's your problem, not the instructor's problem that's how it is. Over here, we, we, we are allowed if there is a major thing happening then we can, we can change things around. (Participant 5)

It is not only the lack of knowledge about what services are available to the students that are holding them back from a truly positive academic

experience, but differing classroom expectations in how they will be learning as well. This is made evident with the emerging theme of theoretical versus practical.

Theoretical versus Practical learning

According to the participants, transitioning from education systems where education was theory focused, and by the book to the practical 'real world' scenarios was a big change from the education systems they came from. All of the participants mentioned never experiencing practice-based pedagogy in the classroom before coming to Canada.

Participant 1 spoke of strictly "by the book" lectures from instructors as the school did not have the resources for all students to do any practical learning.

The education system in Vietnam, they, like I was taught by the book. So, like we would be reading books, we would be taking notes in every class and we rarely ever got a chance at, like, actually practicing things and like do hands on experience...there's nothing else. There's no interactive, there's no science experiment. Even when I remember, we took chemistry and we would have to go to like, the supply room, and rent out one set of equipment. So, then the teachers would demonstrate the experiment. But that's about it. Like we don't get to, actually, do anything. We never had that in Vietnam because we're stuck in one classroom and there's nothing in that classroom. It's just a board and teachers just, you know, lecturing you and that's it. (Participant 2)

Although it took a while to get used to, Participant 4 said they came to Canada for the practical experience, it was more engaging for her learning.

Its very hands on [here in Canada]. Like, we get a lot of case studies. That put us into real into reality, you know? From my past experience, I see a lot of, I had a lot of instructors that will literally just go into the classroom just to speak and speak and speak and speak in the text [from the textbook]. Reading from the PowerPoints to, you know? If somebody was not paying attention or somebody would, like our faces will literally be like 'we're not understanding what you're saying' [they don't notice]...Instructors in my program [here], that when they literally see our eyes like we're kind of lost, they stop, they're very kind and they say 'OK like you guys have any doubt like, where did I lose you guys? Like, how can I, you know, go back on track?' So, there's a little bit more of engagement from the instructors to towards these students here, than in my country. (Participant 4)

For Participant 5, it was a big transition from what they had experienced, but enjoyed the learning opportunities:

So, the school that I studied from back home it's more likely 80% final exam. And 20% is only the class participation or practical exam and all that. So, I was kind of expecting similar, but it was totally different. So, back home when we do our assignments, it is all about put it from the book, that's about it. But in Canada and Western school that I studied from, it was more about putting your own opinions, you are not just

reading it through, through your book, and just putting it from there.

(Participant 5)

It is interesting to note that although there were several discussions of what areas of support instructors could provide to international students, and possible strategies to implement, the overall sentiment from the students was positive. Many had positive stories of support from the International Student Services Center, Student Services and individual instructors, but only for non-academic issues. Several talked about going to instructors about work-related issues and receiving help with personal decisions to be made for their life in Canada. Others talked about the help they received from the International Student Center and from student advisors in choosing classes and financial issues. The feeling of support from instructors, and the engagement found in classrooms was, however, uncommon in the findings.

Discussion and Recommendations

It can be interpreted from data gathered from these interviews, that there is an adequate level of international student support and services provided by institutions currently. The areas requiring change and policy lie with instruction, pedagogy and training of instructors. In order to facilitate academic success for all international students choosing to learn in our institutions, it is recommended that training of faculty and staff be undertaken, as well as policies put in place to globalize education in general.

With all of the participants citing that there were certain services available to them that they had no knowledge of, my first suggestion is to provide a more in-depth orientation for students when they first arrive at the college. This coincides with the findings of Martirosyan, Bustamante and Saxons (2019) research, where they found that for most international students, there was a lack of awareness of what was available to them as instructors felt no need to mention anything as they believed they would either already know (biased international “norm”) or find out at orientation (p. 176). Current orientation for international students in my institution is generally one day, using the morning to find your classroom and be pointed in the direction of the library and bookstore and the afternoon is food and games. There is a student services fair during orientation, but it is only 2 hours, and the students have to stop and ask what it is about, it is not mandatory (College of New Caledonia, 2022). Having a set up in the main part of the campus for the first week of classes at least of all of the

student services available would offer more chances for students, both domestic and international, to discover more of what the institution provides for students. Offering written pamphlets several languages stating services available is another option that could be provided.

Training for faculty and staff needs to be focused on several areas that will help in creating a sustainable internationalization of curriculum to support academic success for all students. The first would be recognizing the possible issues language barriers that plague assignments and exams currently. Even having passed English exams to get into post-secondary institutions, students have difficulty with language in academic situations (Weerakkody & Jerez, 2018, p. 28). Clear and concise language should be implemented in order to ease understanding. International students must translate all of study materials, assignments and exams from English to their native tongue and back to English. Clear and easy to understand wording will aid in this. Colloquialisms and vocab should also be looked at to ensure messages are clear to all.

The second area of training should focus on expectations and personal biases found in current curriculum that can be refocused and internationalized to create dialogue and understanding between students and faculty in recognizing that there is no universal education experience currently. Research conducted by Stier (2004) shows that many instructors carry a bias towards western pedagogy, consciously or not (p. 89). Focus on educating international students on various aspects of western education such as conducting research and citing sources should be undertaken by faculty as more than a one hour simplified talk. Faculty

in western post-secondary institutions take for granted that students will understand the basic concept as they come into the classroom and that is not the case. If there is no space in curriculum for better training of international students in this area, a course should be provided prior to the start of classes. This should be a required course that lasts at least week in order to cover how to conduct research, what a credible resource is and why and how to cite them. It should also carry a weight of at least 1 credit.

Finally, faculty should receive training in microaggressions and how to avoid them when working with students. Kumari Beck (2012) has been a part of a lot of research on this and in her research into unintentional othering of international students, it was found that international students were being judged based on the lack of preferred behaviours of domestic students (p. 136). By providing education and support to instructors on this topic, post-secondary institutions can help create positive academic experiences for all students. Microaggressions are not as blatant as outright racism but are just as damaging and currently more prevalent in educating international students as many are not recognized for the vast and divergent educational and cultural backgrounds they do have. This could be as simple as the required online training in areas such as sexual harassment or trauma awareness currently available, or as complex as professional development seminars throughout the year.

Recommendations for institutional and policy changes should be looked at as creating a sustainable globalization of education for future students and programs by changing the focus of acclimatizing international students to

western education and society to that of openly recognizing the knowledge they bring with them. Providing more peer education and interactions between “international” and “domestic” students will provide the interconnectedness required in the student body for the academic success of all. If we are to train these students and then send them out into a truly internationalized world where they will work in global situations (Klodt, 2019), creating space for these interactions will allow for more inclusions in the classroom, ease of class group work and better work relations once students graduate.

Future Research

With the overall perspective of the participants being favourable towards the support provided from post-secondary institutions, future research should be focused on faculty and curriculum. As per the literature, we have the perspective of the international students and what they need for support in academic situations. Research into the progress, or lack thereof, of faculty and curriculum that has been created and used to support international students studying in Canada is the next step. Interviews with faculty that have taken steps to either indigenize or internationalize their classroom should be looked at to determine the success of creating a more inclusive and diverse educational experience for all students, but domestic and international.

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Appendix A.

Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this interview.

My name is Candice Dyck and I am conducting this interview as part of a research project exploring experiences and perspectives of International Students transitioning into Western Post-Secondary Education. I am an instructor at the College of New Caledonia (CNC), but I am doing this research as a MEd candidate, and this project is a requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership program at SFU. I will present the results of this research in the form of a written report to my faculty supervisor, as well as a public poster session at the 2022 Summer Institute at CNC. Do you have any questions now that we have gone over the interview consent form together?

Verbal Consent:

I will now get your verbal consent to continue this interview and to record the interview. Do you consent to being recorded during this interview? Do you consent to continuing with the interview? (No matter the answer, say thank you for your time). Let's continue to the interview questions.

Questions:

Interview questions participants will be asked in order to understand international students experiences in Western post-secondary education:

- 1) Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your education you experienced in your home country?
- 2) What did you expect lecture/assignment/study wise when you decided to come to Canada to learn and what was the reality?
- 3) What were your expectations of teachers at the college?

- 4) What would you have liked to know about what teachers will expect from you before you came to Canada?
- 5) What are the different teaching strategies you've seen that are different to your home country?
- 6) Have you had to do any assignments, like group work, that are different from the types of assignments you did before coming to Canada?
- 7) What has it been like learning with other international and domestic students?
- 8) What experiences in the classroom were you unprepared for? What could the college have done to help you with this?
- 9) What support would have helped you in learning?
- 10) What was the most challenging thing about learning in Canada?

Closing the interview:

Thank your time and for answering the questions I had for you. Is there anything else that you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?

In Person: Thank you again, here is your \$10 gift card for (preferred coffee shop).

Via Zoom: Thank you again. For your gift card, I can leave it for you in an envelope at the International Student Services front desk, meet you at the college and hand it to you, or mail it out. Which would you prefer?

Appendix B.

Letter of Invitation for Research Project

TITLE OF MEd PROJECT: International Students' Experiences: Transitioning into Western Post-Secondary Education

Researcher: Candice Dyck, MEd Candidate, Faculty of Education

Purpose.

The purpose of my proposed research project is to explore the educational experiences of international students and assessing if post-secondary institutions are providing enough support towards the transition to a Western education system.

You have been invited to participate in this study as your role as International Student at the College of New Caledonia. As interviewer, I am interested in learning about your educational experiences in transitioning to a College in Canada and how can colleges better support international students.

The questions I will be asking you are to learn about your experiences in classrooms so I can get a better understanding of international students. This will help us gain insights in how to better meet the learning needs of international students during their studies in Canada.

Study Procedures.

You are being invited to participate in this study which would involve a **one-on-one interview**, either face-to-face or online via Zoom. This interview would take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and it will be scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for you. You have the right not to answer any question and to withdraw from the project at any time.

Voluntary Participation.

You can decide to stop participating at any point in the process, for any reason. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone. There are no negative consequences for withdrawing your participation. You have the right not to answer any question in the interview and to withdraw from the project at any time.

Remuneration/Compensation.

For participating in this study, you will be given a small gift of appreciation in the form of either a \$10 Tim Hortons Gift Card or a \$10 Starbucks Gift Card. Please let me know your preference when setting up the interview time.

Contact for information about the study.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Candice Dyck. If you would like to talk to my faculty supervisor, you can reach Dr. Michelle Pidgeon, PhD.

Appendix C.

Themes





