

Getting to Know Your International Students (2nd Edition)

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

I believe that hearing personal stories and experiences is one of the best ways to understand the viewpoint of another person. Though much has been written about the experiences of International students in their transition to Western post-secondary environments, too often the perspectives represented are those of faculty and other professionals, rather than those of the students themselves.

The *Getting to Know Your International Students* project began with my interactions with international students as they began their transition to the KPU learning community. As an educator who has worked in both Canadian and Southeast Asian environments, I was aware of the differences between educational systems shaped by educational philosophies and values about the teaching and learning process. As I discussed these differences with students, I heard more about the challenges they faced, and the factors that helped them transition well.

In recognition of the fact that students from India and China represent the majority of KPU's international student community, this project highlights the experiences of students from these countries. The videos were developed in an unscripted interview setting, and were later organized by theme. Each of the students featured shared their intention that these videos would impact instructors and students alike, facilitating effective communication and transitions to the Canadian post-secondary education environment.

Many thanks to the student participants: Neet Dhindsa, Rishab Sapra, Tony Yuan, Lovepreet Kaur Deol, and Gurmanpreet Kaur for their efforts. Robin Leung served as the videographer for this project; without his assistance these videos would not be possible.

Welcome to the journey of *Getting to Know Your International Students*. Our hope is that these videos would stimulate your curiosity, answer your questions, and provide new pathways to building relationships with your students.

Christina Page (on behalf of the project team)

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CREATING THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Creating the Context: Understanding Student Experience

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CANADIAN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Canadian postsecondary institutions receive growing numbers of international students; 498,735 international students studied at colleges or universities in Canada at the end of 2019. Currently, India is the country of origin for 34% of international students studying in Canada and 22% of international students are from China. According to a survey by the Canadian Bureau for International Education, students choose to study in Canada because of our educational quality and our reputation as a tolerant society (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2020). As educators adapt to increasingly culturally diverse classrooms, many search for information that would support effective teaching and greater inclusion for all students.

Despite Canada's strong reputation, international students often face challenges in their transition to the Canadian education system. Some of these challenges arise from the process of transition from one educational culture to another. Other challenges arise when students face discrimination or environments where their cultural identities are not fully honoured. Killick (2018) lists three common myths that impact instructor perceptions of international students:

1. *They're all alike.* This myth assumes that all international students have the same prior experiences, challenges and learning needs.
2. *They can't do it.* This myth positions students within a deficit model where they are viewed as lacking key skills expected in an academic environment. Students may be perceived as lacking the ability for critical thinking, struggling with self-expression in English, or being limited in their ability to participate in class (Ryan & Carroll, 2005). Deficit thinking fails to acknowledge the strengths and prior knowledge that students bring to the academic environment. In addition, international students may experience a type of Othering where their learning challenges are attributed to their international-student status, rather than to the experience of being an academic novice that is common to all students (Laufer & Gorup, 2019).
3. *Failure is their fault.* This view positions students, rather than the learning environment, as the reason for their struggles. In reality, as Blasco (2015) highlights, many of the challenges students face in their academic transition arise from the differences between academic cultures. Misunderstandings arise for students when the implicit expectations of the students' new academic culture are not made explicit by faculty. Students respond with the "scripts" and expectations from their previous context, and may experience confusion when they no longer achieve the academic success that they previously experienced.

The three myths, and the harms that may arise from them, can be countered by creating environments that honour the wholeness of each person, seeking genuine relationship and reciprocity (Sterling, 2008). This includes viewing students as sources of knowledge about their own experiences. Unfortunately, student views are often

missing from conversations about internationalization and intercultural teaching (Ryan, 2011), and there is need for additional student voices to be heard.

Getting to Know Your International Students seeks to contribute to intercultural teaching practice in the following ways:

1. The project seeks to honour students as key sources of knowledge about their own learning experience.
2. The project seeks to counter deficit thinking by creating an opportunity for educators to learn about academic transition from students with a rich variety of educational and life experiences. The student contributors to this project include undergraduate students who have contributed richly to peer leadership, post-baccalaureate students who chose to further their credentials in Canada after completing a degree at a high-ranking institution, and experienced professionals who returned to education as a part of their immigration journey.
3. The project seeks to address the tensions caused by implicit academic expectations in the transition to a new academic environment. The students in the video share differences between academic expectations in their home contexts and in the Canadian context. Listening to these differences creates an opportunity to identify these implicit expectations more clearly, and to prepare to make them more explicit in intercultural teaching contexts.

VALUE DIMENSIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

A common response to intercultural classrooms is to seek to understand the characteristics and expectations of students that come from a particular country. While students from a similar geographic area may share a common set of experiences, focusing strictly on national origin as a source of cultural information and preferences can be problematic, leading to stereotyping. Instead, we recognize that all students bring a range of life experiences, and are influenced by a variety of “small cultures” that can include family, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, among other factors (Holliday, 1999). In other words, two students from the same country may have very different life experiences and personal characteristics that influence their transition to the Canadian classroom.

While seeking to avoid stereotypical labels based on national origin, it is nonetheless helpful to broaden our understanding of the range of values that can shape thinking and behaviour in an intercultural context. These values are often described dimensionally, as in the work of Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2011). While rejecting the idea of these dimensions as aspects of a fixed national culture, value dimensions may be useful in developing a broader understanding of values that may be different from our own. Value dimensions can include: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Grove, 2015a; Grove, 2015b). Misunderstandings in intercultural contexts may occur because unarticulated differences in values shape how behaviours are interpreted. Value frameworks can provide alternative explanatory possibilities for interpreting interactions in non-judgemental ways.

The chart below describes four value dimensions, and the ways in which they might be expressed in classroom contexts.

Cultural Dimension	Definitions	Possible Classroom Expressions
Direct/ Indirect Communication	Direct communicators focus on the speaker's role in delivering a clear message to the listeners. The key point of the message is communicated in the speaker's words. Messages may be shorter, and the primary focus of the communication may be stated first. Listeners are expected to take the speaker's words directly and literally. Indirect communicators focus on the recipient's role in interpreting the message. Some communication may be implied or non-verbal, with the expectation that the recipient will work to understand the intended meaning. For example, an indirect communicator may not answer "no" to a request, but may respond with a statement such as "I'll see what I can do".	Direct communicators might readily express that they are having difficulty with course work or material. Indirect communicators might be more hesitant to express that they are not able to complete an assigned task, with the assumption that their communication partner will understand other nonverbal communication signals.
Universalism/ Particularism	Universalism: Individuals and groups that tend toward universalism value the consistent application of rules, policies, and procedures in all situations, regardless of the relationships of those involved. Particularism: Those that tend toward particularism value flexible application of rules, dependent on circumstances and the relationships of those involved in the situation	Instructors who value universalism may emphasize that classroom policies must apply to all students equally, creating tension with students who expect that more flexibility is warranted.
Low Power Distance/ High Power Distance	Low power difference (egalitarian): In contexts with a low power difference, there is a high focus on the equality of all people, regardless of age, gender, or social status. Individuals may speak freely or challenge one another. High power difference (hierarchical): In high power distance contexts, individuals of different ages, professions, and social status are seen as unequal. Deference to those with higher power is valued.	Possible classroom behaviours of those who value low power distance include calling instructors by their first names, using informality and humour in class, and challenging the instructor. Possible classroom behaviour of those who value higher power difference may include referring to the instructor by title only, waiting for the instructor to take initiative if problems occur, or avoiding sharing one's own opinions in class.
Individualism/ Collectivism	Those who tend toward individualism value the independence and self-directedness of the person. Those who tend toward collectivism value the social group as a source of identity and belonging. People who value collectivism may make choices based on the preferences of the group.	Students who value individualism may be motivated to share personal opinions, to stand out, or to be a leader among their peers. Student who value collectivism may be hesitant to participate in ways that cause them to stand out among their peers, or may feel obligated to help struggling peers.

In the next part of the resource, you will have the opportunity to watch ten short videos where international students share their lived experience of their transition to the Canadian classroom. As you listen to the students, consider how your students' lived experiences, the implicit expectations that may arise from these experiences, and your students' values may impact their classroom experience.

For Reflection

- Where have you encountered "deficit" discourses about international students? How have these influenced your relationships with your students?
- How can you use knowledge about value dimensions in ways that increase understanding, while avoiding stereotyping students in ways that cause harm?
- How can learning about students' experiences help you to identify your own implicit expectations about academic culture?

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STUDENT VIDEOS

Meet the Students

Who are the international students who choose to pursue an education in Canada? This video introduces you to the five students who share throughout the series of videos. Many of the students come from India, reflecting the fact that India is the home country of the largest number of international students in Canada (CBIE, 2020). The students have varied experiences and reasons for coming to KPU: some are pursuing a first degree, while others have previous work experience. These introductions provide the context for the students' reflections in the videos that follow.

Technical note: If the video sound does not play immediately, click the volume button (near the bottom left of the video) to turn on the sound.



An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=5>

For reflection

- What surprised you about the backgrounds of these students?
- How are these students similar to the students in your courses?

Understanding Differences in Assignment Expectations

While students around the world develop similar core knowledge in their secondary school education, this knowledge is often assessed in very different ways. In the Canadian educational system, research and sharing information in writing or with media are often emphasized relatively early in the educational process. In some other contexts, students are more likely to work towards tests and exams. Often, these are high-stakes tests and exams at the end of an academic year or a longer period of education. These differences shape student expectations of what will be required in post-secondary education. In this video, you will hear students discuss their experiences with assignments in their home countries.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=26>

For reflection

- In this video, Tony mentioned how his instructor shared expectations for out-of-class work. How would you explain your expectations in this area to your students?
- Consider an assignment from one of your courses. What academic expectations would you choose to make more explicit in order to support your students' learning?

Classroom Experiences

Classrooms contain their own “small cultures”, with rules of how individuals should relate to one another, communicate, and work together. Often, the rules of classroom culture remain unspoken, and students rely on scripts from their previous experience to make sense of what is expected. When differences in these scripts exist and remain unspoken, misunderstandings can occur. In the next video, students share about typical classrooms in their home countries, highlighting the way that these classrooms might be different from the Canadian classroom.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=29>

For reflection

- What difference between the students' previous classrooms and the Canadian classroom seems most significant to you?
- What might you explain about the way your classroom works on the first day of class to support these students in their transition to your course?

Expectations about University

When students transition to university, teachers or parents might prepare them for the reality that coursework will be more demanding than in secondary school. In some international education systems, however, students complete high-stakes exams to finish their grade 12 year, sometimes putting years of intense effort into preparing for high school graduation. How might these students expect to find the university environment?

In this video, Tony explains expectations about university that he has observed in students from his home country of China.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=31>

For reflection

- Consider a situation where you had difficulty understanding a students' response to your class expectations. How might this have been influenced by their expectations about university more generally?

Transitions and Surprises

The initial days and weeks in a new educational system can be very demanding for international students. Not only are they adjusting to a new country, they are also learning a number of new skills that are required to succeed in the Canadian university environment. Sometimes, things that instructors take for granted are quite new and challenging for students.

In the video below, students share what was most surprising to them in their first weeks at university.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=33>

For reflection

- Which of the students' challenges in transition was most unexpected to you?
- What strategies would you use to help students learn these key skills in their first weeks at university?

Differences in Assignments and Plagiarism

Academic integrity and plagiarism are two of the most challenging topics for international students and instructors alike. Instructors rightly expect that students learn and use the conventions of citation, and most students commit to trying their best to master the system. However, for many international students, including those who have completed previous degrees, the citation practices expected of them in the Canadian environment are completely new. Though most students intend to work with integrity, learning the academic literacies involved may be challenging.

In the video below, students share their experiences with academic integrity and plagiarism.



An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=35>

For reflection

- How would you introduce the research process to a student with no previous experience conducting academic research?
- How do you determine the difference between intentional cheating and unintentional plagiarism caused by inexperience? What do you feel is the best response to students who make errors in citation?

Relationships with Instructors

Many of the most effective learning experiences occur in the context of a strong and supportive relationship between instructors and students. In the video below, students share strategies their instructors used to develop strong relationships that fostered a safe learning environment.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=37>

For reflection

- What instructor practice from the video seemed most effective to you? How is it similar to the ways you already connect with students? What might you add to more effectively connect with international students?
- What are the benefits of holding mandatory office hours in the early weeks of class?

Language in the Classroom

What is it like to study at the university level in a language other than your home language? In this video, students share the challenges they experienced when they first studied in a Canadian English environment. As you will hear, while some students have many years of experience in English, differences varieties of English may create difficulties understanding in the initial weeks and months of study. Students may also feel intimidated by speaking in the classroom.



An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=39>

For reflection

- How have you modified your communication style to help students understand concepts more easily?
- What strategies might decrease student anxiety about class participation?

Life in Canada

Besides the challenges of study in a new educational system, many international students also face the challenge of working in Canada to support their studies. For many students, their move to Canada marks their first experience living independently. In this video, Gurmanpreet talks about the challenges of adjusting to adult life in Canada.



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<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=41>

For reflection

- How might students' adjustments to all aspects of life in Canada affect their classroom performance?
- What time management strategies might you recommend to students who are balancing work and study?

Bridging Communication Gaps About Assignments

As you have watched the previous videos, you will have gained a new sense of the implicit expectations of the Canadian university system that create challenges when they are not made explicit for students. Before hearing these students' experiences, you may have assumed that students were familiar with some of these expectations and practices. However, as you have now seen, many talented and promising students face significant adjustments when they first start their educational journey in Canada. Making the expectations of your course as explicit as possible to students is one way to help international students succeed.

In the video below, you will hear Neet describe one experience where the requirements of an assignment needed to be explained clearly to students in a more explicit and culturally relevant way.



An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/internationalstudents/?p=43>

For reflection

- Have you experienced a similar situation to the one Neet describes in your own course? What would you try the next time you encounter a similar situation?
- How can learning from international students like Neet inform your efforts to connect with students in culturally relevant ways?

Perhaps hearing the student stories in this resource has motivated you to learn more about teaching internationally-educated students. This page provides resources for furthering your own professional development in this area, and resources to share with students who are transitioning to the Canadian university environment.

Professional Development for Faculty and Instructional Staff

- [Western Guide for Mentoring Graduate Students](#): While this resource is focused on graduate students, it contains helpful information for instructors working across cultures at all levels of post-secondary education.
- [Finding Common Ground: Enhancing Interaction Between Domestic and International Students](#): This guide provides strategies for creating a classroom environment and group learning activities that enhance students' learning from one another.
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- [Tips for Planning Culturally Inclusive Online Courses: An Overview](#): This infographic provides an overview of six key strategies for enhancing the inclusivity of online learning environments.

Resources to Share with Students

- [University 101: Study, Strategize, Succeed](#): Essential resources to help students transition to their first semesters in the Canadian university system.
- [Learning to Learn Online](#): Introduces students to key learning strategies for online contexts.

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