

Experiences of International Students at a Canadian University: Barriers and Supports

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ABSTRACT

Universities in Canada are increasingly attracting international students, but few studies have examined their academic and social experiences. This research identified the key supports and barriers for international students in order to make policy-relevant recommendations. This convergent mixed-methods study combined survey (n = 104) and interview (n = 14) data to investigate international student experiences through the lens of international students. Exploratory factor analyses revealed writing and mathematics skills and relationships with faculty and students as key factors for success. Frequency analyses revealed that racism was a persistent barrier. Assistance, access, diversity and equity issues were also raised. Open and axial coding of qualitative data corroborated these findings and revealed three dimensions of internationalization according to international students' perspectives: Exchange; Understanding, Sharing, and Support; and Transformation. Recommendations to universities included offering bursaries to international students from underrepresented regions, developing intercultural awareness of faculty, and providing program-specific student support centres with peer mentors.

Keywords: Canada, international students, internationalization, student success

Universities are increasingly pursuing and attracting international students, who bring substantial benefits to host institutions and communities. International students can contribute significantly to universities and may also enhance student diversity. In response to calls for a national strategy to compete for international students with Australia and other nations, Canada (2019) announced an International Education Strategy in 2014 aimed at doubling the number of international students by 2022. This goal was surpassed in 2017 with 494,525 international students studying at all levels and 370,710 in post-secondary education (Canadian Bureau of International Education [CBIE], 2018). Canada has surpassed Australia in numbers and is one of the top destinations for international students compared to the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, a newcomer to this international competition. International students in Canadian post-secondary institutions accounted for 10% of Bachelor, 18% of Master, 32% of Doctoral students, and 12% of all students in 2018 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018).

India and China are Canada's largest sources of international students (CBIE, 2019). The number of international students from India has recently surpassed those from China as the largest number of students. The increase in students from India was interpreted as the *Trump effect* (Korostelina, 2017), as many international students chose not to study in the United States due to imposed barriers (Strauss, 2020). The number of Saudi Arabian students dramatically declined over the past five years in Canada, with a complete withdrawal of students in 2018. Diplomatic relationships between Canada and Saudi Arabia had collapsed and the Saudi Arabian students were recalled home. International students are vulnerable to geopolitical changes.

Universities in Canada have received decreased government funding for many years and were held to increased expectations to take a more entrepreneurial approach (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2007). Generally, international students pay three times more tuition than domestic students and tuition fees from international students make up increasingly larger portions of university budgets (OECD, 2018). Attracting more international students importantly resulted in economic benefits but the rationale for internationalization was also framed by enhanced globalization, skilled labour, and knowledge mobility (AUCC, 2007). Now, more than 82% of Canadian universities list internationalization in their top five priorities (UNIVCAN, 2014). International students contribute more than \$20 billion to Canada's GDP (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Government of Canada, 2019).

Canadian and international researchers identified significant challenges associated with the expansion and the marketization of higher education programs (Abdi & Shultz, 2008; Andreotti, 2013; Hébert & Abdi, 2013; Knight, 2000, 2006, 2008, 2011; Lennon, 2007; Ninnis & Hellsten, 2005; Stein et al., 2016). There are calls to reframe international student research to acknowledge the economic rationales "yet balance them with the social and academic outcomes necessary for all students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective participation as professionals and citizens in increasingly multicultural and global contexts" (Garson, 2016, p. 19).

The university that participated in this study, Thompson Rivers University (TRU) is a comprehensive, learner-centered institution that serves its regional, national, and international learners and their communities. We serve more than 25,000 students. In keeping with national trends, TRU experienced rapid growth in international student numbers. Enrollments of international students more than doubled from 2,635 (2014–2015) to 5,795 (2018–2019) (TRU Factbook, 2019). According to internal reports, 27% of the university's operating costs are funded by international tuitions (Institutional Planning and Analysis, 2018). Our university has dramatically expanded graduate programs in response to the increased demand from international students. Figure 1 illustrates the home country of international students attending universities in Canada (CBIE, 2019). TRU's international student population demographics are similar.

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) is defined as, "the international process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research... to make a meaningful contribution to society" (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29; cf. Knight, 2004). IHE is often measured by student mobility, but rarely are the experiences and perspectives considered of the international students, at the center of internationalization. Thus, the research questions are:

- 1) What is *internationalization* according to international students?
- 2) What are the barriers and supports experienced by international students?
- 3) What are the educational experiences of international students?

Figure 1

Home Country of International Students in Canada in 2019



Literature Review

Global Context

International university student issues have been articulated by many scholars (Beck & Ilieva, 2019; Buckner et al., 2020; de Wit, 2008; Kang & Metcalfe, 2019; Khoo et al., 2016; Kim, 2005; Knight & de Wit, 2018; Lane, 2015; Larsen, 2016; Robinson et al. 2020; Sabzalieva, 2020; Tarc, 2011; Trilokekar & Masri (2020); Xiong & Yang, 2021; Yildirim, 2014) and this is an expanding area of research. Yildirim's (2014) meta-analysis on international students, and other researchers (e.g., Kang & Metcalfe, 2019) found that the key barriers for students were related to their English language ability, cultural differences, discrimination, homesickness, and differences in academic culture. Consistent support for international students included relationships with faculty and other students (Kang & Metcalfe, 2019; Xiong & Yang, 2021), as well as mental health and sense of well-being. Experiences of international students potentially vary by the host country, thus research from universities in Canada is summarized next.

Studies of International Students in Canada

There is a paucity of research giving voices to international students in the Canadian context with a few noteworthy exceptions (Kang, 2020; McGregor et al., 2022; Reichert, 2020; Tavares, 2021). In the most comprehensive study to date, and to address the gap in the literature, Calder et al. (2016) surveyed (n = 75) and interviewed eight international students. They found that international students faced unique challenges compared to domestic students. The key barriers pertained to housing, employment, financial issues and the need for more assistance from the university. Supports identified included: social, faculty, students, and institutional. Calder et al. (2016) reported that no published studies or reports existed pertaining to the challenges faced by international students in Canada, but there has been some progress since then. Three recent international student research projects in Canada relevant to the study are reviewed in turn. Robinson et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between friendships among students and well-being but not between friendships and education satisfaction. They recommended research be carried out on how international students develop relationships and how social interactions can be incorporated.

Anderson (2020) investigated the experiences of international refugees studying in Canada. The results indicated that language barriers permeate international students' challenges. Moreover, broader structural and sociocultural issues were found to impact equity, access, participation and success rates. Implications for policy and practice included recruitment, enrollment and funding. Heringer's (2020) study of educators' perspectives at a mid-sized western Canadian university also raised these issues pertaining to the challenges of IHE while pointing out the paucity of research. In Guo and Guo's (2017) study, conducted at a large university in Western Canada, 26 undergraduate students from 9 countries were interviewed. The results showed that a neoliberal approach, treating internationalization as a marketing strategy, posed a number of problems including gaps between internationalization policy and the experiences of international students. Furthermore, students rarely encountered curricula that reflected their experiences. Ironically, this study did not include any students from India. Yet, India is one of the largest sources of international students (CBIE, 2019).

In summary, while a modest amount of research with international students in Canada has examined the demographics and experiences, and some studies identified barriers and supports related to student success, a paucity of research focuses on practices that could potentially enhance the university experience for international students. Clearly, it is in the best interests of international students and universities in Canada to identify the key elements of the student experience that serve as supports or barriers, and then attempt to enhance the student experience. International students are in an excellent position to make recommendations for enhancements to the university. Their recommendations could potentially serve as starting points for universities as programs for international students continue to expand in the future.

Having described the context of this study, next we briefly describe the conceptual framework and methodology. In the findings section, we start with international students' conceptions of internationalization, then we describe barriers and supports, before highlighting international student voices through rich descriptions of lived experiences. Finally, we discuss the findings and provide a summary, noting limitations, insights, recommendations, and implications for further research.

Conceptual Framework

In comparative and international education, internationalization of higher education has been well researched and clearly articulated (Knight & de Wit, 2018) but rarely are international students themselves included in the development of theories to explain the phenomenon. This research puts lived experience before theory. In this study, the voices of international students are the focus. Our narrative conceptual framework draws on Hayhoe (2000) and insider-outsider research (Etherington, 2006). Over the past two decades, Howe (2010) has developed comparative ethnographic narrative (CEN), as a means to better understand lived experiences. CEN is a blend of reflexive ethnography and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). CEN is both a conceptual framework and a method (Howe, 2022).

Methods

This research employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 551–553) including an online survey and interviews with international students. The study was conducted in 2016 upon receiving ethics approval from Thompson Rivers University's ethics review board. Unique pseudonyms chosen by participants are used throughout to protect student identities.

Participants

A diverse sample of one hundred and four international university students from Asia, the Middle East, Africa and other regions, were recruited via email through snowballing sampling techniques. The sample consisted of 62 females and 42 males with an average age of 23.03 (SD=3.80).

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Participants completed an online survey, drawing from previous survey design (Walton et. al., 2020). The survey contained three components. The first component asked demographic information including country of origin, program of study and year, age, and gender. The second included 15 items

related to barriers and supports to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. The third component asked 15 open-ended questions related to their experiences as international students at a Canadian university and their conceptualization of IHE. Survey items were analyzed through descriptive analyses, ANOVAS, and exploratory factor analyses. Data from open-ended questions was integrated with data from interviews and analyzed qualitatively.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

A separate, diverse group of 14 students were recruited through snowballing techniques and interviewed by two international student research assistants. In alignment with *comparative ethnographic narrative* (Howe, 2005a; 2005b; 2010; 2022), a blend of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and reflexive ethnography (Etherington, 2006), unstructured open-ended interviews were followed by reflective debriefings by the two research assistants. Transcripts from interviews and debriefings were coded using open and axial coding techniques (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and crosschecked by Ramirez. Through iterative coding and constant comparison (Glaser, 1992), codes were collapsed and synthesized into major themes across the entire set of qualitative data.

Results

Internationalization Through the Lens of International Students

To address the first research question, participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of internationalization as part of the open-ended survey questions and interviews. Responses were analyzed and three dimensions were identified in the conceptualization of IHE by the participants: 1) Exchange; 2) Understanding, Sharing and Supporting; and 3) Transformation. Each of them with supporting quotes are presented in Table 1.

Survey Results: Barriers and Supports

To answer the second research question, pertaining to barriers and supports, here we analyze the quantitative data before investigating barriers, supports, and the lived experiences of international students embedded in the qualitative data.

Gender

It was possible that the supports and barriers differed by gender or by country. Ideally, gender and country differences could be examined in one multi-factorial ANOVA. However, there were only five countries with sufficient numbers of students for the analysis of country leaving a sample of 77. Separate analyses were conducted for gender and country so that the sample size for gender was not reduced from 104 to 77.

Gender differences were examined with separate independent *t*-tests on each of the 15 survey items. There were no differences across gender for any of the supports or barriers (all *ps* > .05).

Country

The participants in the study originated from 27 different countries. There were enough students ($n \geq 7$) from five countries (China, Russia, India, Nigeria, Ukraine) to conduct an ANOVA analysis to examine differences in supports and barriers in the sample. In total, the analysis included 77 students. See Table 2 for the results. There were significant differences on only one of the 15 items (*Q9. More access to campus advisors would help me complete my program*). Post hoc analysis with Fisher's least significant difference test found that students from China ($M = 4.17$) and India ($M = 4.23$) responded more positively to this item than students from Russia ($M = 3.33$) and the Ukraine ($M = 3.43$).

Barriers

As shown in Figure 2, barriers to the success of international students included the following: financial support; writing skills; mathematics skills and racism. Interestingly, about 2/3 of participants indicated they had sufficient financial support while 1/3 were either undecided or disagreed. Also,

Table 1*What is Internationalization According to International Students?*

Exchange of Ideas, Language and Goods	Understanding, Sharing, Supporting	Transformation
People coming in from all different communities and studying living and working together (Participant 2)	People from different countries live, work, cooperate, care each other together (Participant 40)	It is the process of leaving one's country and try to adapt to a new place's culture. It can be associated to wanting to discover the world or simply exiting one's current identity to enter a new one. (Participant 22)
It's the process of planning and implementing products and services so that they can easily be adapted to specific local languages and cultures, a process called localization. (Participant 13)	Having the viewpoint of a range of nationalities taken into consideration when deciding any outcome (Participant 45)	Adaptation to other cultures (Participant 29)
When something is linked or being converted to the platform linked at international level (Participant 14)	To work together with different nationalities (Participant 52)	Adaptation to many different cultures or ways (Participant 63)
Bringing people of different country together under one roof and sharing a common learning (Participant 23)	Increase of intercultural communication (Participant 54)	Accepting and integrating others' beliefs, opinions, norms (Participant 87)
It's hard to tell. People from all over the world can play together and work together in this case? (Participant 42)	Making service available to the international community (Participant 64)	A process that enables one to take on the ideas and attitudes of others (Participant 89)
When people in a society come from different parts of the world (Participant 53)	Tolerance to all people from all over the world from different cultures and religions (Participant 93)	
Lots of people from different countries with different culture (Participant 58)	Openness to other cultures (Participant 97)	
To get different people in different cultures to get in touch with other cultures (Participant 88)		
Going to another country and try to mix-up ourselves with the people of that country (Participant 70)		
In academic situation it's a way of disseminating information and knowledge so that it can easily be adapted to specific local languages and cultures. (Participant 95)		

Table 2
Differences of Supports and Barriers Across Countries

Survey item	Country					MSE	F(4,76)	p	Part. Eta ²
	China (n = 23)	Russia (n = 9)	India (n = 27)	Nigeria (n = 11)	Ukraine (n = 7)				
1. Financial support	3.13 (1.06)	4.11 (0.60)	3.63 (1.01)	3.64 (1.03)	3.52 (1.03)	1.80	1.74	.150	.070
2. Transportation easy	3.52 (0.95)	3.56 (0.88)	3.89 (0.70)	3.82 (0.87)	3.14 (1.46)	1.06	0.82	.298	.040
3. Housing available	3.39 (0.78)	3.67 (0.71)	3.26 (1.13)	3.91 (0.70)	3.29 (1.70)	1.05	0.95	.422	.046
4. Childcare available	3.00 (0.52)	3.00 (0.00)	3.04 (0.85)	3.00 (0.78)	2.71 (0.76)	0.59	0.25	.869	.013
5. University academic support	4.04 (0.56)	4.11 (0.60)	3.93 (0.92)	3.73 (1.10)	3.43 (1.40)	0.98	1.18	.470	.047
6. University non-academic help	3.17 (0.83)	3.44 (0.88)	3.11 (1.01)	3.64 (1.21)	2.43 (1.62)	1.09	1.60	.182	.082
7. Cultural activities at university	3.78 (1.00)	3.11 (1.17)	4.15 (0.83)	3.73 (0.91)	3.57 (0.98)	0.90	2.20	.077	.110
8. Support for my religion	3.70 (0.93)	3.11 (0.60)	3.62 (0.90)	3.91 (0.94)	3.00 (1.29)	0.86	1.71	.158	.088
9. Access to advisors on campus	4.17 (0.72)	3.33 (0.87)	4.23 (0.86)	4.09 (1.04)	3.43 (1.34)	0.83	2.56	.046	.126
10. Have the writing skills	4.04 (0.93)	4.44 (0.53)	4.22 (0.64)	4.27 (0.79)	3.86 (0.90)	0.60	0.81	.525	.043
11. Have the mathematics skills	3.96 (0.83)	4.22 (0.67)	4.44 (0.64)	3.91 (0.83)	3.57 (1.27)	0.64	0.06	.057	.118
12. Good relationships with faculty	3.91 (0.67)	4.11 (0.60)	4.30 (0.61)	4.00 (1.18)	4.14 (0.38)	0.52	0.95	.439	.050
13. Good relationships with students	3.91 (1.02)	4.22 (0.67)	4.33 (0.56)	4.09 (0.54)	4.29 (0.49)	0.53	1.13	.351	.060
14. Diverse faculty at the university	4.39 (0.72)	3.67 (0.87)	4.33 (0.88)	4.18 (0.60)	3.71 (0.76)	0.62	2.24	.073	.111
15. Encountered racism at university	3.09 (1.00)	3.22 (1.48)	2.33 (1.49)	3.45 (1.44)	2.86 (1.40)	1.88	1.83	.132	.092

noteworthy is that *Q15. I encountered racism at the university*, had a wide range of responses with participants choosing Strongly Disagree (25%), Disagree (16.3%), Undecided (23.1%), Agree (21.1%), and Strongly Agree (14.4%). This was the only question that had such a pattern of responses spread evenly across the 5-point Likert scale. We can better understand and interpret these results through the open-ended responses to survey questions, cross-referenced with interview data.

Supports

Academic support, advisors, and having good relationships with faculty and other students were strongly endorsed by participants as contributing to their success. More than $\frac{3}{4}$ of all participants chose Strongly Agree or Agree for each of these (See Figure 3). More access to advisors was identified by a majority of participants (70%) as something needed.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

There were 15 survey items in the second component of the survey, each one assessing a separate barrier or support for international students. A goal of the research was to identify the most influential barriers and supports, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to reduce the number of factors from 15 (one for each survey item) to a smaller number of key latent factors. EFA determines if there are significant groups of items that are highly related to each other (i.e., clusters), orders the factors by how much variance is explained, and identifies the survey items related to the latent factors. The sample included 104 students, 100 with complete data, a requirement for factor analysis.

Polychoric correlation is advised in EFA over Pearson correlation when the data was collected with a Likert scale of five items or less (Baglin, 2014; Lorenzo-Seva et al., 2011). Polychoric correlations were used in the EFA as the survey used a 5-point Likert scale. There is also controversy in the EFA literature on determining the number of significant latent factors. Recent summaries on this topic found that Eigenvalues (i.e., > 1) are most commonly used in the literature, but tend to overestimate the number of significant factors, and parallel analysis is preferred over scree plots due to the subjectivity in reviewing scree plots (Garrido et al., 2013). The parallel analysis supported the interpretation of two factors, as did the scree plot. Eigenvalues (> 1.00) supported the interpretation of five factors. Following Suhr (2006) and Pett et al. (2003), the findings of two EFA factors are reported. The rotated factor matrix is presented in Table 3.

Factor loadings represent the relationship between each survey item and the latent variable, and factor loadings $\geq .50$ were considered significant. Table 3 reports the factor loadings for each survey item on the two significant factors, with a total explained variance of 44.8%, which is large.

Factor 1 is associated with having the writing and mathematics skills to complete their program, and relationships with faculty and students. A possible explanation is that students with strong mathematics and writing skills also developed positive relationships with faculty and other students. The second latent factor is related to support for culture, religion, and more access to campus advisors.

International students lived experiences

The lived experiences of the international students interviewed and surveyed in this study are synthesized and presented through two dimensions, barriers and supports. Included here are some of the survey responses to open-ended questions and interviews. To capture their voices as accurately as possible, quotes have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or punctuation.

Barriers

The main barriers reported include financial stress and finding a job, language issues and academic support, adjustment issues (social isolation, cultural shock) and racism. These issues were recurrently reported by participants through interviews and open-ended survey questions.

Table 3
Rotated Factor Matrix of Supports and Barriers

Survey Item	Factor Loading (Variance Explained)	
	Factor 1 (28.8%)	Factor 2 (16.0%)
1. I had the financial support I needed to succeed.	0.07	-0.19
2. Transportation to/from campus was easy to access and efficient.	0.37	0.05
3. Housing was readily available.	0.00	-0.07
4. Child care services were available to support me.	0.00	0.13
5. The university gave me the academic support to complete my program.	0.27	0.19
6. The university helped me to cope with non-academic issues (e.g., family).	0.15	0.12
7. More cultural activities would help me at university.	-0.04	0.85
8. More on-campus or community support for my religion would help.	0.03	0.80
9. More access to advisors on campus would help me to complete my program.	0.32	0.75
10. I have the writing skills to complete my program.	0.63	0.05
11. I have the mathematics skills to complete my program.	0.65	0.07
12. I have or had good relationships with the faculty at the university.	0.56	0.19
13. I have good relationships with other students at the university.	0.55	0.20
14. It is important to have diverse faculty at the university.	0.06	0.44
15. I encountered racism at the university.	0.09	0.19

Figure 2
Barriers for International Students

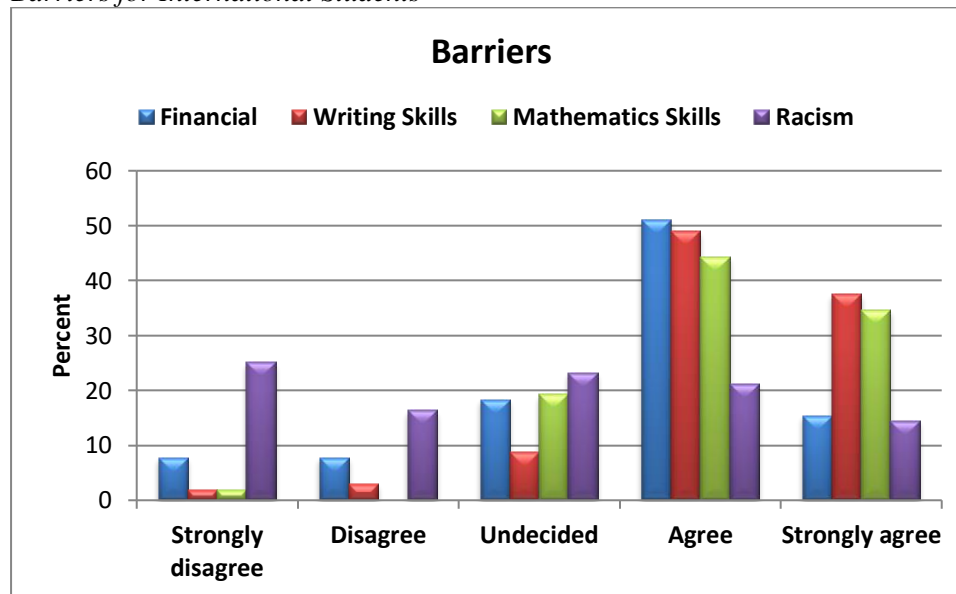
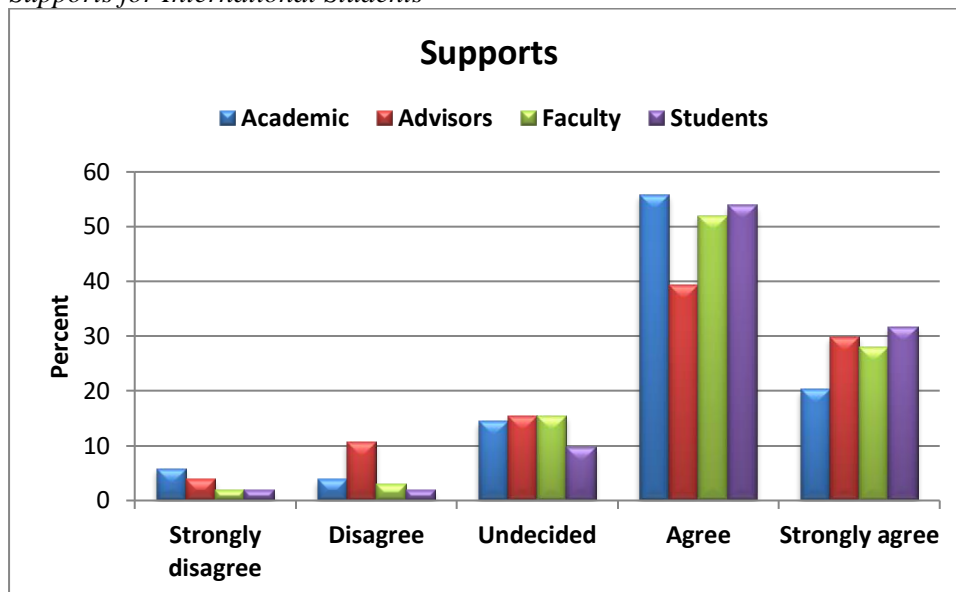


Figure 3
Supports for International Students



Financial Stress and Finding a Job. When asked about non-academic issues interfering with or facilitating the successful completion of their program, many identified financial stress as a major barrier. “Financial is a very big issue, so the fee need to be minimized for international students” (Participant 8). “Limited budget which creates stress” (Participant 22). “Financial issues are the biggest of the issues” (Participant 29). The high tuition rates, financial stress and frustration forced some students to drop out: “One of my friends told me she left school because she doesn't have enough money to pay those fees” (Participant 42). “I may choose to leave school even though My GPA is 4.0” (Participant 57). Several participants questioned the lack of scholarships for international students and some felt demoralized by it:

We should set up scholarship for international students...I decided to work as part time job instead of studying during my spare time. My GPA is 4.0. But I have no enthusiasm to study under a high tuition fees without any scholarship reward. (Participant 57)

“There should be a revision in the fees structure for the international students to make education affordable. More awards/scholarships/bursaries should be made available for the international students based on merit” (Participant 83). Difficulties finding a job exacerbated financial stress as it seems that many participants expected to find a job to support themselves. Financial stress appeared in the narratives of most participants and was connected to difficulty finding a job, lack of scholarships for international students, and changes in the global economy.

Language issues and academic support. Language barriers were recurrently reported throughout the interviews and surveys and seemed to have interfered with academic performance. As Konstantin states in the interview, “the hardest part of my studies is the English course, because it is so hard to write those essays.” Language challenges also limited social integration, as suggested by Ice Cream when talking about her biggest challenge, “My biggest challenge is conversation with Canadians.” Chocolate also expressed that it was very hard to understand Canadian classmates because they “talked too quickly.”

Overall, the major language issue was with academic writing. Students expressed the need for more support. For example, Participant 83 stated, “we need academic and language support, for adapting to a whole new education system.” Similarly, Participant 29 affirmed, “Writing center and library services are helpful, but not when it comes to graduation school paper. Writing workshops on academic paper formats would be useful as different courses have different requirements.”

Adjustment Issues and Racism. Some participants reported challenges with public transportation and accommodation issues, including difficulty finding an affordable place, limited and expensive student residences on campus, limited cooking space, and small and noisy dormitories at one of the residences on campus and some of the ones off campus.

Racism and discrimination are additional barriers experienced by many participants. This was a recurrent answer to the question: *What specific challenges do you face as an international student?* The following are some of the most representative answers: “Racism, discrimination, double standards, hard time to find friends” (Participant 22). “Racism and group-ism. People have made a mind set about a certain people of specific country and they prefer judging everyone on that ground “(Participant 23). These answers suggest that this was also connected to challenges with social integration and feelings of exclusion, “Instead of treating students as ‘international students’ we should be getting almost same treatment as Canadians. Because we are constantly being referred to as an international student, it definitely makes us feel excluded” (Participant 42).

Supports

Participants identified a variety of supports that facilitate their experience as international students. These included positive relationships with faculty and peers; the role of International Student Advisors (ISAs); activities, orientations, academic support centers, volunteer and cooperative education opportunities organized for international students; as well as effective pedagogical strategies such as group work, discussions and experiential learning. Also, participants mentioned the friendly nature of faculty and staff, small size, and the quiet and safety of the city, which gives authenticity to their Canadian experience.

Faculty and Advisors. The approachability and willingness to help of university faculty and staff was noted by several participants, who felt that the informal culture of the institution facilitates building effective relationships between faculty and students. One student, N mentioned the support he received from his academic advisor, professors, and Dean when he experienced challenges fitting in the schedule for the five final courses needed to complete his degree.

Dancer commended her ISA for help during her first days at university: “The first thing I did was look for my ISA. She was the only person I knew. My advisor calmed me down [...] The next day we dealt with SIM-cards, bank accounts and all that.”

Along with the role of ISAs and academic advisors, professors and instructors were recognized as people playing key roles in international students’ success. The majority were satisfied with their relationships with professors, as stated by Participant 9 and 13 respectively, “Teachers are one of the best pluses here. People work for idea, not for money,” “I think the teaching here has been better then I could ever hope for.” Similarly, Chocolate stated: “Teachers in my program are all very friendly and like us to ask them questions, and they all have office hours an allow us to ask questions.”

In some cases, instructors provided language support. For example, Maggie stated, “I received a lot of support from my instructors. In one of my graduate courses the teacher show me which sentences were strong and which were not, so I learned”. However, a few, like Participant 91, noted, “I believe that relationship with professor could be enhanced with more ways to keep in touch with your professor.” Along the same line, Participant 52 would like to “Maybe have a after class session where faculty can talk to students about any particular problems they are facing with the course.” These statements highlight how important regular communication with professors is for international students. Participants would also like more workshops, socials, and events with faculty and “one to one meetings at least once a month” (Participant 89) to build stronger relationships.

Students. In addition to the support offered by faculty and staff, peer support was critical for international students’ success. An ideal social network includes international and Canadian friends. Participant 87 stated, “Making Canadian friends other than sticking with a ‘herd’ from your home country helped me a lot. I’ve also tried to be as engaged as possible on campus.” Friends significantly influenced their program choices. Moreover, making friends was reported recurrently as the most successful and

satisfying experience during their first year of study as international students. Friends provide important emotional and academic support, such as a friend who became a mentor to Maggie, “I had a conversation with this student here who is my friend, she is about to finish her thesis. She helped me to find my way.”

Activities. The orientations and special activities provided for international students were considered very useful by most. During orientations they met their ISA, learned about safety in the city, how to open a bank account, how to register for courses, what to do in the case of fire, how to deal with health issues, and most importantly, they made good friends who eventually played a key role in their successful adaptation.

Several participants emphasized the importance of volunteer and cooperative education (coop) experiences for their career development, language skills, and social networks. A states, “Volunteering in the Writing Centre made me feel valued.” T summarizes the importance of his coop experience, “I really enjoyed my coop, [...] during those 4 months experience I learned what I am really interested in and also for future what I am looking for.” A comment by Participant 100 captures the sentiment of most students about the support systems offered:

The university provides plenty of support for students (not just academic), though I haven't exploited most of them. When I did need help, it was provided by colleagues and teachers (both in-class and off-class hours), but other services were available (Writing Center, for example).

Academic. About effective pedagogy, several students referred to group work as a teaching strategy that supported their learning and improved their self-confidence. Dancer described how group work helped her, “Me and some other students gathered before the exams and discussed everything we learnt. It was very practical and helpful. We took some tests online, and it was “really useful”; we argued and questioned each other’s knowledge.” Chocolate also found value in group work, “The teacher ask me to speak in small groups, that is great. People in the group is from different countries, so you must speak English, so it helps you improve your English.” Maggie stated, “Teamwork improved my self-confidence. Day by day I become more and more confident and I can talk to people. It’s a very good method.”

The value international students see on experiential learning, group discussions, interactive activities, and practical application of theory is reflected in numerous recommendations provided to enhance learning: “More discussion should be added in classes. Try to ask questions to students to make them concentrate in classes” (Participant 70). “More stress should be given on practical aspect of the course” (Participant 81). “Experiential learning with interactive teaching methods and real-world examples” (Participant 83). “Hands-on learning!” (Participant 87).

Cultural. The experiences shared by some participants provide further insights of cross-cultural transformations. For example, Maggie shares transformative moments through her interaction with community members outside the university,

I was on the bus, and someone wanted to have a conversation with me about religion and culture. He said, can I talk to you, if you don’t want it is ok, I am fine. I said, I am a sociable person, so it’s ok. And we became friends and he invited me for lunch. (Maggie Interview)

This interaction was an opportunity for Maggie to clarify misunderstandings about Islam and debunk myths about Muslims, while getting beyond her comfort zone to interact with a male. The transformative experience IHE offered Maggie is also captured in her educational experiences,

In my country, we do not have classes with men, only women. So, it was very hard to have class with men and have teacher men. I didn’t want to talk, but now I am ok. [...] I was not comfortable speaking with men. But now I am. I have to go back [to her country] and change people over there and the society.

Discussion

This research investigated IHE through the lens of international students to better understand their lived experiences, barriers and supports. We sum up by reflecting on the results within the changing context

of IHE and discuss the unique nature of the methods used, the significance and implications for further research.

The following questions guided this research: What is internationalization according to international students? What are the barriers and supports experienced by international students? What are the educational experiences of international students? Exploratory factor analyses revealed key factors for success included writing and mathematics skills and relationships with faculty and students. In addition, support for culture, religion, and advising were secondary factors. Open and axial coding of qualitative data corroborated these findings and revealed three dimensions of internationalization according to international students' perspectives: Exchange; Understanding, Sharing, and Support; and Transformation. Detailed qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and rich stories of lived experiences complemented the quantitative data summarized here. Results suggested that international students require more assistance.

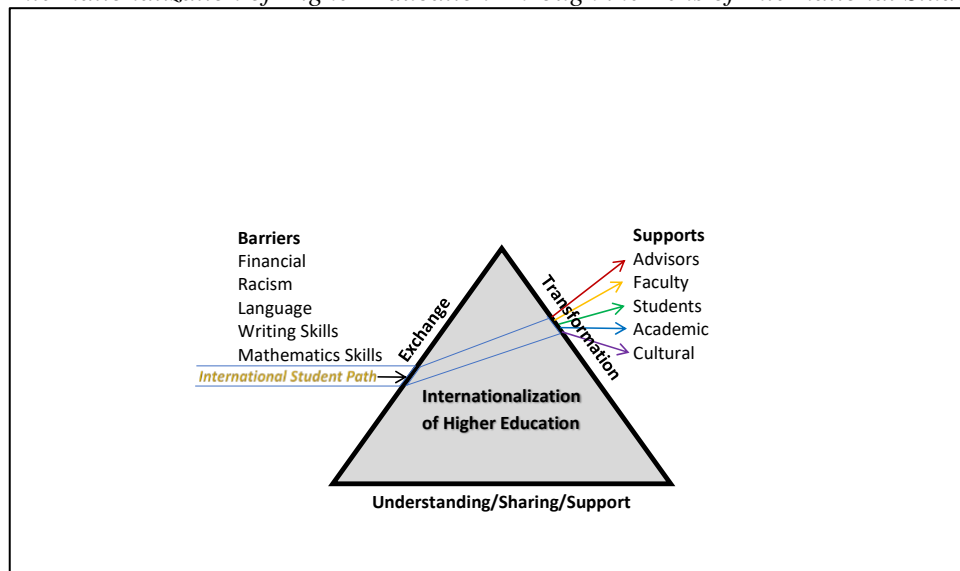
To comprehensively present the findings, a graphic organizer and metaphor was created. Figure 4 represents a synthesis of all findings. Inclusion in this figure was dependent upon these supports and barriers being identified as significant elements in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Figure 4 illustrates the three dimensions of internationalization (Exchange, Understanding/Support, and Transformation), through the lens of international students. Also included are the range of supports and barriers. The metaphor of a prism is used to conceptualize the phenomenon of IHE. In the same way white light is refracted by a prism into the visible spectrum, international students are transformed through their experiences within our universities. Barriers can block the path of students (represented by light). The prism permits student exchange, transformation and support (emerging as the rainbow).

A convergent mixed-methods approach, combining survey data and interviews, provided a clear window into the lived experiences of international students at a mid-sized Canadian university. This was facilitated through *comparative ethnographic narrative* (CEN) (Howe, 2005a; 2005b; 2010; 2022), which represents an original and unique conceptual framework and research method. Essentially, CEN is a collaborative form of narrative inquiry—*comparative* (as it involves comparing one's experiences with others); *ethnographic* (in situ, long term participant-observation); and *narrative* (incorporating peer-to-peer extended conversations). Two research assistants were recruited from international students and selected a small diverse group of other international students through snowballing methods. They worked as a team to conduct interviews or *peer-to-peer conversations*. CEN is more culturally sensitive and less hegemonic than traditional interviews between a researcher and a participant. Moreover, this approach effectively helps to develop rapport with participants to better understand their stories through individuals who can fully relate to shared experiences. International students felt more at ease in sharing their stories in this way. This entire process is done with another co-researcher. Through CEN, two international students collected, analyzed and reported interpretive data from peers to study IHE, from an insider's perspective. International students were thus a significant and integral part of this research as they were actively engaged at every stage. Through their efforts, the stories of international students were told and retold in order to better understand challenges faced and to improve the lives of future international students.

Implications and Conclusion

International students require more assistance, bringing to light critical social justice issues including access, diversity, and equity (Beck & Ilieva, 2019; Bedenlier et al. 2018, Kang, 2020; Lennon, 2007; McGregor et. al, 2020; Sabzalieva, 2020; Senyshyn et al., 2000; Yildirim, 2014). Also, in light of recent global developments (COVID-19), universities are facing dramatic budget cuts due to the potential impact of the pandemic on international student enrollments at universities across Canada. Thus, the well-being of our international students is paramount at this time more than ever before.

Most international students are from Asia, with China and India the largest sources. There is an international student *trade imbalance* as *senders* are China, India, and South Korea while *receivers* are predominantly Western nations. This poses a number of serious problems, including a significant hegemony of Western knowledge and uniformity of educational provision, with the United States as a de-facto model (de Wit & Hunter, 2014; Knight, 2013). Our study and further micro-level studies of IHE can help de-centre this meta-narrative.

Figure 4*Internationalization of Higher Education Through the Lens of International Students*

Since this study was conducted in 2016, a number of significant changes have occurred, impacting the situation of international students in Canada. These include geopolitical tensions such as deteriorating Canada-China international relations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the election of a new government in the United States. Furthermore, at a local level, our university has embarked on new initiatives to support international students, with remarkable results. Faculty are striving to develop intercultural awareness to better serve international students. The focus of curriculum development is equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This research helps inform our EDI curriculum reforms.

Relations with China are having an impact on enrolments of Chinese international students in Canada. Thus, recruitment efforts have focused on India, at the expense of other nations. While our university boasts of international students from dozens of different countries, an overwhelming majority of students are from only two nations: India and China. We recommend actively recruiting more international students from underrepresented regions including Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be considerations in recruitment. Equity seats could be held for both Indigenous and international students within each program of study. Scholarships and bursaries could be offered to marginalized students from impoverished and underrepresented countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in drastic changes for international students in terms of travel restrictions, visas, and classes. Teachers had to suddenly pivot lessons to alternate delivery modes of instruction, and students had to adjust accordingly. While there was little that could be done in the Spring 2020 term as schedules had been set, in Fall 2020 our graduate program moved classes to times that accommodated international students. We recommend universities look carefully at schedules to ensure they are flexible and inclusive.

Finally, we wish to share an exciting initiative started several years ago within our graduate programs in education. Our Student Success Centre shows great promise. Other graduate programs at our university are in the process of replicating this model. It could be an effective way to support international students at other institutions across Canada. The Student Success Centre provides space to meet and to socialize. In addition, we offer weekly workshops and special seminars on topics such as graduate exit options, thesis writing tips, APA, and more. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual events have been offered. We have a faculty member who acts as a coordinator, hiring five or more peer teacher assistants (TAs) to run the Centre each term. International students can book appointments with TAs via our online learning management system (Moodle) for individual help with their writing. The TAs have great empathy and provide significant mentorship. In discussions with faculty and students, we can see evidence of the

Success Centre having a significant impact on the wellness of our international students. It is our recommendation that other programs offer something similar for their international students.

This study provided a platform and voice for international students. We have described common experiences of international students and identified barriers and supports, which we hope will contribute to innovative and student centric approaches to IHE at Canadian universities. Our findings clearly show that more work is needed to provide support to overcome barriers faced and better understand the lives of international students. As this research was conducted at a mid-sized Canadian university, that has undergone rapid expansion in recent years, caution must be advised in applying the findings widely. Nevertheless, the challenges facing international students at the university where this study was conducted are likely similar to the struggles of international students at other universities. We are hopeful this study will encourage others across Canada to investigate further the lived experiences of international students — the very students our universities have become so dependent upon.

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