

Equity in International Education: An Autoethnographic Exploration  
of Intercultural Competence and the Experiences of International  
Students in Canada

by

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## **Abstract**

Canada's government and universities have been successful in placing Canada as a top competitor in the international education global market. These efforts have caused significant increases in the numbers of international students choosing Canadian universities today. As a result, universities in Canada are facing an equity dilemma, balancing their structures, policies, and processes, with their responsibility to international students. Through an autoethnographic account of international student stories in a Canadian university, this thesis addresses the opportunities for equity, in developing the intercultural competence of universities. These student experiences of Canada's academic culture, university support services, and financial policies, constitute critical areas of inequity in international student success. By increasing the effectiveness of those facing and managing the intercultural barriers experienced by international students, universities can improve equity within international education in Canada.

## **Acknowledgments**

Writing this thesis was a great lesson in both time and project management. After the birth of my two daughters, I had to work hard to balance all of my roles and claim the space to prioritize my academic objectives. I carved away moments that belonged to my family and I am extremely grateful for their support.

Josh, thank you for taking care of me and our home - the bags of clean laundry, the loads of dishes, and the many Costco outings with our girls have truly been an important part of this process. Thank you for taking on more than you should have and for believing, even when I did not, that I would get to this point. I love you and I hope to make you proud!

Ava and Emma, being your mother makes me want to be a better person every day. I hope that you remember that in life different is not bad and that we can find opportunities in the unexpected.

I want to take a moment to thank my mother, the bravest woman I know, and the person who started all of this by bringing her children to Canada on her own and making an immigrant out of me.

I also want to acknowledge the many people that over the years contributed to my experiences and stories of international education. My wonderful ISSO family who has put up with my many stories throughout this process. Working with a group of professionals as committed as you are, has truly been a highlight of my professional career.

Sophie, thank you for believing in me - your support, perspective, and kindness were instrumental in getting me here. Thank you for challenging your students to look at the world differently.

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## **1. Introduction**

The increasing numbers of international students in Canadian universities demonstrates the success that Canada and Canadian post-secondary institutions are having in recruiting students. Provincial and federal governments alike have implemented collaborative efforts with Canadian universities to make Canada a top competitor in the international education market. Canadian universities are heavily relying on the presence of international students as universities grapple with an increasingly competitive domestic market. This has resulted in the development of strong recruitment campaigns targeting new and already existing markets for institutions to attract prospective students globally. These efforts have proven successful, but success cannot be measured by international student admission rates alone; we also need to consider Canada's ability to meet the promises made to an increasingly diverse international student population. This requires an analysis of Canadian universities' ability to fully engage and support multiple international student experiences, including the attitudes and responsiveness of those working directly with international students.

With these objectives in mind, this project grapples with the international student experience in Canada as seen through my experiences working in the field of international education for close to a decade. The use of my stories and observations over this period of time challenges us to reexamine the complexity of diverse student contexts. As I examine our willingness to stand behind our promise of success to international students, I consider the role and impact of government policies and of Canadian universities in supporting the objectives of students arriving in Canada from all around the globe. Through this process I will

examine the manner in which embedded stereotypes and attitudes towards international students in Canada at the institutional level create inequity, focusing on the opportunities to shift and foster a more equitable international student experience by developing the intercultural competence of our universities, as reflected in their policies, structures, and student services. Addressing the issue of equity in international education in Canada is becoming more pressing as we are working with increasing numbers of international students, highlighting the gaps that create clear winners and losers in our international education story.

In the rest of this section, I will outline the road map for this thesis and explain the importance and relevance of this project for Canada and Canadian universities. My discussion of equity in international education is based on my belief in the potential for universities to increase their intercultural competence<sup>1</sup> so that they can address more effectively the complex and diverse challenges experienced by international students. Increasing the intercultural competence of universities includes a commitment to supporting the intercultural skills development of individuals - students, staff, and faculty, across the university. Intercultural competence can help shift our perspective to address the experiences and needs of others without relying on our own understanding, biases, or perspectives. I believe that this shift will help our universities address the gaps and create more equitable outcomes for international students in

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<sup>1</sup>Janet M. Bennett and Milton J. Bennett, "Developing intercultural sensitivity," in *Handbook of Intercultural Training, Third Edition*, ed. Dan Landis, Janet M. Bennett, and Milton J. Bennett (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 147-165.

Canada.

### **1.1 Context and Contents**

There has been a state of transition in international education in Canada since the Federal Government released its official international education strategy in January 2014. This strategy represents the interests of various stakeholders in international education, based on an extensive process of consultation, evaluation, and assessment of Canada's goals in the area. The Federal Government released the strategy under the name *Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity*, creating a bold statement of its intentions in the area. Overall, having a national strategy is a significant development in international education; the strategy frames Canada's image and it dictates the future of policy. It is important to note that since the original release of the strategy, we have had a change in government; however, there have been no significant changes to the narrative, as the general direction of policies seems to fall in line with the objectives of this strategy document. These objectives appear to have been shaped by existing assumptions about and perceptions of international students in Canada. A major focus at the government level has been attracting international students who fit the mold of the perfect migrant in Canada – one that is self-funded and educated in Canadian institutions.

Over the last twelve years, the federal government has introduced significant changes to policies and programs that aim to make Canada a more competitive destination for international students. These changes have mainly created clear pathways for post-graduation opportunities for international

students to remain in Canada and have changed the regulation of study permits. The willingness of the previous and current federal governments to make frequent changes to international education demonstrates the importance of an equity analysis of the international student experience in Canada. While the focus of the changes has been to help students remain in Canada, there has also been an increasing shift towards regulating and maintaining the integrity of international education policies. This environment of constant change and of policing has created instability and fear. International education has become fluid as an area of constant change that our leaders seem to reevaluate as they seek new ways to attract and retain talent. This volatility and fluidity in the pace of policy changes is visible in legislation changes and Ministry reports, including annual reports to Parliament.<sup>2</sup> Reforms signal a willingness to improve the international student experience, however they also point to an inability to establish equitable or sustainable policies and programs.

Significant efforts have been made to support the federal mandate to make Canada attractive to international students, including many projects in nation

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<sup>2</sup> Citizenship and immigration Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2008*, (Ottawa, Can.), [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2009/cic/Ci1-2008E.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2009/cic/Ci1-2008E.pdf).

Citizenship and immigration Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2010*, (Ottawa, Can.), [http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/pub/immigration2010\\_e.pdf](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/pub/immigration2010_e.pdf).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2014*, (Ottawa, Can.), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2014.html>.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2017*, (Ottawa, Can.), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2017.html>.

*Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, SOR/2014-14, <http://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p2/2014/2014-02-12/html/sor-dors14-eng.html>.

branding. As explained in Chapter 3, *Imagine Education au/in Canada* brand<sup>3</sup> is the projected image of Canada in international education. The brand represents the idealized experience of international students in Canada and therefore plays a central role in defining the course of policies at the government and university levels. Developments in nation branding frame the implicit and overt promises made by Canada to international students. Canada is presented as a product that students are investing or buying into, and they do so with the expectation of a specific experience. However, we see gaps between the promises and the outcomes for many students who cannot fit the mold of the ideal migrant. Most students fall outside of the mold but make great efforts to fit in – some do so successfully by making great sacrifices, while others are unable to and struggle in their journey to achieve success in Canada. Chapter 3 will examine the impact of the brand in setting expectations for students and universities. Canada's international student population is made up of individuals from not only different cultural backgrounds and origins, but also academic experiences and disciplines. International students contribute diverse perspectives and approaches; however, they can also have different levels of preparedness when entering Canada's academic system. The adequacy of the Canadian brand and our ability to follow through on its promises is directly impacted by the increasing diversity of the student population. I therefore end chapter 3 by examining the gap between the ideal and the actual international student body.

I have been employed at a Canadian post-secondary institution since 2007

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<sup>3</sup> Brand was current at the time of writing. A new brand has been introduced, however with no substantive change in policy direction.

and I have been working in the field of international education for close to ten years. In that time, I have observed how the international student population has almost doubled at the university where I am currently employed. We are seeing students arriving from diverse destinations including China, India, and Nigeria, which according to Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) are the top three fastest growing countries of origin for international students in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Our current processes and services struggle to support all international students equitably. This demands a frank conversation about the academic and socio-cultural needs of students with diverse cultural and academic backgrounds and the skills and approaches needed to meet them.

The diversity of the students we serve testifies to the success of international recruitment efforts but also compounds the challenges associated with following through on an equitable international education system for all international students in Canada. As the focus is increasingly on competing on the international stage to attract more students, universities need to offer effective intercultural transition support and services to meet the short and long-term promises made at the recruiting stage. This need is established and explained in chapter 4, which examines the experiences of international students in Canadian classrooms, and in chapter 5, which focuses on international student services. In both chapters, I will use experiential narratives to illustrate challenges encountered and discuss the opportunities that they present for the development

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<sup>4</sup> “Canada’s Performance and Potential in International Education, International Students in Canada 2016,” Infographic, Canadian Bureau for International Education, accessed 27 May 2018, [https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Infographic-Inbound\\_EN.pdf](https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Infographic-Inbound_EN.pdf).

of intercultural competencies.

I work in a supportive role developing and facilitating services that support the transition and experiences of international students in Canada. In meeting this mandate, I have struggled to extend opportunities that benefit all students equitably and not just the stereotypical international student. The general perception of international students in Canada conflicts with the complexities and layers that make up a student population from diverse backgrounds and experiences. These complexities call those of us who are working in universities, and more specifically with international students, to develop a skill-set that supports our ability to look beyond the stereotypes and develop approaches and services that are more accessible. In this process we need to take a step back and learn more about the international students who are arriving in Canada and why recruiting them has increasingly become a priority for policy makers and universities.

The most obvious motives are financial. According to the CBIE, international students are self-funded and contribute eight billion dollars annually to Canada's economy in tuition and living expenses alone.<sup>5</sup> This is a significant contribution that points to the importance of international education for Canada and of the efforts made to make Canada a competitive and desirable option in the international education market. However, defining the benefits of having international students in our universities solely by their financial

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<sup>5</sup> "Facts and Figures, Canada's Performance and Potential in International Education," Canadian Bureau for International Education, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://cbie.ca/media/facts-and-figures/>.

contributions to the Canadian economy, restricts our understanding of their experiences. Although international students are self-funded, this does not always translate into students having great personal wealth. It instead means that students are dependent on sources of income located outside of Canada. This can mean different things for different students and making assumptions about their financial stability can create undue pressure and challenges for them. In chapter 6, I will examine the implications of these financial assumptions and the difficult realities that many international students face, especially given the instability of some global economic and political conditions.

While this overview provides a rough sketch of what this thesis hopes to address, it has not explained how I intend to pursue this mandate and how it relates to my personal investments in international education. These questions are addressed in the next chapter.

## **2. My Approach: Methods and Theoretical Framework**

As a stakeholder in international education, this study has become a vehicle for me to project my voice and that of many unnamed students. My intention is not to assume ownership of the experiences of those students whom I have listened to over the years. My intention is to offer a channel for these experiences to highlight the need for equity in international education in Canada. Working as a resource for international students at an Ontario university with currently over four thousand active international students, has allowed me the opportunity to observe the unique and complex challenges facing international students. My position has provided me a front row seat in the course of international education in Canada. This allows me to present a complex overview of international education, which acknowledges the limitations set by my own voice and work, while offering a unique experiential perspective.

Regardless of their motivation, all actors in this area are working toward establishing an attractive and successful international education experience in Canada. With this in mind, my intention is to be constructive in furthering those efforts to create a more equitable international student experience. I contribute my observations, stories, and experiences working in the field in order to foster open discussion of our current shortcomings and of the opportunities for creating more accessible and sustainable programs and services for international students.

An honest discussion about the experiences of international students will include an assessment of the intercultural skills of those of us working with students. I seek to examine the manner in which the government and other

stakeholders in international education continue to make efforts to positively impact the experience of international students in Canada, while also recognizing that policies and programs are limited by those who create them. This means that as international education actors, our intentions are limited by our own perceptions and understanding of the population and its needs. Canada welcomes students from numerous countries around the globe, which challenges policy makers' and other stakeholders' ability to reach everyone equally while relying on dominant Canadian notions of education, family, employment, etc.

The stories presented here highlight the range of experiences and inequities that ensue despite great efforts to accommodate and help students build their life in Canada. I will therefore explore the need for new approaches to redefine the outlook and attitudes of all actors working in international education in Canada. I will consider the development of intercultural competence at all levels to guide the formation and application of policies, services, and programs. Intercultural competence influences the way individuals contend with differences and I believe it offers us a window by which all actors could redefine the model of the international student in Canada, while challenging us further to renegotiate and meet diverse needs. Evaluating international education through an intercultural mindset will support a landscape in which the application of programs, services, and policies is adapted to diverse student contexts. This, in turn, could influence the development and implementation of policies, reforms, services, and programs, increasing their potential to support an equitable international education system in Canada.

While this thesis is not rooted in policy evaluation, it crosses into that space

by assessing student experiences of international education policies and programs. My qualitative approach deepens this relationship, by creating a clear parallel with the efforts made by policy analysts seeking to implement processes that “provide a format and a set of procedures for organizing the interactions between policy experts and the lay citizens that they seek to assist.”<sup>6</sup> Policy makers are shifting towards implementing “[m]ethodologically, an approach capable of facilitating the kind of open discussion essential to a participatory context”<sup>7</sup>. As a result, there are clear links between my approach and postpositivist policy analysis.

## **2.1 My approach**

To achieve the goals of this thesis, I will present stories in various areas of the international student experience in Canada. This will provide the groundwork for understanding the complexity and diversity of experiences at the individual level as students transition into a new academic cultural environment and the implications of those experiences for various stakeholders. I will provide a discussion of the services and programs offered to students in supporting their transition to university life in Canada. Finally, I will examine the financial stability of international students and the impact of changing world conditions on their stability and wellbeing. Stories will be presented in each chapter, as well as a consideration of the impact that intercultural competence can have in supporting the student experience in these areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Fischer, “Beyond Empiricism: Policy Inquiry in Postpositivist Perspective,” *Policy Studies Journal* 26 no. 1 (1998): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1998.tb01929.x>.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer, “Beyond Empiricism: Policy Inquiry in Postpositivist Perspective,” 141.

In each section, the stories presented and my interpretation of actual student experiences are shaped by my experiences as a young immigrant and as an international education professional. Although these experiences are limited and cannot tell the complete story of international education, I strongly believe that they contribute a perspective worth adding to the discussion. The process of validating my observations as a legitimate source of knowledge has been challenging, as I have had to contend with the places in which I can exhibit a bias or potentially trespass due to my work with students. However, I persisted in drawing on my own observations and experiences because they are genuine and valuable in presenting opportunities for international education in Canada. My decision to move forward with personal narrative and the process I follow to protect those behind my experiences is explained in detail in the next section of this chapter (Chapter 2.2).

My experiences working in the field have continuously formed my process. Coming to terms with my subjectivity and seeing the opportunities in my experiences has taken time – this is one of the reasons for the length of time that it has taken me to complete this thesis. My experience of imposter syndrome was a significant barrier, but I now recognize that my experiences, observations, and analysis reveal a small, but important piece of the puzzle of international education. My voice has been formed by close to a decade of experiences working in a supportive role with international students at a Canadian university. Throughout this time, I have been an active participant in shaping the experiences of students by not only working in an advising role, but also by developing programs and services that aim at supporting their experiences. I

have had to work within a structure that benefits some more than others, while contending with a lack of stability as policies and programs are continuously changing. In my role, I have been privy to many stories that together have created a narrative of international education worth sharing. That narrative can contribute to and help define the need for new ways to approach policies, services, and programs when working within intercultural settings. International education offers us a great opportunity to look at a relevant and important area, while also contending with complex concepts like culture, diversity, and intersectionality.

At the start of my professional career in international education, I was presented with the concept of intercultural competence<sup>8</sup>: a skill set that seems abstract and idealistic but that has come to shape the way in which I approach my work. Intercultural competency calls for individuals to reexamine the manner in which they work and build relationships across cultures; pushing us to face cultural differences and reframe our approach, providing us a sensitivity and awareness to operate in a cultural context.<sup>9</sup> This can be easily understood at the individual level when we think of two people with two very different backgrounds being presented with a problem that they both have been taught to solve with different approaches. How do these individuals navigate those differences to find a common space where they can work together to solve the issue at hand? Intercultural competency presents us with the skills and strategies to assist individuals in such situations, however in my work I have often thought about the

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<sup>8</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity.”

<sup>9</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity,” 149.

potential of implementing this competence in program development and policy-making processes. Could relying on an open framework that calls for a consideration of everyone around the table support us in creating a more equitable international education system?

This has resonated greatly with my own experiences as a young immigrant in Canada. I arrived in Canada from Colombia at the age of 16, and as I navigated the Canadian system with my family, it became clear that despite the image of a Canada that is open and welcoming to immigrants, there were structures in place that benefited some more than others. These structures are defined by the dominant culture in Canada. With this in mind, my age, the British education I received attending a private school in Colombia, my language abilities, my exposure to North American pop culture, etc. all contributed positively to the way others perceived me and gave me tremendous privilege as I navigated the education and other established systems. This stood in contrast with my mother, who was in her mid-forties and did not have professional working fluency in the English language. Despite having extensive professional experience as a lawyer and human resources expert, she faced numerous barriers navigating different levels of the education system and later on finding employment.

Recognizing my own journey and struggle has been key in empathizing with and relating to the diverse experiences of international students arriving with great expectations to begin their experience in Canada. A teacher once told me that I had to fit the mold in order to find success in Canada. For him this meant that I needed to work hard to lose my accent and to begin eating what he considered Canadian foods. This remained true for me into my late twenties,

which later on resulted in a rediscovery of pieces of myself that had been dormant for many years. This process was not simple, and for my husband it came as a surprise as we found ourselves looking for new ingredients, listening to a lot of Spanish music, and finally taking a difficult trip to Colombia.

Despite the intentions of policy makers and other international education actors to support successful international education experiences in Canada, there are structural barriers that are continuing to pressure international students to fit this mold. This has resulted in me meeting students who struggle with their own identities and place in Canada. It is unreasonable to think that being in Canada will not change us as immigrants, especially as our own cultures and identities shift, however this should happen organically. It is with this in mind that we need to look for meaningful ways to create a more equitable international education system in Canada.

In considering my original concerns and wanting to determine whether the strengthening of our intercultural competence would affect the international student experience in Canada, I also considered the way that these skills have had an impact in my personal and professional lives. Increasing my awareness and working toward being a more interculturally competent individual has provided me with a different way to look within and appreciate my own evolving identity. I welcome the many competing cultural perspectives living within me and recognize that sometimes there may not be a clear or comfortable answer to a problem. Working on my intercultural competence has offered me a more open outlook, in which I attempt to consider multiple experiences and try to challenge my own biases and expectations of others. Although intercultural competence

continues to be abstract and difficult to apply as our own subjectivities and values are bound to impact our abilities in different contexts, it still offers us a means to approach our work in international education with more than one expected outcome in mind.

Finding my voice in storytelling has been a significant hurdle for me to overcome in the process of writing this thesis. My strategy at first was to present fictional composite stories inspired by real life experiences. This however presented a challenge for me as I felt that these fictional stories took away from the real stories that substantiated and formed my lived experience. With this challenge at hand, I tried to find a way to share real stories while protecting the actors. The individuals who appear in the stories and experiences that I will share here have been given pseudonyms. Although the stories do offer relevant details, I have left out or altered identifiers that could compromise others and myself. Becoming comfortable with this took a significant amount of time and many attempts, until I finally focused on the big picture and gained confidence in my role as a researcher and writer. Taking on this risk has been an important part of this thesis, as the stories are not derived from questionnaires or interviews and instead describe unique and genuine encounters that occurred organically over the past decade. My own filters limit these stories, meaning that they are not authoritative accounts, and may be biased in ways that exceed my own self-perception. However, they nonetheless offer rare glimpses into the circumstances encountered by international students and new opportunities for analysis. These stories are composite and reflect situations that continue to be representative of many international student experiences today. In writing these stories and

presenting them here, I wanted to address real life experiences and situations. However, I was also mindful of the potential for reinforcing new and already existing stereotypes. The situations that inspired these stories have been instrumental in shaping my perception and opinions of international education, and they continue to inform my understanding of culture and student success.

## **2.2. Theory & Methods**

This thesis contends with the inequalities of a system that undermines culture and diversity. This has opened a door for me to consider current inequalities through more encompassing methods that mitigate the risks surrounding my own role and utilize my experiences and voice to present multiple individual experiences of international education in Canada. In developing a framework for this thesis, I have considered my position and privilege working in the field of international education, as well as the risks associated with different methodologies for obtaining information and data. In this process I carefully considered my position wearing not only the hat of researcher, but also the hat of service provider and international education professional. My consideration of potential conflicts of interests and ethical challenges ultimately shaped the methods and theory adopted. The potential for trespassing and jeopardizing my credibility as a researcher and as a professional in international education propelled me to seek methodologies that may not seem conventional but have allowed me to manage the ethical implications of this thesis.

With this in mind I will now offer a guide to some of the theoretical and methodological tools that I have used, in particular my reliance on personal

narrative, as well as my use of appreciative inquiry and strength-based approaches. I will also strive to provide a working definition for intercultural competency here to further shape my analysis. These approaches have allowed me to be constructive and minimize risks, while still looking forward and taking strategic advantage of my role as an insider. The theoretical framework for my research has been founded on the work of many who have provided the foundation for working myself into my research in an open and honest manner. This style of writing has presented both risks and opportunities for me, staging a constant push and pull between the multiple sides of my voice.

### *Personal Narrative*

I began my graduate education in the Faculty of Law but the decision to transfer into Canadian Studies was easy after taking a couple of courses in the school. From the beginning, this choice was personal rather than just founded on my academic interests. I felt that as a Canadian and an immigrant, the courses and material that I was exposed to both challenged and informed my own identities. It became impossible for me not to position myself within the material in courses such as Decolonizing Canada. These experiences offered me a new lens for critically utilizing my own experiences as sources of knowledge – with the understanding that knowledge cannot be fixed but that my experiences were important pieces of a greater puzzle. My experiences in Canadian Studies have validated my own voice in academia and it therefore felt appropriate for me to honour this and utilize my own experience as a legitimate source of data in this thesis. The use of personal narrative as a source of inquiry is new for me, but in considering the risks involved with my professional role in international

education, this approach presented an opportunity to be open and transparent. This decision however was not clear-cut for me and it was a process for me to recognize the value of moving away from more traditional research methodologies, like conducting interviews. In this process I read and wrote other autoethnographic pieces that inspired and allowed me to truly appreciate the opportunities presented by the use of personal narrative.

The process of evaluating different methodologies was admittedly difficult, but the work of scholars like Elizabeth St. Pierre set the tone by validating the use of personal narrative and experience as a more ethical approach in my work. Through her own work on poststructural theories of subjectivity, St. Pierre found that she could no longer discern between the researcher or the participants in her studies<sup>10</sup> and most importantly addressed how “[w]e qualitative researchers are very present in our research, in the thick of things, talking with and observing our participants. Qualitative inquiry is not distant; it’s live and in person; it happens right now. And of course, extended time in the field – being there and being there longer – makes our work even more valid.”<sup>11</sup> This description of the honesty and value in openly addressing the experience of the researcher led me to conclude that utilizing my lived experience as a legitimate source of inquiry in this thesis presented a unique opportunity in part due to the number of years that I have been active within the subject area. With that in mind, it was impossible for me to overlook my lived experience - the trends, stories, opinions, etc. that led me to

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth St. Pierre, “Decentering Voice in Qualitative Inquiry,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3 (November 2008): 320, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2008.1.3.319>.

<sup>11</sup> St. Pierre, “Decentering Voice in Qualitative Inquiry,” 321.

begin studying this area to begin with.

St. Pierre's conclusions further supported my decision to not pursue formal interviews as she indicates that "...continuing to privilege the 'voices' of our participants as if they are present and as if that presence is somehow sacred will continue to limit qualitative inquiry."<sup>12</sup> This questioning of the authenticity of the data produced in interviews was compounded by my own influence and positioning within the domain of potential subjects. Could I truly develop unbiased questionnaires and fully remove myself from their domain seeing that I am an active actor in international education? This line of self-questioning led me to the work of John Law, whose work has further assisted me in establishing the foundation of this thesis. Early in *After Method*, John Law indicates that "[t]his book makes a sustained argument for a way of thinking about method that is broader, looser, more generous, and in certain respects quite different to that of many conventional understandings."<sup>13</sup> Staying true to this statement, in chapter 7, he explores the role of imagination and narrative. Within this chapter he identifies that "[t]here is a need for tools that allow us to enact and depict the shape shifting implied in the interactions and interferences between different realities."<sup>14</sup> When I first read this statement I initially thought that by different realities, Law was simply referring to that of the researcher and the subject, however this statement is much more complex than that and it challenged me to question not only the validity of subject-based research, but also my own

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<sup>12</sup> St. Pierre, "Decentering Voice in Qualitative Inquiry," 331.

<sup>13</sup> John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Sciences Research* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Law, *After Method*, 122.

subjectivity and experience as I aimed to position my own voice in sharing my experience of others' stories. In aiming to move beyond notions of universalism and singularity prevalent in what Law links to the Euro-American method of inquiry<sup>15</sup>, he prompts us in the following statement:

That we refuse the dualism between the real and the unreal, between realities and fictions, thinking, instead, in terms of *degrees* of enacted reality, or more reals and less reals. That we seek practices which might re-work imaginaries. That we work allegorically. That we imagine coherence without consistency.<sup>16</sup>

I am not seeking a single flat reality or truth, but rather I seek to present a negotiation of experiences that contend with conflicting cultural contexts. This supports my need to maintain transparency and to use methods that will not overvalue one experience over another. Instead, the objective is to capitalize on their difference, present the struggle, and focus on the process, without seeking one singular truth.

In building my research, I am adopting the role of active participant, however I am also a conduit for the experiences of others. I am relying on my experience of those stories, while presenting the owners as silent subjects in order to protect them and preserve my ability to be of service to them. Because my objective is to not overvalue one experience over others, I need to continuously work to keep my own points of view in check, while acknowledging that the entire storytelling enterprise is framed by my perspectives and priorities.

Additionally, I need to explore the value of relying on others' experiences and stories – which I obtained as an active participant in non-research contexts,

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<sup>15</sup> Law, *After Method*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Law, *After Method*, 139.

without actively seeking them out as data. This puts me in a position of risk for several reasons; there is a risk of jeopardizing the professional trust placed in me, in addition to the risk of misrepresenting someone's experience. Lynn Buttler-Kisber provides guidelines for conducting this study by openly addressing these risks. Buttler-Kisber contends with the concept of transparency and voice, explaining that the appropriation of participant voices and stories/experiences has been highly criticized and that reflexivity has become essential to maintaining ethical and transparent research practices.<sup>17</sup> This focus on reflexivity is particularly important to me and has led me to openly address these issues of voice and transparency, to further expose my potential assumptions and position. I have questioned the legitimacy of my experiences and my reliance on others' stories/experiences - are my experiences and observations truly representative of all international students in Canada? Can my experience of others' experiences stand as a valuable and legitimate source of data for conducting research? These questions are not fully answerable but the paradoxes and tensions that they provoke have been central to the formation of my methodology.

As an actor in international education, as an advisor, and as someone in a position of privilege, I am acting as a conduit. Understanding my own position, with its advantages and limitations, both benefits and adds dimension to the discussion. Authenticity in this case comes not in the search for one truth, but rather as we manage the complexities of multiple experiences, which is ultimately what is leading me to pursue a more equitable international education system in

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<sup>17</sup> Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 21.

Canada.

An important element of this approach has involved taking into consideration the feelings of those behind the stories. I have been privileged to learn from students themselves about their individual circumstances and experiences. These students however were not aware that I would carry them into an academic context. I believe that it is reasonable for professionals to be reflective and rely on their experiences at work to inform their professional development. However, in this case, it is my academic objectives that have provided a space to accomplish this, without direct and clearly beneficial outcomes for students. My circumstances have led me to a sensitive area of qualitative research, in which the actors have been observed and brought into an academic context without their direct consent or acknowledgment.

While I have wrestled with the ethics of my approach, I have observed that this is a common practice in other research contexts. For example, I have noticed that psychologists routinely write case studies and scholarly articles that make reference to their clients using pseudonyms, while informing greater outcomes for others in a sensitive manner. These situations have been a source of inquiry for qualitative researchers, with many in-depth discussions of maintaining the privacy<sup>18</sup> and confidentiality<sup>19</sup> of their subjects while also gathering and disseminating the lessons learned from a professional practice in human services. The stories presented in this thesis are representative of many student

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, David Wyatt Seal, Frederick R. Bloom, and Anton M. Somalai, "Dilemmas in Conducting Qualitative Sex Research in Applied Field Settings," *Health Education & Behavior* 27, no. 1 (February 2000): 14-16, <http://doi.org/10.1177/109019810002700102>.

<sup>19</sup> Seal, Bloom and Somalai, "Dilemmas in Conducting Qualitative Sex Research," 16-18.

experiences, but despite my best efforts, actors may still be vulnerable in my interpretation of their situations. I take some comfort from the notion that, “[a]lthough impossible to avoid, careful reflection about potential pitfalls during the study design of applied research can increase the likelihood that researchers will address field dilemmas in an ethical manner.”<sup>20</sup> This combination of self-awareness and intention in understanding my position and that of the actors, has been central in my approach to presenting stories that highlight real and relevant issues for international students in Canada in an ethical manner.

### *Loving Criticism*

This study is the product of an inside-out evaluation of international education – this means that it is rooted in my subjectivity and experiences of others as I have observed and experienced them not only as a witness, but also as an active participant in international education in Canada. I currently have a responsibility to my employer, my clients, and my colleagues to be thorough and fair in my assessment of international education. Beyond this responsibility, I also have relationships with other actors and have been privy to their sincere efforts in supporting and enhancing the experiences of international students in Canada. With that as a guiding factor, I felt it was necessary for my critiques to be presented in a constructive manner that would recognize these efforts and positive intentions, and furthermore build on our strengths as international education professionals and actors.

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<sup>20</sup> Seal, Bloom and Somalai, “Dilemmas in Conducting Qualitative Sex Research,” 20.

Maintaining this will be a challenge considering how easy it is for us to simply criticize others without looking at the full picture of a situation or considering the practical impact of our efforts. Choosing to root this analysis in my understanding of neoliberalism and to apply an anti-capitalist framework would have created a space for me to critique international education more easily. Although that may be a worthwhile analysis, this thesis is not the right place for it as my goal is to consider structural barriers with more empathy, in order to make better use of my position. I believe that by applying principles of positive inquiry I will gain valuable perspective in fully understanding the inequity and opportunities in international education in Canada.

In seeking a perspective that would help me build bridges instead of creating greater gaps, I decided to rely on Sharon Doetsch-Kidder's work on loving criticism. When I first came across this approach, I remember thinking that it sounded childish, however, after further analysis I identified the power behind this approach as it helps answer Doetsch-Kidder's own questions – "In a culture that seems obsessed with conflict and newness, how do we bring old knowledges into our work?"<sup>21</sup> and more importantly, "How do we find common ground with those whom we protest and criticize?"<sup>22</sup> It is this latter question that resonated with my own objectives, especially as Doetsch-Kidder further explains that "Paying attention to the spirit of our work helps us produce knowledge that serves humanity, that is useful to those struggling to survive, and that brings

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<sup>21</sup> Sharon Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism: The Spirit of Social Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 21.

more love, peace, and compassion to the world.”<sup>23</sup> This highlighted the sentiment of what I hope my work will be – not a plain critique, but rather a meaningful contribution towards achieving a more equitable international education experience at the individual level in Canada. Doetsch-Kidder breaks down this idea of loving criticism by presenting it as having five aspects: “loving criticism (1) honors our roots; (2) accepts our shared humanity; (3) accepts our power to change our lives and the world; (4) faces conflict with kindness; and (5) nourishes us through positive action.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, she explains that loving criticism “...seeks understanding of others on their own terms, along with an understanding of larger structures that work on and through individual lives.”<sup>25</sup>

These reflections on the impact and potential behind loving criticism inspire me to seek positive outcomes in my work through the recognition that we can affect change through positive action. As I seek to do precisely this, loving criticism helps me approach my critiques of the current inequities in international education taking into account multiple contexts and perspectives.

### *Intercultural Competence*

When I began working in international education, I quickly learnt that people rely on conflicting narratives about international students in Canada. Some view international students as wealthy and privileged, while others think of this student population as a marginalized group of young immigrants. Either way, these students are recognized for their struggle to adapt to Canadian culture

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<sup>23</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 23.

and society. These narratives and perspectives dictate the way people interact with individual international students in multiple contexts within our universities.

This observation led to my appreciation of Sherene Razack's work. As I aim to break down misconceptions and conceptualizations applied as a blanket to all international students, Razack challenges us to question knowledge<sup>26</sup> and contends with the actions of those who belong to more than one culture.<sup>27</sup> Although she applies this in the context of the mestizas, her conclusion in calling us to avoid defining and boxing ourselves into one subject identity<sup>28</sup> can be directly applied to the need for us to avoid grouping all international students together as one. In her own words, "Without absolutes, no true self, no pure origin, it becomes all the more imperative to pay attention to how our multiple identities are constructed and played out at any one time in any one context."<sup>29</sup>

Razack propels me to question all that we have come to know about international students. We need to shift our focus to the individual level and consider the potential for multiple experiences based on the dimensions and identities that intersect on a continual basis. Razack's conclusions here set the stage for me to want to seek an approach that allows me to navigate multiple cultural contexts more effectively, or that at least acknowledges the struggle between competing cultural practices and identities in an open and safe manner.

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<sup>26</sup> Sherene Razack, "Story-Telling for Social Change," *Gender and Education* 5, no. 1 (28 July 2006): 67, <http://doi.org/10.1080/0954025930050104>.

<sup>27</sup> Razack, "Story-Telling for Social Change," 68.

<sup>28</sup> Razack, "Story-Telling for Social Change," 68.

<sup>29</sup> Razack, "Story-Telling for Social Change," 69.

This is how Razack opened a door for me to connect my work on intercultural competence with equity in international education.

According to Janet M. Bennet and Milton J. Bennet, intercultural competence is defined as “...the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts.”<sup>30</sup> In the case of universities, the ability to relate to others (i.e. international students with diverse cultural backgrounds) is the key to establishing services and processes across campus that consider and empathize with multiple experiences and perspectives. Relating and communicating effectively across cultures can be challenging due to our limited knowledge of other cultures, biases and stereotypes, and our reliance on generalizations. Intercultural competence moves us forward, giving individuals the skillset to use cultural generalizations responsibly,<sup>31</sup> therefore weighing the risks, while also creating a space for individuals to manage cultural differences openly. “The Intercultural skillset includes the ability to analyze interaction, predict misunderstanding, and fashion adaptive behavior.”<sup>32</sup> This requires self-awareness and self-management, keeping an open mind and flexibility to move beyond our own cultural lens to consider the experiences of others.

Developing and measuring intercultural competence is complex at the individual and institutional levels. There is an uncertainty when stating an individual’s intercultural competency level, when their actions cannot be

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<sup>30</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity,” 149.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity,” 152.

<sup>32</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity,” 149.

predictable in all intercultural situations. Despite our best efforts to keep an open mind and be flexible, an individual's intercultural competency is not fixed. In considering competing approaches to intercultural competence, Laura B. Perry and Leonie Southwell conclude that "[i]ntercultural competence is generally related to four dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors."<sup>33</sup> This means that there are multiple factors influencing our effectiveness in the face of intercultural situations and challenges. For example, misunderstanding or lack of knowledge, being negative or having a bias towards an issue, and our interpersonal skills and behaviors, including the way we show frustration, can all come to impact the way we exhibit intercultural competence in any given situation.

There is no one-size-fits-all method of acquiring intercultural competency. Research suggests many ways in which you cannot adequately attain intercultural competency but few ways in which you can. However, Laura B. Perry and Leonie Southwell argue that all forms of intercultural education have a number of principles in common, including a form of intercultural challenge and the need to develop critical cultural awareness,<sup>34</sup> "[s]tudents must critically examine culture, not just accumulate facts and knowledge about a culture, to develop intercultural competence."<sup>35</sup> Intercultural competency development can therefore be enhanced by strategic and critical intercultural interventions such as anti-racism training

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<sup>33</sup> Laura B. Perry, and Leonie Southwell, "Developing intercultural understanding and skills: models and approaches," *Intercultural Education* 22, no. 6. (December 2011): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2011.644948>.

<sup>34</sup> Perry and Southwell, "Developing intercultural understanding and skills: models and approaches," 457.

<sup>35</sup> Perry and Southwell, "Developing intercultural understanding and skills: models and approaches," 457.

and prolonged exposure to diversity, but it generally accumulates over multiple opportunities for personal growth and intentional practice.

I became familiar with the term after attending the CBIE National Conference in 2008 in St. John's Newfoundland, and over the years I have observed that it is mainly discussed in the context of domestic students seeking international opportunities, such as academic exchanges. I continue to use it as a way of recognizing and calling attention to the skills and attitudes that dismantle difference-based barriers to positive interaction in multiple contexts, including barriers facing international students in Canadian universities today.

As we continue to see growing numbers of students choosing Canada, universities are being faced with more challenges meeting the diverse needs of international students. This calls for our universities to think strategically about the potential benefits of increasing their intercultural competence, including the need to remain competitive in the world of international education. Janet M. Bennet and Milton J. Bennet indicate that "The increasing interconnectedness of global and domestic organizational needs suggests that the need for diversity work will be increasing, not decreasing, if the profession can deliver culturally responsive programs for a global clientele."<sup>36</sup> The intercultural competence of our universities affects our response to the needs of our global clientele – in this case, that of international students. The stakes are high for individual international students and for our universities to continue to meet their institutional needs and mandate. This brings up a number of questions that I hope to address throughout

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett and Bennett, "Developing intercultural sensitivity," 162.

this thesis – what does it look like for universities to increase their intercultural competence? How do you apply intercultural skills across a university to programs, services, policies, and academic environments? What does it look like to work with an intercultural lens? These questions are important in reimagining a university that is active in relating and connecting with its international student population.

### **2.3 Theoretical Framework: Summary**

This thesis aims to contribute to the conversation about international education in Canada at a time when mobility and recruitment continue to be a main focus of our universities. Universities have a responsibility to expand the conversation to include the experiences of international students – including equity issues and the opportunities to mitigate gaps. As an actor in international education at a Canadian university, through the use of personal narrative, I will provide evidence that supports shifting our process to intentionally increase the intercultural competence of our universities. Intercultural competence in our universities translates to agents of the university being equipped with the skills to navigate cultural barriers and challenges when presented with situations and individuals from diverse backgrounds. It also means having university processes and measures in place that are flexible in meeting diverse student needs. The increase of international students in our universities is facing us with our inability to offer equal opportunities to all students. Applying strength-based principles, such as loving criticism, will allow me to dig deep and consider the efforts and opportunities for universities to succeed in this task. My role and professional experiences allow me to appreciate different opportunities for

growth while at the same time having an appreciation for the dedication and hard work of colleagues and individuals working to support students at my university. Universities have an unwritten contract with international students and now more than ever we need to outline the breadth of our responsibility to achieve equity and integrity in international education.

### **3. Nation Branding: The Transformation of Canada into a Commodity**

My experience as an immigrant youth has allowed me to empathize with the experiences of international students. However, my experience differs from that of international students who are heavily recruited. Before coming to Canada, I really did not know what to expect. I only knew two people who had visited Canada and they described the country as an extension of the United States. I clearly remember someone telling me that Canada was exactly like an episode of Dawson's Creek. Little did I know that being equated with Americans is a big source of national discontent and that being distinct from the U.S. is embedded in the national psyche as a source of pride for Canadians. This was something I observed many times when pursuing my undergraduate in political science when we often found ourselves discussing American politics. I recall how important it was for my peers to draw comparisons to Canada highlighting distinct areas between the two countries. More recently the same thing was palpable during the last American election when Canadians proudly encouraged Americans to seek refuge up north to escape Trump politics.

When thinking about Canada, people rely on the imagery and stereotypes about Canadians available to them – this can be the cold weather, igloos, hockey, the kind Canadian, etc. I had few images to rely on and no clear points of reference. Besides my mother, no one was actively trying to sell me on Canada. I was 16 years old and was more concerned with what I was leaving behind in my home country. Not having a formed expectation helped me keep an open mind when I arrived. I still made comparisons between Canada and Colombia, but I

had no set expectation of what Canada would be like. This is one of the ways in which my own experience as an immigrant youth differs from that of international students in Canada. International students are heavily recruited by the country, provinces, and universities, and are presented with imagery and the prospect of an experience that sets the tone of their Canadian experience even before they take their first step in Canada.

International students are recruited using the images and promises set by national branding campaigns such as the Imagine Education au/in Canada, or the more current EduCanada Brand Extranet. These brands have a dual mandate offering a means to regulate and legitimize institutions, while drawing prospective students to the benefits of pursuing a Canadian education. These brands present and shape Canada and Canadian education as a commodity. When international students choose Canada, they are making a financial investment based on the brand. International students can therefore be seen as buying a product and the brand acts as a contract outlining the expectations and returns of the product. According to Canada's 2014 International Education Strategy, the piloting of nation branding in international education alone resulted in an increase in the number of international students in Canada by 51 percent.<sup>37</sup>

Branding has been successful in reinforcing a notion of Canada as a booming and stable world economy, as well as a multicultural society welcoming of difference. "Across the "brand spectrum," Canada's brand is one of the most

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<sup>37</sup> Global Affairs Canada, *Canada's International Education Strategy, Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity*, 2014 (Ottawa, Can.), 10, <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/assets/pdfs/overview-apercu-eng.pdf>.

trusted in the world. From economic performance and leadership on the world stage, to expertise and know-how across key economic sectors, from safe, clean and vibrant communities to a highly skilled and multicultural workforce...”<sup>38</sup> Under such imagery, it is easy to understand the growth in Canada’s international education numbers as “International students recognize Canada’s value proposition—a consistently high-quality education at an attractive price in a tolerant, diverse, safe and welcoming environment.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, students look forward to “Canada’s excellent integrated offer—not just to study, but also to work both while studying and after graduation, and to possibly immigrate to Canada after graduation.”<sup>40</sup> Choosing Canada is therefore a financial transaction, which results in students expecting clear returns promised during the recruitment stage.

### **3.1 Branding Canadian Values**

Brands tend to present positive images that set a consumer’s expectations of a product. In the case of international students, the brand can also negatively impact students who struggle throughout their transition to university life in Canada. I have seen the manner in which inconsistencies between student’s expectations and their experiences can come to affect students’ mental health, academic performance, and can furthermore cause students to become isolated, or to seek connections solely with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds. Students arrive in Canada guided by the images presented to them, however

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<sup>38</sup> *Canada’s International Education Strategy*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Canada’s International Education Strategy*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Canada’s International Education Strategy*, 10.

upon arrival they can encounter a less than helpful border agent, freezing temperatures without the proper winter gear, an unsuitable living arrangement, etc. These unexpected challenges and difficult experiences can be a normal part of an international experience, however not being fully prepared for them highlights the gaps in students' coping skills and resiliency. The challenges facing international students from the moment that they arrive in the country can have a significant impact on how they relate to Canada and on their success navigating cultural differences. Not all international students arrive in Canada on an equal footing, however they are all exposed to the images and narratives provided through Canada's nation branding efforts. When students are being set up from the recruitment stage to expect great results, they are not given the opportunity to prepare more strategically and effectively for their own Canadian experience.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a German student at the start of the term about his initial experience in Canada. I remember falling into the trap of speaking about all the wonderful things that Canada has to offer, including the positive impact of living in such a diverse city. The student quickly gave me a reality check as he shared how at a local store, another patron overheard him speaking in his mother tongue and told him to leave Canada and "go back" to his own country. The student mentioned being surprised about this and our conversation changed to address a more realistic view of people's attitudes.

Similarly, a couple of years ago I had a conversation with a student from Iran and his wife who wore Hijab, about an experience they had outside of the campus.

The couple was walking in the downtown of our city and an individual called them terrorists. The couple was significantly shaken by this experience and

required additional support.

These negative experiences are part of the gap that exists between the Canadian brand and the experiences of students. They are a symptom of attitudes towards difference that can still be found in Canada but are commonly masked by branded Canadian values such as multiculturalism. As a branded Canadian value, multiculturalism creates an expectation for how Canada welcomes and handles difference. When individuals are faced with negative incidents it can make the situations more unexpected and difficult to comprehend. Students are presented with the images associated with a multicultural Canada that typically involve people from different ethnic backgrounds going about their day to day lives in unity. Brands then capitalize on these images, placing further responsibility on our universities to help prepare students for their arrival in Canada.

The efforts to brand Canada as a superior international education destination go beyond simply depicting beautiful images of the country. Intentional efforts have been made to ensure that we are not selling just a country, but a great international education experience. This involves helping individuals project themselves and imagine what their experiences will look like once in Canada. According to Simon Hudson and J.R. Brent Ritchie, this has been the objective of Canada's nation branding efforts within the context of tourism - "Destinations have realized that the brand promise needs to move beyond defining the physical aspects of a destination, and create an expectation

of experience once the visitor arrives.”<sup>41</sup> Hudson and Ritchie furthermore map the process followed in Canada to establish a current national brand and explain that “...destination brands need to convey the promise of a memorable travel experience that is distinctively associated with that destination in order to be successful.”<sup>42</sup> In the case of Canada “...marketers have adhere[d] to this model, using experiential marketing techniques to communicate the new brand.”<sup>43</sup> These techniques have transformed the international perception of Canada into an experience, deepening the expectations of visitors who in choosing Canada embed themselves into the desired projected Canadian experience.

Jeffrey Ruhl discusses the evolution and impact of nation branding, explaining that, though rooted in maintaining competitiveness in the global economy, it also has tremendous impact in shaping a nation’s perception of itself, whether warranted or not.<sup>44</sup> Richard Nimijean highlights that domestic branding in Canada has created a scenario where “[s]uch contradictions reinforce ‘brand politics,’ in which the political manipulation of the Canadian identity benefits the [interests of] the ruling party by framing policy initiatives (whether implemented or not) in terms of “Canadian values” that appeal to the Canadian citizenry’s renewed sense of national pride”<sup>45</sup> This has a tremendous impact on

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<sup>41</sup> Simon Hudson, and J.R. Brent Ritchie, “Branding a Memorable Destination Experience. The Case of ‘Brand Canada,’” *International Journal of Tourism Research* 11, no. 2 (24 February 2009): 220, <http://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.720>.

<sup>42</sup> Hudson and Ritchie, “Branding a Memorable Destination Experience,” 227.

<sup>43</sup> Hudson and Ritchie, “Branding a Memorable Destination Experience,” 227.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Ruhl, “Inukshuk Rising: Iconification, Brand Canada and Vancouver 2010,” *Canadian Journal of Globalization* 1, no. 1 (January 2008): 25.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Nimijean, “The Politics of Branding Canada: The International-Domestic Nexus and the Rethinking of Canada’s Place in the World,” *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Canadienses* 011 (Summer 2006) 68, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238754775>.

international education as perceived Canadian values are projected to increase national pride and fuel our recruitment of international students. “In the era of the “brand state,” countries transform national narratives in order to attract foreign investment and skilled labour.”<sup>46</sup> This embedding of perceived values in the national psyche creates a void between the image of a nation, its policies, and the experiences of those who rely on the brand to take action - in this case international students who rely on the brand when they choose Canada as a destination.

### **3.2 Nation Branding in International Education in Canada**

Canada has made great leaps in nation branding within the context of international education. This has increased Canada’s competitiveness and has resulted in higher numbers of international students choosing to pursue their studies in Canada. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* Karen Birchard discusses the announcement of the national brand for international education. The article specifically points to the need for the Canadian experience to stand out and for Canada to “...position itself as an alternative destination to the United States and Britain for international education. Such a strategy would emphasize differences that make Canada attractive to foreign students, including the promise that a Canadian education will help them “change the world”.”<sup>47</sup> This objective reflects the intention to create a clear perception of the Canadian experience in support of Canadian universities and the Canadian economy as a

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<sup>46</sup> Nimijean, “The Politics of Branding Canada,” 68-69.

<sup>47</sup> Karen Birchard, “Canada Starts a ‘Branding’ Campaign to Help Universities Recruit More Foreign Students,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 29 November 2007, <http://chronicle.com/daily/2007/11/828n.htm>.

whole. Birchard explains that the federal officials who described the branding campaign highlighted that “... the use of the Canada brand would be tightly controlled to weed out fly-by-night operations and to provide an assurance of educational quality to students in other countries.”<sup>48</sup> This is an important step to guarantee that only legitimate institutions are recruiting prospective students. Therefore, creating a national brand in international education can be seen as necessary to both protect prospective students and to support the recruitment efforts of legitimate Canadian institutions. The brand has become a means to guarantee the integrity of the system, however as we have already seen, it has also embedded inequity in the experiences of students.

*Imagine Education au/in Canada* became the national brand for Canada in international education in 2008. The brand achieved its mandate in setting guidelines for all stakeholders in international education, however it has also projected a very specific experience for those being recruited under the images and rhetoric of the brand. The brand’s website offered the following mission for the brand:

The *Imagine Education au/in Canada* brand implies great value. Essentially, it conveys a message of openness and support through the concept of “empowered idealism.” In other words, our brand aims to convince international students that the quality of an education in Canada will provide them with the tools they need to develop their full potential. Our brand is therefore intended to be a springboard that will help them fulfill their dreams and ambitions.<sup>49</sup>

In the process of convincing potential students about the merits of the Canada

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<sup>48</sup> Birchard, “Canada Starts a ‘Branding’ Campaign.”

<sup>49</sup> “Understanding the Brand,” Brand Use Guidelines, Imagine Education au/in Canada, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20161203082338/http://imagine.cmec.ca/en/understanding>.

brand, Canada proceeds to make a series of promises directed to those students, such as “[i]n Canada, we believe that, with your contribution, we can build a better world. That is both an invitation and a promise.”<sup>50</sup> Along those lines, Canada makes three promises: “We promise to provide you with guidance and with the knowledge and tools you need to develop to your full potential, while affirming the person you are today.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, “We promise you will be proud of your Canadian credentials; they are a recognized passport that will open doors for you worldwide.”<sup>52</sup> Finally, “We guarantee a unique cultural experience in safe, diverse and exceptionally beautiful surroundings.”<sup>53</sup> These promises are made under the outlined mission of Canadian educational institutions, which commit to providing “...an academic environment that is welcoming, stimulating and safe and in which tolerance and celebration of cultural and educational diversity are paramount.”<sup>54</sup>

The brand therefore goes above and beyond presenting a competitive image of Canada, by creating a space for students to develop expectations for what the country and academic institutions will provide. In this manner, the brand not only provides accountability, but also seeks to give Canada a competitive edge. Josh Dehaas highlights the significance of this by explaining that the stakes are high as “not only do Canadian students benefit (for the most part, it seems) from more diverse classes, our economy is lifted by the estimated \$7.7 billion

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<sup>50</sup> Imagine Education au/in Canada, “Understanding the Brand.”

<sup>51</sup> Imagine Education au/in Canada, “Understanding the Brand.”

<sup>52</sup> Imagine Education au/in Canada, “Understanding the Brand.”

<sup>53</sup> Imagine Education au/in Canada, “Understanding the Brand.”

<sup>54</sup> Imagine Education au/in Canada, “Understanding the Brand.”

[international students] spend each year.”<sup>55</sup> According to CBIE, international education contributes nearly \$8 billion to the Canadian economy in expenditures including tuition and living expenses.<sup>56</sup> The financial contributions of international students alone serves as a great incentive to work towards meeting the promises made by the Canadian brand and to establish a more equitable international education system in Canada.

Josh Dehaas’ article discusses the results of a past survey conducted by CBIE indicating that in choosing Canada “...77% of international students agreed that Canada being “tolerant and not discriminatory” was either very important or essential to their choice...”<sup>57</sup>. Furthermore, it was reported that “...82% agreed [Canada] was, in fact, tolerant and welcoming once they got here.”<sup>58</sup> Although this may seem encouraging, it is still limited in scope as students are likely to base their responses on their own understanding of Canada, which is rooted in the brand itself. Additionally, this percentage still points to several students having experiences that prevented them from agreeing with that statement.

It is with this in mind that I have considered the experiences of students that I have directly come into contact with, reflecting on more than just answers to a survey and instead addressing the day to day lives of students actively navigating Canada. Individual student experiences put to a test the policies and actions of not only the state, but of all stakeholders in international education.

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<sup>55</sup> Josh Dehaas, “How international students feel about Canada,” *Macleans*, 19 November 2013, <https://www.macleans.ca/general/how-international-students-feel-about-canada/>.

<sup>56</sup> Canadian Bureau of International Education, “Facts and Figures.”

<sup>57</sup> Dehaas, “How international students feel about Canada.”

<sup>58</sup> Dehaas, “How international students feel about Canada.”

### **3.3 Branding the International Student in Canada**

The Canada brand not only creates an expected Canadian experience, it also creates an expectation within Canada of international students. As we have explored already, brands have the power to influence the national psyche, in addition to the way others perceive the nation. In the case of international students, the brand sets the vision for an imagined international student able to successfully join the established image of Canada. This image embeds an expectation of international students – who they are and how they will perform once they arrive in Canada. This image and expectation has come to frame the national discourse around international education, without accounting for the layers and compounded issues that make individual international student experiences unique. Furthermore, this has set the stage for individuals to be blamed when they fall outside of the perceived expectation and narrative of international students.

When a student's experience falls outside of the established brand, students become outsiders and therefore it becomes acceptable for the blame to be shifted to them. This is an important observation and something that I will continue to explore in more depth as I consider individual student experiences of Canada. This attitude continues to perpetuate the inequity in the experiences of international students despite the promise of a supportive Canadian experience for all. Our universities face structural issues and policies that favor some students over others. International education in Canada is shaped with a specific international student model in mind, which has resulted in the system producing clear winners and losers. Challenging the brand and the expectations set for both

international students and Canada helps us begin to consider the manner in which intercultural competency may play a role in establishing a more equitable international education system. However, our ability to do so depends on seeing through the branded images in order to recognize the realities of international students and their experiences.

### **3.4 Our International Students**

The presence of international students in Canadian universities is not simply identified by the racial diversity of students sitting in our classrooms. International students in Canada can face multiple challenges in transitioning to life in a new country, including learning to navigate a new academic culture and adjusting to Canadian sociocultural norms. In moving forward with this project, it is important to spend some time learning about this international student population, including having a clear working definition of who international students are.

In setting the breath of this project I have limited this definition, purposely excluding some migrant groups in Canada that may share similar experiences but may also be impacted by other factors. As such, this study does not directly address the experiences of refugees and permanent residents in Canada. Additionally, since this study is driven by my experiences, it is important to recognize that it will not address the circumstances faced by all international students in Canada, especially those in Quebec who encounter different cultural and immigration policies. While this study might indirectly apply to others transitioning to life in Canada, I will steer away from making generalizations that may cover individuals outside of the international student experience.

Throughout my professional life, I have observed how at the institutional level there is a tension in determining who is and who is not an international student. This is important, as international students are automatically provided with additional support systems that for example a new refugee in Canada may not be intentionally connected with. Having said that, some of the intercultural supports offered may meet the needs of other students in transition. For the purposes of this study however, it is important to limit the scope. Though there may be some overlap, I will mainly address the experiences of self-funded students, who are recruited and/or choose to pursue their post-secondary education in Canada.

International students are full tuition paying students and in order to be in Canada they must hold a study permit and adhere to Canada's immigration and international education policies. The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) offers us significant data and information to help us further define and understand the current make up of this student population. According to their website, "CBIE is the national voice advancing Canadian international education by creating and mobilizing expertise, knowledge, opportunity and leadership."<sup>59</sup> CBIE takes leadership in tracking international education trends and statistical information in Canada, reporting that there has been a 92 percent increase in the international student population in Canada from 2008 to 2015.<sup>60</sup> At the institution where I am currently employed this has resulted in the growth

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<sup>59</sup> "Mission, Vision, Values," Who We Are, Canadian Bureau for International Education, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://cbie.ca/who-we-are/mission-vision-values/>.

<sup>60</sup> Canadian Bureau of International Education, "Canada's Performance and Potential."

of our international student population, which has almost doubled since 2008, the year I began working in the field.

Post-secondary education has become a commodity of great importance for the Canadian economy and it continues to have great potential in influencing the make-up of Canada's migrant class. CBIE points out that in 2015, 51 percent of the international student population in Canada reported planning to apply for permanent residence.<sup>61</sup> International students are making a significant investment by pursuing their education in Canada – some are driven by their programs and the objective of returning home with a Canadian degree, however this statistic shows that for a slight majority the benefits of pursuing a Canadian education may be driven by other long-term goals. International students arrive in Canada from all around the globe, but we already know that India, Nigeria, and China are amongst the fastest growing destinations.<sup>62</sup> This information reflects not only the racial diversity of our students, but also sets the stage for understanding the differences in transition that students from these large nations may experience once in Canada.

Most international students never visited Canada prior to their arrival in the country. This means that their understanding and expectations of the country are mainly shaped by their experiences in their recruitment/application stage. I will explore the full impact and implications of this further on, however at this time it is significant to acknowledge the vulnerability of international students when faced with a more complex version of Canada. International students lack a

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<sup>61</sup> Canadian Bureau of International Education, "Canada's Performance and Potential."

<sup>62</sup> Canadian Bureau of International Education, "Canada's Performance and Potential."

support network when they first arrive, making their transition issues more difficult to overcome without a clear path for support and understanding. Students usually do not have family members in Canada, and although I have met students with relatives in the country, they are not necessarily in the same city, or close enough to connect with them about their challenges. The support network of international students beyond support staff at the university tends to be comprised of any friends they make once they are here, and their family and friends back home. Technological advances have helped students stay connected with their family and friends more easily, however different time zones, access, and social media can change the type and level of support received across borders.

International students are mainly undergraduate; however, we have significant growing numbers of international graduate students. Whether undergraduate or graduate, international students are primarily self-funded, meaning that their education and living expenses are covered from funds they bring from outside of Canada. These funds can include personal savings, family support, and/or scholarship programs from back home, etc. International students may receive entrance scholarships, and some graduate international students do receive funding packages, however these are not extensive when compared to the cost of tuition.

It is important to highlight that international tuition rates are not regulated and therefore students' tuition payments can increase from year to year without recourse. At the institution where I am currently employed, international tuition rates vary by program of study, but are approximately thirty thousand dollars for

the fall and winter semesters and it is specified on the university's website that international students can expect to spend close to fifty thousand dollars during this time once living expenses and other fees for the year are accounted for.<sup>63</sup>

International students are not eligible for funding options within Canada, including federal and provincial student loans or bank loans. The financial contribution that international students make to our universities is therefore significant, making it important for our universities to remain competitive in supporting the international student experience. The international student population at my university is diverse – international students range in age and preparedness for their move to Canada. They can have disabilities, be mature students, some have had military experience in their home countries, and others have families and young children with them in Canada or waiting for them back home. International students can have sick parents or relatives, and some have experienced war and violence. Our international student population is not one, however they are grouped as one based on their tuition payments and our expectations about the people who make those payments.

### **3.5 Nation Branding: Summary**

The impact of nation branding in Canada on international education requires more in-depth analysis bearing in mind the power dynamics between the Canadian government and students. The brand fosters trust in the Canadian experience, which capitalizes on already existing stereotypes of Canada. Students

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<sup>63</sup> "USA and International Costs," Undergraduate Admissions, Carleton University, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://admissions.carleton.ca/scholarships/usa-and-international-costs/>.

looking to Canada expect that Canada's government is honest and reliable, in contrast with the corruption and or domestic challenges of other countries. Within the context of this thesis however, it is significant to recognize the role nation branding plays in embedding inequity in the experiences of international students.

Nation branding has been used in Canada to influence people's perceptions of themselves, their values, and to improve Canada's position in the global economy. Canada's branding efforts play an important role in today's global economy, making Canada an important competitor in international education; however, these efforts have created a power imbalance worthy of consideration. Nation branding has been used to manipulate people and in the case of international students, it has created significant gaps between the narratives illustrated in brand rhetoric and imagery, and students' experiences of Canada. These inconsistencies have contributed to the equity issues experienced by international students and it has furthermore positioned their failures and struggles as their responsibility. The brand represents the norm and everyone who falls outside of this norm is seen as unable to fit in due to their own difference.

For students, the brand shapes the terms of a financial agreement between Canada, our universities, and students themselves. A brand may be nothing more than a marketing campaign, however it holds great power in making promises and delineating roles and expected outcomes for students. There is no oversight over the brand and no safeguard for international students once they are in Canada, where despite great efforts to welcome and support their experiences,

students are faced with structures that are unable to meet them within their own intercultural experience.

#### **4. International Student Experiences of the Canadian Classroom**

##### **John's Story**

*John, a graduate student from Iran, came up to me after an orientation session in which I led a discussion about potential challenges for students when transitioning to life in a new country. John was concerned about not fitting in when he went to class as he did not know what was expected of him in the classroom – more specifically, he wanted to know how to act and relate to his peers and professors. I remember asking John questions about the classroom etiquette back in his home country and he shared numerous things, including how as soon as the professor walks into a classroom everyone is expected to stand, he also mentioned that if he needed to go for example to the bathroom, he was expected to ask to be excused. He said that the tone is formal and that students are not permitted to eat in class or come and go as they please. When we talked about how informal some learning environments may feel to him here in Canada, he laughed nervously and seemed surprised. John had a difficult time imagining addressing faculty by their first name but was thankful to have an open conversation about these differences prior to the first day of class.*

Classroom etiquette and power distance between faculty and students tend to be some of the most visible ways in which cultural differences between diverse academic cultures can be appreciated. In the case of John's story, the student recognized that the way we behave in the classroom is very visible and therefore carries immediate implications for students entering a new academic culture. These differences however only begin to define the true impact of culture for those navigating cultural differences in an academic context. The challenges associated with student performance in a new academic culture have been a major focus of my professional work. Though western academic values can be assumed to dominate academia worldwide, there are still nuances and approaches that vary between different academic cultural contexts. These differences can be seen in the ways that language, local customs, and values influence academia. Variances can be subtle, however in the case of international

students, they can affect the manner in which a student discerns and communicates information.

Anna Mauranen addresses the importance of recognizing the manner in which cultural differences impact academic discourse, suggesting that “...cultural differences are most problematic when users are not aware of them.”<sup>64</sup> A lack of awareness about cultural differences in academia can be detrimental for students performing in a different academic cultural context. For example, in the case of students conducting work in a second language, despite great efforts to edit and eliminate grammatical errors, “... “foreign” features are left at the discourse level, which affect our comprehension and assessment of a text...”<sup>65</sup> This is significant, because “[a]s readers, we tend to respond to texts on the basis of our culturally learned expectations concerning good writing and persuasive argumentation. If texts do not meet these expectations we tend to perceive them as unconvincing, incoherent, or even illogical.”<sup>66</sup> This has big implications for international students in Canada, who need to have an awareness of the role of culture in their academic success, and furthermore require the skillset to identify and navigate cultural differences effectively. It is necessary for those conducting academic work to be aware of differences, including textual features, which may cause a negative impression or response in readers from another culture.<sup>67</sup>

In recognizing the fluidity of culture and the challenges of predicting the

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<sup>64</sup> Anna Mauranen, “Cultural Differences in Academic Discourse – Problems of a Linguistic and Cultural Minority,” *AFinLA Yearbook* 23, no. 51 (1993): 157, <https://journal.fi/afinlavk/article/view/57853>.

<sup>65</sup> Mauranen, “Cultural Differences,” 158.

<sup>66</sup> Mauranen, “Cultural Differences,” 158.

<sup>67</sup> Mauranen, “Cultural Differences,” 158.

specific situations that each international student will face academically in Canada, we need to seek methods that will reflect the diversity of our own faculty and the multiple contextual differences in our own academic system. Faculty in Canadian universities are also being put in a difficult position, often being the first responders identifying and bridging student cultural needs in the classroom. Faculty have to decide how to support and grade students and their approach depends on their comfort level, their ability to identify differences, and the merits ascribed to each cultural difference. Cultural differences can involve issues of academic integrity and language barriers but also manifest more pervasively in writing, where “[t]hese culture-specific preferences operate within the confines of genres, and include such features as the degree of expressing authorial presence in text, avoidance of repetition, whether to go straight to the main point or to prepare for it gradually, etc.”<sup>68</sup> In this section I will explore the impact of academic cultural differences on the experiences of international students in Canada, and the opportunities for universities to support faculty and students who are struggling to fit in. This calls us to use more student-centric methods of teaching and learning in order to fully consider individual international student experiences and stories.

My analysis of the academic experiences of individual international students navigating the academic culture of my institution will rely on the concept of Loving Criticism to better understand the limitations of those of us working within the system and the opportunities that we have to achieve more positive

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<sup>68</sup> Mauranen, “Cultural Differences,” 160.

outcomes. I have had the opportunity to meet with many students over the years who are having difficulty adapting to different elements of our academic culture. These differences will be reflected in the stories of students that will be shared to highlight inequities in the Canadian classroom. I will also look at how our academic structures struggle to respond to issues of academic culture. It is here that we will see the greatest opportunity to explore what a more interculturally competent classroom may look like for all students, including international students, and for faculty. This will involve tearing apart our assumptions about international students in the Canadian classroom and considering the impact of internationalization on our curriculum and learning and teaching environments.

#### **4.1 Student Academic Cultural Baggage & Inequity in the Canadian Classroom**

Many international students find themselves having to relearn how to discern and communicate information in order to meet their academic goals in Canada. This raises important questions about the impact of a students' academic cultural baggage on their success navigating the academic culture of their university in Canada. International students may work to shift and adapt to meet the expectations of their new academic environment, but their success is heavily influenced by their previous academic experiences. Similarities between previous and current academic experiences can make a difference for individual students navigating a new environment, however there are other influencing factors that can further complicate matters. For example, prior experiences can be compounded by language barriers and sociocultural challenges faced by students when they first arrive in a new country. All these factors come to shape a

student's academic cultural baggage. The weight of this baggage can determine the academic success of individual international students. "In comparison to domestic students, international students need to pay additional attention and effort to social integration, as their family, friends from their home country and social network are mostly not within easy reach."<sup>69</sup> Social isolation can negatively impact students' enjoyment of life in a new country, which in turn affects their confidence and overall perception of self. Strong bonds with friends and family back home, though important, are not able to take the place of in-person social interaction. "Furthermore, the social network of international students is less likely to be fully aware of the explicit and implicit customs or culture of the host institute/country..."<sup>70</sup> A lack of support and guidance can be detrimental to the way students respond to the academic challenges they face when studying in a different academic culture.

The academic cultural baggage of students can also contribute to their resiliency when navigating multiple or new cultural environments. This baggage can influence their approach to learning, writing, their ability to engage critically with course material, group work process, participation, understanding of academic integrity and plagiarism, etc. Students navigating Canada's academic culture need to reconcile their own experiences with the expectations of a system new to them. As students navigate a new academic culture, differences can become apparent. This process is not always organic and at times can be

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<sup>69</sup> Bart Rienties, Simon Beausaert, Therese Grohnert, Susan Niemantsverdriet, and Piet Kommers, "Understanding academic performance of international students: the role of ethnicity, academic and social integration," *Higher Education* 63, no. 6 (24 July 2011): 688, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9468-1>.

<sup>70</sup> Rienties et al., "Understanding academic performance," 688.

damaging for the student. It can affect their self-confidence, create additional stress, and ultimately have a detrimental impact on their mental health beyond their academic success.

International students have diverse academic backgrounds and experiences – many have studied in international schools and others have already been international students elsewhere. I have observed over the years that students who have participated in multiple international education experiences or have attended an international or Canadian school in their home country are deemed to be better equipped for managing the academic cultural differences they will face in Canada. However, relying on this assumption or generalization can be a risk for faculty, staff, and students alike. Expecting that students with smaller academic cultural baggage will not struggle is unfair because any student can struggle when faced with different elements of our academic environment. There are pieces of our system that can only be understood when experienced in Canada. This is the case despite years of preparation. Students who arrive in Canada expecting not to struggle because they expect the system to seem familiar may hesitate to ask for help when experiencing difficulties. Although students with prior Canadian academic experiences may have an advantage, they will still have to come to terms with their individual academic cultural baggage and learn the values that shape each learning environment within their Canadian experience.

The idiosyncrasies of a place can only be experienced within its context. An example of this can be appreciated in the way students manage social interactions and peer-to-peer relationships in the classroom. International students

struggling to build friendships may find speaking with their peers in the classroom intimidating and difficult. A student's ability to build relationships and find allies within a class can be a factor influencing their success in Canada. Social connections often result in students feeling more confident exchanging ideas with their peers and finding a more open and friendly academic environment overall. When students are unable to build these relationships, they can often feel isolated and find themselves struggling academically. I have observed over the years how students can struggle academically due to a lack of social connection within their programs. The following story reflects one such experience.

**Lisa**

*Lisa completed her high school education in a Canadian high school back home. Lisa achieved an Ontario High School Diploma from her school, which came across as a source of pride and confidence for her. Lisa's English skills were strong – she did not meet the stereotype of an international student from her country struggling with her language skills. She also came across as being very academically driven and in our meetings was always able to state what her goals were for pursuing her university education in Canada. Lisa appeared to be ready for navigating the Canadian classroom, however her transition to university life in Canada was not easy. Lisa was admitted into a highly competitive program – the kind of program where students are required to achieve high grades in order to continue in the program. During her first term in Canada, Lisa struggled deeply with the social elements of her chosen program. The competitive culture within her cohort contradicted her expectations of Canadians. Lisa was expecting to be welcomed by kind Canadians, but instead experienced difficulty relating to and connecting with her peers who did not seem to support one another. Lisa stopped going to her classes after two months in Canada. Lisa felt shame in not being able to connect with her peers. Despite being prepared for the academic requirements of our academic culture, Lisa was not prepared for the social pressures associated with the culture within her program.*

In Lisa's story, intercultural competency could have assisted her in having flexible expectations. This flexibility would have been met with an openness to

focus on approaches that could help her bridge her understanding of the academic culture of her chosen program, while building her skills to respond to those in that context more effectively.

Issues of academic integrity and plagiarism in particular tend to be associated with international students. This is also an area that can really challenge our ability to meet students in their own cultural context and accept academic work that does not meet the academic integrity policies of our institutions. This is however an area that could benefit from increased intercultural understanding in order for us to help bridge students' understanding of the Canadian classroom. I can recall standing in a room with over a hundred new international graduate students and seeing only two hands raised after one of the Referencing Librarians at my university asked who had experience using referencing tools in their work. This is a real issue and at times it comes down to academic values and the differences between academic systems. Many students come from academic cultures that value knowledge sharing, while others may come from places where referencing violations are simply not sanctioned in the same way and therefore they expect more flexibility.

I have met with students who have experienced the clash between their own academic culture's plagiarism norms and those of my university. In these cases, the intent does not justify the actions, however the assumptions we make about those facing issues can affect our degree of empathy and our approach. I see this as an opportunity for us to apply our intercultural skills to influence the experiences of international students facing similar clashes. Moving past assumptions based on stereotypes about where students come from is imperative

to help bridge students' understanding of the academic integrity expectations of our universities. This echoes Sherene Razack's call for us to consider multiple identities<sup>71</sup> and in this case multiple academic experiences, in order to support students in their transition to university life in Canada more effectively.

At my institution, academic integrity issues are flagged and handled outside of the international office, however I have observed that over the years we have made strides as a university in considering the source of the violation and connecting students with services that are able to offer additional education. This is a meaningful step forward, however the connections we facilitate for these students and our approach would benefit from the application of intercultural skills in order to address individualized student cultural needs.

Despite trends in seeing international students struggling with issues of academic integrity, each situation is uniquely compounded by each individual student's cultural baggage. This was the case of Matt and Diego, who as international students had issues with plagiarism, however their experiences were not the same.

### **Matt and Diego**

*Matt and Diego were both upper year international students in their first year of study in Canada. Matt was a transfer student from India. His first language was English and he was pursuing a math based degree, therefore expected that there would be no significant issues for him adapting to Canada's academic culture. As part of his degree however, Matt was expected to write reports, which he did not expect would be a problem. Matt came to my office seeking guidance after receiving a notice from his faculty explaining the occurrence of an academic integrity violation and next steps. Matt was confused and did not understand why he was being accused of plagiarism. He brought a copy of his assignment to show me that there must have been a mistake. The issue was that Matt had failed to use appropriate references throughout his assignment. He had indicated in his introduction that his*

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<sup>71</sup> Razack, "Story-telling for Social Change," 69.

*project was based on a specific source, however he did not properly reference that source throughout his assignment, missing references for graphics and exact quotes throughout. Matt had assumed that by making reference to the author in the introduction and including a bibliography at the end, he was meeting all referencing requirements. Diego, on the other hand, was a third-year student from Spain, in his first year in Canada, and he also received a similar letter from his faculty. Diego was equally surprised to receive this letter notifying him of a conduct issue referencing an assignment and a violation of the university's academic integrity policy. Diego had difficulty understanding why this situation had been escalated in this manner and was disappointed by the way that it was being handled. He did not understand why his professor did not just speak with him about the issue. Diego showed me his assignment and explained that he had used appropriate citations throughout. He said that he had missed including the references in one section and that this had been an oversight. Diego recognized his mistake, however explained that back home a mistake like this would have been simply circled or highlighted in the same way as a spelling mistake. Diego's academic cultural baggage influenced his expectations of the disciplinary process.*

In the story of Matt and Diego we see two students from different backgrounds, experiencing difficulty with the same issue. However, this difficulty is rooted in different approaches, which means that in order to support their learning process effectively, we need to be able to appreciate the intercultural barriers they experienced as individuals.

Many international students experience academic challenges on the basis of their language skills. Students who speak English as an additional language can face significant cultural barriers in the Canadian classroom. Language issues are complex at both the student and institutional levels. Language learning is a process and the issues that come up around language skills in the classroom often require immediate solutions. When a faculty member needs to grade an assignment that is difficult to follow, the options for that student and for the faculty member are limited. A student's language proficiency can have a tremendous impact on their self-esteem and performance, while also creating

challenges for faculty and other students in the classroom. In order to mitigate difficulties around language proficiency, institutions screen students' language skills through English proficiency exams. These results are taken into consideration before a student is admitted into a program. In the case of the institution where I am employed, students can receive conditional offers requiring them to complete additional English language courses offered at the university.

Despite assessing students' language skills prior to their admission, we continue to see issues with students' ability to study in English. Some students are able to meet the minimum requirements to pass tests, however challenges still emerge when they are immersed in an academic English environment. This is something that I can personally relate to as English is my second language. I attended a British school for twelve years and spoke English prior to arriving in Canada, and I have lived in this country for close to seventeen years. Despite my experiences learning in English, I continue to face language barriers in my written and oral language skills. This is also the case for many students, who have to adapt their learning skills and strategies to learning in a new language. For example, these students may have to budget more time when completing readings for a course. My experiences have helped me empathize with students struggling with various language issues. These issues can be extensive, and students face a lack of effective individualized supports.

There is no one resource or service at my institution capable of helping students solve all challenges experienced with their English language skills. There are however, different programs that assist students with specific elements of

their language skills. These programs include conversation groups and the campus writing centre. The people behind these services dedicate significant efforts to supporting international students, however, they are working within structures that prevent them from going deeper into students' individualized needs. Recognizing these structures is important in following the concept of Loving Criticism, which has enabled me to consider the context of the gaps experienced by international students in Canada. When students can face multiple challenges rooted in their language skills, it is difficult for our university services to have specific programs that will meet all of these challenges at any time. This opens the door for recognizing the role of intercultural skills in supporting staff and faculty and teaching international students. We need to be able to take a step back and consider the specific issues experienced by students without simply attributing challenges to a systemic issue of students arriving without an ability to speak English. Our intercultural skills can help us ask appropriate questions to fully recognize what our students are exactly struggling with. This would enable universities to foster an environment that supports the application of intercultural teaching strategies that consider all student experiences. Some students can struggle with typical learning skills compounded by their language skills, while others get lost in the process of translating information from one language to the other, etc. The application of intercultural skills in these situations could have meaningful outcomes for students who feel unsupported in their experiences.

<b>Lynn and Chau</b>
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<i>I met Lynn and Chau, two first year students just outside of my office. The two students were friends and came to the international office together looking for</i>
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*help as their request for academic accommodation through the office for students with disabilities had just been rejected. Chau in particular was very frustrated at our inability to write a letter in support of her request. The students had learnt that there were note-takers in one of their classes and since they were struggling taking notes in that class, they felt that using this service would be helpful. They both mentioned how difficult it was to write and listen, while trying to understand their professor all at the same time. Both students were completing an English language course but were permitted to enroll in one class concurrently. This class took place in a big lecture hall and the speed of the class was also new to them. Both Lynn and Chau required note-taking and learning strategies that went beyond their language skills.*

I have met many students who try to obtain special academic accommodations on the basis of their language skills – more time for completing exams or access to note-taking services from the office that supports students with disabilities. These requests are turned down, and although I am not equating language skills with having a disability, it is appropriate to consider what would be the outcome of granting these requests on the basis of individualized language needs. I would argue that in this case we are faced with an opportunity to increase equity in our universities. Intercultural competency can facilitate this process by creating a space where we can effectively respond to individual student’s circumstances and academic cultural barriers.

These are just some examples of the academic cultural barriers experienced by international students in Canada, including language barriers, connectivity, and academic integrity. The experiences of individual students navigating these issues can depend heavily on their academic background, their resiliency, and on the support services they encounter in the process of adapting to a new academic culture. In choosing Canada, students expect to encounter an internationalized learning environment, where their experiences will be presumably valued. The

way we respond to the diverse needs and backgrounds of our international students will continue to set the pace for our progress towards achieving equity in international education.

#### **4.2 Responding to Academic Cultural Differences**

When studying in a new academic culture, students have to quickly recognize differences and values in order to meet the expectations of that place. Because they intentionally seek international student enrolment, universities have to create the space for students to learn to manage academic differences in an open, respectful, and supportive way. Increasing the intercultural competence of the university can support this by fostering a mindset that encourages meeting individual students' cultural needs. Similarly, universities can extend this to supporting students in developing their own intercultural skills. This would increase students' ability to manage academic differences. In the Canadian classroom, students will learn from diverse faculty members and will be exposed to unique experiences. Investing in the intercultural skills development of international students will influence the way that they respond to conflicts between the images of a multicultural all-accepting Canada and their experiences of otherness. These experiences of otherness in the classroom can be damaging to a student's self-esteem and in my observations, it can lead to students repeating patterns that prevent them from achieving successful outcomes. Working with students to help them develop skills to approach differences openly, not only increases their awareness, but also gives students agency in developing and using tools to effectively recognize and navigate expectations in different academic environments.

**Janet**

*Janet was a graduate student pursuing her MBA. Janet had no previous Canadian experience prior to coming to Canada and was struggling to make connections with her peers as she perceived them as being mainly competitive and not inclusive of others. This was particularly problematic in her program as she became overwhelmed by the expectation to work in groups. Janet felt that in other environments she would be able to work collaboratively with her peers, but she struggled reconciling her expectations of Canadians with her experiences with the people in her program. This became a pattern for her in all of her courses. Janet felt that her peers were dismissive of her experiences and opinions, which resulted in her feeling excluded and unrepresented. Janet explained that she did not have much experience working in groups, but despite this inexperience, she attributed her problems to not being able to connect with her Canadian counterparts. Janet struggled building friendships with Canadians, who she perceived as cold and uninviting – a conflict with the image that she had of Canada prior to coming here.*

Student's own perceptions and expectations of Canada's academic environment can hinder their academic transition. However, the way universities respond to other academic traditions and cultures within Canada can also demoralize and impact student success. Our perception of other academic cultures and our over-valuing of our own system can result in the discounting of other practices perceived as falling outside of the norm. Sunera Thobani explains how multiculturalism has contributed to our overvaluing of dominant norms:

Multiculturalism masked the continuity of white privilege, even as the justification of this privilege was being profoundly eroded. The national subject remained empowered by displacing the patterns of discrimination and racial hatred onto the now disclaimed past or onto its own rejected, obstreperous, and stubborn minority in the present.<sup>72</sup>

This privilege has become entrenched in our process and we have come to rely on multiculturalism to highlight differences and further alienate/marginalize others

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<sup>72</sup> Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects, Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 154.

more subtly but still detrimentally. It is not surprising that international students can become alienated in the classroom if they do not comply with the expected sociocultural norms of our Canadian academic culture. Despite our best efforts to recruit top-performing international students, including those educated in international schools, we continue to see international students who struggle with the norms used to represent knowledge in Canada. We know that this can be devastating for students who arrive unprepared for the gaps between their expectations of Canada and their actual experiences. The bulk of the responsibility however is placed on students, as they are the ones choosing to pursue their education in our universities. Continuing to justify inequity in international education in this manner is becoming more difficult as we continue to see increasing numbers of international students in our classrooms. Universities have an opportunity to make their experiences more equitable by intentionally developing their intercultural competence.

In February 2017 Inside Higher ED announced the results of a survey addressing the experiences of international students in the classroom. Six hundred and sixty two international students in the United States were asked what they would want their professors to do differently – thirty three percent of respondents indicated wanting professors to seek to understand international students’ perspective, while twenty eight percent would like them to provide non-local examples in course contents.<sup>73</sup> As explained by the author, Elizabeth

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<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Redden, “Teaching and Integrating International Students,” *Inside Higher Education*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/node/187661>.

Redden, this survey is limited in value as the outcomes are skewed by students' experiences and background - she explains for example that the presence of native English speakers could have skewed the overall figures.<sup>74</sup> This is also a survey conducted outside of Canada. However, these results support my observations working with international students here in Canada, echoing that small actions in the classroom, such as reconsidering examples used, can have a significant impact on the experiences of students. This is relevant as we consider the application of intercultural skills in the classroom and other academic environments.

The application of intercultural skills allows us to focus on the individual experiences of students, and therefore position us to reevaluate our teaching strategies and become more student-centric. Faculty and instructors have to teach and assess students who seem to have varying levels of preparedness for the material and learning environment in their courses. This can create numerous challenges influencing the experiences of all students in the classroom. Earlier this week I witnessed a Twitter discussion between students in a class on the merits of having to do group work with students who speak English as an additional language. While one student was upset about what this would mean for his grade, others countered with the potential benefits of working with a student from another country. Situations like this push those at the front of the classroom to find creative ways to engage and teach everyone in their courses, while managing the academic cultural baggage of each student. This is no easy

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<sup>74</sup> Redden, "Teaching and Integrating International Students."

task, but with an understanding of the stakes for both individual students and faculty, we have an opportunity to achieve more equity in international education through the application of intercultural competency at all levels of a university.

### **4.3 Opportunities in Intercultural Competency Development**

Internationalization continues to be a main focus of international education, mainly supported by student mobility. There are however opportunities for looking deeper into internationalization to seek out new approaches to supporting the academic experiences of international students. It is no longer good enough to say that students have to simply adapt. I recognize the importance of students meeting the academic expectations of a place, however at the same time I do not want to miss the opportunities for incorporating new perspectives and values as part of a truly internationalized education experience for both international and domestic students.

The concept of intercultural learning is explored by Hanneke Teekens, who defines it as “... blending concepts like *foreign*, *strange*, and *otherness* into teaching strategies that make an effort to integrate the cultural input of students, to use different backgrounds as a source of learning, and to see students with different backgrounds as resources themselves.”<sup>75</sup> This offers the opportunity for multiple experiences to be discussed in a safe and respectful way. Intercultural learning engages faculty and instructors to intentionally consider multiple experiences, including that of international students. This approach has the

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<sup>75</sup> Hanneke Teekens, “The Requirement to Develop Specific Skills for Teaching in an Intercultural Setting,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 7, no. 1 (1 March 2003): 109-110, <http://doi.org/10.1177/1028315302250192>.

potential to help international students feel more valued by having their experiences recognized as important sources of knowledge and information. Although Teekens does not address intercultural competence directly, he discusses the need to “integrate an *international* and an *intercultural* dimension into the content and delivery of the curriculum of all students.”<sup>76</sup> Developing our intercultural skills can facilitate this process by supporting us in not only considering and presenting multiple approaches, but furthermore by helping us move in and out of multiple cultural contexts. Intercultural competence is “the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context.”<sup>77</sup> This would apply to intercultural situations in the classroom. Intercultural learning opens the learning environment to multiple learning experiences, allowing all students the same opportunity to engage with the curriculum. As a strategy, intercultural learning could help bridge international students and support them in meeting the expectations of the Canadian classroom more organically, while maintaining respect for other academic cultures and approaches. This respect is key in helping students find their voice and therefore become engaged learners in Canada.

#### **4.4 International Student Experiences of the Canadian Classroom: Summary**

International students arrive in Canada with diverse levels of preparedness for the Canadian academic culture. Though their prior experiences have eased the transition of some students, most international students find themselves in a

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<sup>76</sup> Teekens, “Requirement to Develop,” 109.

<sup>77</sup> Perry and Southwell, “Developing intercultural understanding,” 453.

vulnerable position, being expected to adapt and meet the expectations of a new learning environment, while learning to navigate new social and cultural situations. Even the most prepared students can struggle with differences that can only be appreciated in their environment. It is true that a university cannot take responsibility for students' academic goals, especially as we take into account other factors influencing student academic success, such as their ability and suitability for a program, personal circumstances, and attitude. However, as we increase our recruitment efforts to attract more international students to Canada, we adopt a responsibility to be effective in supporting their experiences transitioning to university life in Canada. This involves responding to students more positively and empathetically, by taking the time to understand their experiences of our academic culture. This can result in meaningful outcomes for individual students who are learning to navigate new academic situations.

Increasing our intercultural skills and competency campus-wide can help narrow the inequities experienced by many international students in the classroom. Acknowledging the role of cultural differences in the classroom and incorporating new strategies and tools can help set the stage for individual students to be successful. Changes in our mindset and approach will bring us closer to achieving equity in international education in Canada.

## **5. International Student Services**

### **Emma**

*Emma, a student in her first year, felt lonely and discouraged about student life in Canada about a month after the start of the semester. Emma's English skills were strong and she completed her high school education in an international school back home. Emma explained that she felt like an outsider in Canada. She used her clothes as an example – she wore haute couture clothes, which she said clashed with all other students. Emma felt that other students stared at her in class and when walking across campus. She was discouraged and was disappointed not having made any good friends yet in Canada. Emma did not want to exchange her clothes for the typical student look. She had made efforts to connect with people, joining for example a fashion club on campus, which ended up being a club about being thrifty. Emma was losing her motivation to complete schoolwork and explore her new city.*

Emma's story is significant in providing an example of the value and purpose of international student services at a university. Feelings of isolation and otherness can be common amongst international students, who can feel that they have to negate pieces of themselves to adapt and fit in within Canada.

International students have to develop proficiency for navigating Canada, however this should not happen at the expense of core elements of an individual's identity – which can be much more complex than their fashion choices. At my university, international student services are just one of the many support programs and offices available to help students navigate university life. Students typically need to be motivated to be proactive and seek these services. This means that although we have a responsibility to offer services that meet diverse needs, ultimately it is students who will direct their own course, seeking support and asking for help. The background and culture of a student can influence their willingness to seek these support services. Some may be hesitant due to fear of authority, while other students may perceive seeking support as a sign of

weakness. Cultural barriers can create significant gaps in the way that international students engage, and access supports designed to facilitate students' university experiences – academic, social, and cultural. Emma's experience echoes that of many international students who shortly after their arrival in Canada seek out services to address the challenges in their experience. Emma fit the mold of the perfect international student in Canada; however, despite her socioeconomic status and ability to speak English, she struggled with managing sociocultural differences without support. We have a responsibility to help connect students who seek out services, while also addressing the cultural barriers experienced by those students who are not willingly accessing supports when needed. This requires that we consider our skillset to effectively offer services across the university in an intercultural context.

Students value the culture of support in Canadian universities, where we can appreciate that big investments are made to support all aspects of student life. Many exchange students in particular have indicated this after spending some time in Canada and comparing the services of my institution with those of their own universities. I will share some of those stories here, as they offer relevant international student experiences of our support services.

Universities like mine seek to support all aspects of student life, which has led to the development of support services and programs that consider the barriers and challenges that students can face on the road to academic success. In the course of my professional career I have observed how my university is committed to supporting students by expanding service areas in an effort to stay current and address generational shifts. This however takes place within the

same cultural context and therefore, even as universities demonstrate fluidity in keeping up with trends and changing needs, they are still not necessarily able to extend all services effectively in intercultural situations.

Over the past decade my university has made significant changes to support student mental health. The work of my university in this area requires more in-depth analysis taking into account the experiences of international students. Mental health support and the achievements of my institution in addressing student mental health and wellbeing stand as an example of how a university can apply strategies across the institution to intentionally increase the quality and effectiveness of student services. Despite efforts to extend relevant student services, we continue to see opportunities to better engage international students, consider the cultural barriers creating issues of equity in their experiences, and develop our skillset to offer effective intercultural student services. Each of these opportunities will be explored here along with relevant student stories.

### **5.1 Supporting International Students – Meeting the Mark**

I once found myself in a meeting discussing international student services and it was brought up that in order for us to support international students more effectively at the university, we needed to offer winter clothes shopping assistance. This suggestion was brought forward by individuals who identified a barrier in the transition of international students in Canada. The suggestion was valid; however, it indicated a lack of knowledge often seen across the university about existing international student services and of the depth of those services. The international office at my institution does offer programs and activities that help students prepare for the Canadian winter. These activities mainly involve

facilitating shopping outings in which volunteers answer questions for students looking to buy winter gear for the first time. Programs like this one address day-to-day situations that students may face as part of their new life in Canada and they play a significant role in supporting student transition. For example, knowing how and where to buy a cellphone, where to shop for food, how to take the transit system, etc. are important skills and information.

These services however do not stand alone in their support for international students. While the issue of having a proper winter coat may be easy for people to relate to, it does not reflect the depth of issues that students can experience when navigating different norms and practices in a new country. An example of this is the issue of time, which is experienced differently across the world. In some countries, there is flexibility with time, while in others there is an expectation of punctuality. Cultural differences like this one can lead to conflicts between people that respond to the same situation differently –it could mean a student showing up to a group meeting fifteen or twenty minutes late without hesitation or apology. Invisible cultural norms carry significant weight in the way that we relate to one another and in the case of international students, in their enjoyment of life here in Canada.

Being responsible for coordinating services to support international student needs puts me in a difficult position here evaluating services at my institution. However, this process has motivated me to address opportunities in the way that current programs support diverse cultural needs across campus. It is important to note that international students access services across the institution. The scope of the international office does not include the breadth of services offered

across campus – each service provider is seen as having an expertise in their area of support. Since international students access support services across the university, it is reasonable to address their experiences accessing different services, and furthermore consider the opportunities for increasing the intercultural competence of those services.

Support services aim to address barriers influencing the wellbeing and academic performance of students. International students can experience typical student challenges, but cultural barriers can compound their experiences. Our services and programs need to be in a position to manage these intercultural situations, especially as we continue to intentionally increase the international student population at our universities. As service providers, we need to understand how to support students across cultural barriers and taking the time to analyze current experiences can offer us a meaningful starting point.

The first step in analyzing the experiences of international students accessing services across campus, is evaluating the way international students access services to begin with. We often rely on students being able to self-advocate in order for them to take full advantage of our services. This is an important consideration because not all students are in a position to seek help. Students are active participants in their success, however cultural barriers can influence their ability to engage with our structures. This means that international students face inequity when accessing services in situations where we are unable to reach them in effective and meaningful ways across cultural differences. Extending our services to all students in an inviting way may not resonate with all students across cultures and it calls into question our own

expectations of others. If we advertise and promote our services in ways that we believe are attractive, then we project the responsibility for accessing them onto those who should respond to our efforts. By presenting an open and friendly image, we feel that we cannot miss anyone. However, this is not always the case and therefore we need to evaluate how students perceive our services to begin with.

The culture of support that we work to foster at my university may not resonate with others. Ultimately, the university is behind the services, and some students may therefore perceive them as being authoritative. Additionally, the notion of seeking help is different across cultures; in some societies people are expected to self-regulate and manage their own issues in private. In the case of international graduate students, they may also come from other academic cultures and institutions where services are not offered or are meant for the students who are the weakest in a program. Accessing services and asking for help can therefore be associated with a sense of guilt or shame, which often results in students asking for help too late. That perception acts as a barrier for some students in connecting with our programs and services. The image that we aim to create does not always translate into the perception that others have of our services.

<b>Alejandra</b>
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<i>Alejandra, a third-year student came to the international office because her study permit was going to expire within the current semester. Alejandra was not enrolled in classes however and due to a prior financial hold, had missed the enrolment deadline by a week. Since she was not enrolled at the university, she was unable to get the required documents to extend her status in Canada. Alejandra had to be connected with the Immigration Advisor at the international office for support. Alejandra made the decision to not ask for help or seek services prior to this point because she felt embarrassed about the</i>
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*financial hold on her account. This resulted in her missing potential appeal processes and pertinent information about her status in Canada.*

**Rebecca**

*Rebecca, a first-year student, went to the on-campus bank to open a bank account and deposit the money that she brought with her from back home shortly after arriving in Canada. Rebecca felt nervous waking into the bank by herself. Upon entering the bank, she was greeted enthusiastically and when she identified herself as an international student, the person at the bank started asking her more questions about herself and where she was from. Rebecca got more nervous and did not know how to respond. She felt that she should not trust someone in a position of power with her personal information. In that moment, her reaction was to not respond and leave the bank in a hurry. Rebecca did not open a bank account that day and she continued to hold onto a large amount of money in cash until she felt confident going back again. Rebecca did not understand why the person at the bank was so friendly and showed so much interest in her life.*

The way we communicate information to students is also relevant within this analysis as universities rely on technology more and more to communicate resources and offer actual support to students. Students at my university can access information, resources, and tools remotely through our website, social media, and a mobile application. This shift in our use of technology has had an important outcome in shifting approaches to meet student's generational needs. The efforts made by my university over the last ten years to develop new tools and strategies demonstrates a commitment to student success. The experiences of international students taking advantage of these tools is diverse, considering that for example we may miss students who do not use the same social media platforms and that even when they do, the way people relate to and use social media may differ across cultures. With that in mind, we need to consider the way we communicate with students to develop appropriate connections across the board. Making the assumption that all students communicate in our expected

formats can create an imbalance of information and therefore impact the accessibility of our services. For international students, this can result in students feeling unsupported as they navigate their new life in Canada.

I have met students who arrived at the international office in their last year of study, who did not know that our office existed up until that point. I have also met students who were upset because they could not navigate our website and find information that they expected should be offered online. Given that we expect students to seek out resources when needed, it is our responsibility to address the cultural barriers involved in reaching every student by communicating with all international students across cultural differences in an effective, timely, and appropriate way.

**Beverly**

*Beverly started volunteering with the international office as a student mentor. Beverly was motivated and enthusiastic about her university experience in Canada and was excited to help new students in the role of mentor. As mentors prepared for their role over the summer months, Beverly became disadvantaged because all other team members began connecting over Facebook, which Beverly did not use. Mentors set up a group, which became a tool for sharing resources and information. All mentors knew that Beverly was not a Facebook user; however, they saw that as her own choice in not engaging with the team. Although some team members attempted being more inclusive by using email, Beverly stood out as an outsider for missing what became a central meeting spot for all other mentors.*

In developing communication plans to connect students with support programs, we need to consider the experiences of international students to determine the timelines and content, beyond the methods and tools used to communicate the information. For example, international student orientation programs play an important role in welcoming and supporting the experiences of new international students. The students that learn about this program and

attend have an advantage over those who do not. Attendees have the opportunity to build a relationship with different service providers, faculty, and peers, and therefore establish a network of support early on in their experience in Canada. For students whose parents attend the orientation with them, this advantage is even greater, as parents are offered a unique orientation that gives them insight into what student life may look like for their children in Canada. The orientation in the fall offers students the possibility of moving into their on-campus residence earlier, providing more time to help students adjust and learn to navigate their new home. Despite addressing several areas of concern for international students, this orientation program is not accessible to all and it therefore contributes to the inequity experienced by international students at my institution. Looking at this program through the lens of Loving Criticism has forced me to be critical in a more constructive way, letting go of my own judgements and be more accepting of the world.<sup>78</sup> The barriers making this program inaccessible to all include delays for some students in obtaining their visas, last minute flight changes, and what a colleague once called orientation disorientation. Students with travel and visa delays experience issues that fall outside of the university's control. However, those who experience orientation disorientation can attribute this to issues with the way that we communicate and position different orientation programs. Orientation disorientation happens when there are many orientation programs offered concurrently or close together, devaluing the impact or importance of one program against the other.

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<sup>78</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 25.

Besides the international student orientation, students have faculty and academic specific orientations, as well as social orientation programs, etc. Each program plays an important role in supporting different aspects of student life. However, without clear customized messaging, students can easily become confused about what programs they should attend.

The current model creates the impression of service providers competing for students' attendance, overlooking the importance of addressing the needs of individual students. Attending orientation makes a difference in the experiences of students and we therefore have an opportunity here to develop ways to connect individual students with their own orientation experience, which may include attending more than one orientation session or program. In the case of international students, this would help us develop messaging that connects students with the opportunities available to them. Addressing the issues created by this orientation disorientation requires that we challenge our assumptions and take into account the experiences of international students navigating multiple orientation resources and information. We also need to consider that when sending information around the world, we may be working with students who do not have equal access to the Internet. Orientations are meant to bridge the experiences of students and the current issues we see with orientation disorientation offers us an opportunity to create more equitable outcomes for all students, including international students.

<b>Noah</b>
<i>Noah, a new international student arriving in Canada in the fall contacted the international office by email upset because he would be missing the international student orientation. Noah indicated that his family had already purchased tickets to fly to Canada and they did this in accordance with the</i>

*general information provided by the University. Since the orientation for international students takes place prior to the general move in dates, they would not be able to attend. Noah was worried about the implications of missing this orientation and was confused about not receiving the appropriate relevant information early on.*

The cultural barriers that influence students' access to our services are important, but once they are accessing services, we also need to consider how they experience our support and programs, as well as the implications of not doing so. For example, in our meetings with students, there is great value in asking questions to learn more about their actual experience with our policies and services to fully understand their situation and behavior. In the case of disciplinary situations, students may have a different relationship with or understanding of the law depending on where they come from. The way students relate to our policies around alcohol for example, may be different and therefore our approach in addressing students can either help them navigate the differences, or further marginalize them. In some cultures, it is normal to have open alcohol in parks and most definitely in your home. This can pose issues for students navigating policies that prevent them from carrying a glass of wine from one room to another, or down the hallway in residence. Even though students read the rules, it may still be difficult to relate to them in the way that we mean them to.

In the case of students who are suspended from their program or from the university, it is also important for service providers to apply an intercultural lens to recognize that the impact of situations such as these may have deeper implications for international students, potentially jeopardizing their

immigration status and their health insurance coverage. This does not mean that students would not be penalized, however it means that the way we connect and support students in those situations may be different.

**Shimon**

*Shimon, a third-year student was suspended after a significant violation of the student code of conduct at the university. After his suspension, Shimon was told that he could reenroll at the end of the suspension and was told to seek out different opportunities in the meantime. Shimon decided to stay in the city and work. Shimon faced some issues when his status in Canada became invalidated during his suspension, as his student status required him to maintain registration while in Canada.*

The experiences of international students accessing student services across the university highlight the need for everyone working in student services to develop their intercultural skills, not only those working at the international office. Students seek out services across the university in different ways whether in the form of an orientation, support during a difficult time, or receiving communications from multiple points. The potential outcome of this is seeing students who can take full advantage of the tools available to support their success in university. The next section considers the experiences of international students accessing services supporting student mental health and wellbeing. This requires special analysis as universities look to increase their support of student mental health.

## **5.2 Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Over the past ten years, I have experienced first-hand the commitment of my university to supporting student mental health and wellbeing. This investment has resulted in faculty, staff, and student leaders receiving training to be prepared to identify and manage mental health emergencies at the university.

This investment in student mental health has not stopped at crisis preparedness, and we have started implementing services that are proactive in educating and supporting the wellbeing of students. This has resulted in the implementation of different initiatives that have spread campus-wide. These efforts to support student mental health and wellbeing create an opportunity to analyze the experiences of international students and the potential for cultural barriers to influence the accessibility of programs and initiatives in intercultural contexts.

Nutrition is a factor in student wellbeing and a worthwhile consideration when discussing the wellbeing of international students in Canada. An article published by ICEF Monitor on this subject, highlights the impact of food on the international student experience, indicating that accessing healthy items, similar ‘cultural’ foods, and managing fears around gaining weight on the North American diet<sup>79</sup> can be some of the issues influencing the experience of international students. These concerns can cause significant stress for students and affect their enjoyment of life in Canada. However, for some students, issues of food security can develop into serious challenges influencing their wellbeing. I have met with students who restrict their diet for financial reasons and/or fully depend on the campus food bank to supplement their diet. For these students in particular, campus life may be challenging. Food can have a tremendous impact on the wellbeing of our students and there are simple steps that can be taken to ease the pressure experienced by many students. Being mindful of the

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<sup>79</sup> “Table stakes: The link between food culture and student satisfaction,” ICEF Monitor, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://monitor.icef.com/2016/04/table-stakes-the-link-between-food-culture-and-student-satisfaction/>.

experiences of international students would help us take small steps on campus that could actually have a big impact. One such step could be diversifying the foods available to students in the campus food bank. Intercultural competence would help facilitate this process by helping us look for the experiences of others with an intercultural lens.

**Andrew**

*Andrew, a third-year student from India, experienced significant issues with his nutrition at the end of the fall term that year, which resulted in him having to see a doctor and be prescribed medications to support his health. Andrew's father became ill and the family had to redirect funds to supporting his medical bills, which had an impact on his ability to afford monthly expenses. Andrew did not want to worry his family further and therefore did not mention his difficulties affording food to them. When I first met with Andrew, he looked ill and was embarrassed to disclose his financial situation. However, upon pressing he confessed that he was only eating one meal a day and that it was mainly white rice. After this meeting, Andrew began accessing the campus food bank. Despite the support of the campus food bank, Andrew continued to struggle as that service offered mainly canned and non-perishable food items that were not a part of his diet. Andrew was missing products such as paneer, which is a type of cheese used as a source of protein back home. Andrew felt guilty in expressing this to me during a follow up meeting.*

Counseling services play an important role in supporting student mental health and wellbeing. At my university, students can work with a counselor to support their mental health needs, including developing their resiliency to manage stress and challenging situations. These services have been of great value for students experiencing a mental health crisis. In supporting the mental health of international students, we have the opportunity to consider how individuals from different cultures or backgrounds approach their mental health. Our students can relate to mental health services differently depending on their prior experiences. In some cases, students may get a diagnosis for the first time in

Canada, while in other students may arrive in Canada with a diagnosis.

Mental health awareness is not prevalent in every country or culture, which puts many students at a disadvantage when learning for the first time that they may need to take steps to support their mental health. I have met with students who question seeing a counselor out of fear of the perception that this may cause not only for others, but also from themselves. Applying an intercultural lens to our delivery of mental health services can make a difference in the way that students relate and open up to those services. “Counsellors need cultural self-awareness and sensitivity, an awareness of assumptions or values, openness to and respect for differing value systems, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to learn with and from clients, and a genuine concern for people with differing values.”<sup>80</sup> This influences the willingness of students to proactively discuss issues when they arise before they escalate into a crisis. Although at my university I have seen the positive impact of our mental health support services on many international students, we still see opportunities to help connect others who judge accessing mental health services through a different cultural context or lens. This analysis does not end at highlighting the positive experiences against the negative or difficult ones. Instead, it helps us expand our understanding to consider intercultural experiences and challenges within the context of mental health and mental health services.

<b>Olivia</b>
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<i>Olivia, an exchange student studying in Canada for a year, was very self-aware and arrived in Canada with the diagnosis of a mental illness. After a</i>
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<sup>80</sup> Paul B. Pedersen, “Counseling International Students,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 19, no. 1 (1 January 1991): 15, <http://doi.org/10.1177/0011000091191002>.

*few weeks of living in Canada, Olivia recognized that her mental health was declining and was quick to get connected with multiple points of support at the university. She had a counselor and worked with different advisors to check in throughout her stay in Canada. At the end of her time here, her biggest struggle was knowing that in returning home, she would not have access to the same services at her home institution. This caused her stress in realizing that she was losing her support network.*

**Christina**

*Christina, a student in her graduating year, started struggling with her mental health after her partner ended their relationship. Christina became depressed and was experiencing suicide ideation. When referred to the counseling and medical team at the university for support, she attended appointments but felt very strongly that she should not take medication. She indicated often that her family encouraged her to manage her own emotions and that it was okay to feel sad. She saw the advice of the doctor in Canada as a way of numbing her experience instead of it being a treatment for an illness.*

Having a support network and feeling connected is another factor in the wellbeing of international students. When students' typical support network is far away, in conflicting time zones, this may seem even more urgent. Students can struggle with feeling connected in Canada despite having lived in the country for many years. There are several mentorship programs at my university that aim to connect students on campus, however the way students relate to their mentor and to other students may be impacted by their experiences making friends in Canada. The impact of this can be detrimental for an individual's wellbeing, especially when feeling isolated and othered for several years.

I have met students who despite having a successful academic career in Canada for many years continue to feel socially isolated and struggle to make friends. This is a good example of the potential impact of supporting the intercultural skills development of our students as well as helping them engage in meaningful conversations across cultural barriers. However, this also speaks to

the need for our mentors and students across campus to have the opportunity to develop their intercultural skills as well, in order to more clearly identify opportunities to establish relationships and connections with students from diverse backgrounds. Positioning all students as active participants in the intercultural development of our universities is important as we support their success navigating multiple cultural environments.

International students are not passive and without responsibility in this narrative. In the case of some students, it is their own stereotypes of Canadians that can get in the way of them building meaningful relationships in Canada. At my institution, is not uncommon for us to assume that by exposing students to differences in or outside of Canada, students will develop their intercultural skills. However, this is not the case for all students as experiencing cultural differences can actually widen the gap between people from different backgrounds. The way we help connect students across cultural differences has an impact on their wellbeing relating to and navigating different cultural and social situations in Canada.

**Mark**

*Mark, a graduate student, who had been in Canada for several years, completed his high school, undergraduate, and masters education here. Mark was in the process of successfully completing his PhD when he decided to seek help making friends in Canada. Mark projected the image of a successful international student experience; however, he was struggling with making friends and was very lonely. Even though Mark made efforts to attend events designed to help students like him meet other students, they were only making him feel more isolated reinforcing that he did not have any friends here. Mark had many colleagues and peers with whom he had a good working relationship, but he felt that those relationships lacked depth. Over time, Mark had developed misconceptions about people in Canada, who he described as being superficial.*

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively has to involve intentionally addressing the cultural barriers that may prevent students from accessing services equally. The mental health of international students is most definitely an area of concern at our universities as we see students experiencing stress and challenges in transitioning to life in a new country. As a university, we all need to be more effective in managing student intercultural needs. The stakes are high for individual students who are currently struggling to adapt to our preconceived notions and expectations of international students in Canada. A campus-wide strategy around student mental health demonstrates a willingness to support all students. We see that many international students are accessing services, however we need to consider the cultural barriers negatively impacting the wellbeing of international students at our universities. Issues of food security, social connections, and access to support services are just some of the ways in which we need to consider the intercultural implications for international student wellbeing, and the opportunities involved in developing intercultural competence campus wide.

### **5.3 Opportunities in Intercultural Competency Development**

Intercultural competence supports a student-centric approach, which is of great importance when delivering services to a diverse student population. “Because international students are such a diverse population, even when the same issues are researched, the findings are often contradictory.”<sup>81</sup> This requires everyone responsible for developing and facilitating support services to develop

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<sup>81</sup> Pedersen, “Counselling International Students,” 14.

their intercultural competence to be more effective in responding to multiple cultural needs. The growth of our international student population highlights an opportunity for universities to become more effective in managing intercultural situations. International students are accessing services across the university, including personal and academic supports. Services and programs have a common goal in aiming to support the student experience and the success of students at our universities. My experiences in international education suggest that there are many unique student experiences and needs across the university. All students go through an adaptation period when transitioning from high school to university, or from their undergraduate to graduate education; however, “[i]n the context of international students, additional factors might play a role for successful adaptation, acculturation, academic and social integration.”<sup>82</sup> Our programs need to be more competent at recognizing these challenges to ensure that we can be more effective in reaching diverse students. Developing our intercultural skills in the area of student services would allow us to offer services that take the time to analyze our interactions with individuals, predict misunderstandings, and shift our approaches in a way that considers experiences across cultural differences.<sup>83</sup> This shift requires the commitment of individuals across the university, in order to reframe our services and challenge our assumptions about and stereotypes of international students, including positive and negative stereotypes. We are called to be mindful and open to responding to the needs and situations of individuals that we come into contact with, rather

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<sup>82</sup> Rienties et al., “Understanding academic performance,” 687.

<sup>83</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity.” 149.

than taking steps based on our general knowledge of student or cultural groups. This may be easier to apply when we think about one-on-one interactions with students, however it also needs to influence program design.

There are many approaches to developing intercultural competency, including training and international experiences.<sup>84</sup> However, in order to be effective in engaging effectively across cultures, I believe that we need to recognize the role of our own limitations and experiences. For example, we all have different skills and comfort levels when reading and responding to cultural cues. This process can be influenced by our biases and our understanding of others. With this in mind, we need to consider our own biases and cultural barriers in supporting different student groups. A common stereotype about Chinese international students is that they tend to have a big language barrier and therefore tend to keep to themselves as a group. This type of thinking can guide the way service providers respond to students from China from the start of their experience. If you expect that students from a particular country will not access your services because they seek support from their peers, you will not question your impact, or lack of impact, on that population. At the same time, if you expect that students from a particular country will all struggle with their language skills, you will justify individual experiences as institutional problems that you cannot change. Expectations, regardless of their foundation, can come to excuse the way we interact with individual students, or the way we deliver services and programs. If we base our interactions with students on

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<sup>84</sup> Perry and Southwell, "Developing intercultural understanding," 457.

generalizations, it is likely that we will become complaisant with the way we support students from different cultural backgrounds and miss the potential for deeper impact.

In the case of our Chinese student population, which makes up over fifty percent of the international student population at my institution, we need to consider the way other identities intersect making this one of the most diverse student populations, despite sharing the same nationality. Chinese students may arrive from different cities or rural areas of the country, and have diverse academic and cultural experiences, as well as varying sexual orientations, genders, ages, abilities, and socioeconomic positions. Service providers have an opportunity to support students more effectively by looking at the entire student, instead of taking action based on their expectations of students from different backgrounds.

Developing interculturally competent programs involves being proactive in considering multiple experiences across cultures, creating the spaces for customization to take place, and allowing individual students to pick and choose based on their changing needs. Students need to feel secure in making these choices. We need to challenge ourselves to increase the depth of our programs by also challenging our expected outcomes and stereotypes about those accessing our services.

By being open to multiple student experiences, our programs have the opportunity to support our students' development of intercultural skills. This would facilitate their experiences navigating different situations and challenges in Canada. For example, in supporting students prior to their arrival in Canada, we

have an opportunity to increase the depth of our services by providing more resources addressing the academic culture and environment of our institutions<sup>85</sup>. Although this may seem superficial given the discussion here, our approach in accomplishing this could influence the mindset of students to be open when managing intercultural differences in different contexts on campus. A recent article published in *Student Affairs* magazine featured steps that universities in Canada are taking to help international students succeed. Many of the strategies and programs listed are also offered at my institution, including airport welcome programs, orientations, and ongoing social events.<sup>86</sup> Opportunities to learn logistics are important; however, supporting all international students equitably needs to be a campus wide effort.

I am currently working to establish an online pre-arrival orientation program for international students. This project is in its infancy and as I consider the information in the literature, I have to remind myself that we need to dig deeper to avoid creating expectations for students that will not be met. I am dealing with a lack of practicality that is associated with the application of an intercultural lens, as it entails having to consider multiple student experiences, beyond the norm. Avoiding issues is impossible, as I cannot predict all student experiences of this resource, however I am attempting to speak about multiple potential outcomes for students navigating different aspects of student life in Canada. In developing an online program such as this, the hope is that most

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<sup>85</sup> Rienties et al., "Understanding academic performance," 698.

<sup>86</sup> Suzanne Bowness, "Universities take steps to help international students succeed," *University Affairs-Affaires Universitaires*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/universities-take-steps-help-international-students-succeed/>.

students will access it prior to or shortly after their arrival in Canada. There is a great opportunity here to create a resource that can be accessible to all, however the way we present and position this resource will impact its uptake across the international student population. This is a welcomed opportunity to further evaluate what it can look like to develop interculturally competent programs.

Offering student-centric services can at first seem challenging as it signals an increase in one-on-one supports when service providers already have limited resources and budgets. However, there are small things that we are already doing well, and small changes that can be implemented resulting in meaningful improvements in the way that we see and respond to international students navigating our universities.

#### **5.4 International Student Services: Summary**

International students have the opportunity to access a wide range of services and programs designed to support student success. These services range from personal services to academic support services, including services that support student mental health and wellbeing. At the university where I am currently employed, these services have demonstrated great success in supporting many students, however through the experiences of international students we continue to see opportunities to address instances of inequity. These opportunities are found in the way students consume information, in the assumptions that we make about international students, in the accessibility of our services across cultures, and in the manner in which students relate to our programs.

The cultural barriers experienced by international students in our

universities call into question the success of universities in managing intercultural situations when they arise in multiple contexts. Stereotypes and misconceptions about international students can create significant gaps in services and put international students at a disadvantage based on their individual cultural barriers. This analysis helps identify opportunities for making our services more equitable and accessible to international students, including the potential outcomes of developing the intercultural competence of universities in Canada.

Having a more coordinated campus-wide intercultural strategy involves building the intercultural capacity of all staff working in student services. A coordinated effort will lead to services being more intentional in addressing all student needs, including any cultural barriers experienced by individual international students. As service providers we have a responsibility to offer effective intercultural services that engage with all students across cultures. Programs must be flexible and adapt to multiple circumstances as students can experience intercultural challenges despite their own perceived level of preparedness, prior international experiences, and or level of study. Similar challenges or trends can trigger different outcomes for individual students. This lack of predictability reinforces the potential impact of developing the intercultural skills of everyone at the university, creating a space where students can be supported equitably across cultural barriers.

## **6. Finances and Changing World Conditions**

The financial circumstance of international students in Canada is diverse, and while some students face no financial concerns, others face significant sacrifices to be here. Every year I come across students experiencing financial difficulties ranging from outstanding tuition balances, to students having difficulty paying their rent and other monthly bills. As self-funded students, international students do have a financial responsibility when choosing to pursue their education in Canada. However, their finances and changing world conditions offer insight into issues of equity experienced by international students based on cultural barriers and on difficulties imposed by processes that are unable to manage intercultural situations.

Canadian universities are doing a phenomenal job recruiting international students. As noted by ICEF Monitoring, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) reported at the 2017 CBIE Conference in Halifax that in 2016 there was a 17.5% increase in foreign enrollment in Canadian institutions.<sup>87</sup> This is a significant increase in the number of international students in the country and presumably an indicator of the increasing financial benefits of international recruitment. However, by increasing the number of students, universities have to be more prepared to manage intercultural challenges, including creating buffers and implementing systems that can effectively respond to the changing financial circumstances of students. The application of an intercultural lens in this case

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<sup>87</sup> “Canada’s international student enrolment surges in 2016,” ICEF Monitor, accessed 27 May 2018, <http://monitor.icef.com/2017/11/canadas-international-student-enrolment-surged-2016/?platform=hootsuite>.

can lead to processes that can help students be successful in meeting their financial commitments in Canada.

Over the years, I have witnessed the manner in which financial processes and instability caused by changing world conditions, amongst other factors, can have detrimental outcomes for international students. Financial difficulties affect many international students, graduate and undergraduate, and from multiple backgrounds. This reality contradicts the comforting image of the wealthy international student leaving their home country to pursue a foreign education. This assumption has created challenges for international students, who are ultimately dependent on foreign sources of income to support their education in Canada. We have students from different countries who have to navigate challenging banking systems, students whose families experience changes in their finances due to illness or changes in government, and students who navigate precarious relationships to maintain their financial wellbeing in Canada. The next section covers student financial stories, including their experiences navigating structures and processes, as well as an overview of the issues that continue to influence the success of international students in Canada.

### **6.1 International Student Stories**

<p><b>Karen</b></p> <p><i>Karen, a student in her last year of studies, found herself in a precarious situation. Karen had excelled throughout her university experience, often taking on leadership roles mentoring younger peers. Karen always projected confidence and had a professional demeanor. Karen's story up until this point was that of a successful international student. Things however changed drastically for Karen, which became apparent in Karen's appearance. Karen's father ended all financial support, leaving Karen in a vulnerable state, unable to pay her tuition and other monthly bills including her rent. Karen started staying on a friend's couch, however after getting in a fight with one of the roommates, she was asked to move out. Karen found herself homeless and</i></p>
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*with no support.*

*Karen's story was made even more precarious as her status in Canada was soon to expire, but since she had been unable to pay her fees, she had a hold preventing her from accessing the official documents required as part of the application to renew her status. Karen continued attending classes but was falling behind. The university became the only safe space for Karen. Karen ended up living in a shelter, which over time began affecting her mental health. Karen had no means to return home, no home to return to in her country, and was left in Canada homeless and unable to finish her education.*

Karen's story stands out as one of the most challenging situations I have come across in the last decade, as there were multiple moving pieces influencing her wellbeing and safety in Canada. The situation experienced by this student reflects the vulnerability experienced by many international students in Canada as they are ultimately depending on their families and other sources of foreign income to support their stay in the country. Financial instability continues to be a major factor in the success of international students in Canada. Universities are put in a difficult situation when faced with unpaid fees and students are left vulnerable without access to services, including health insurance, which is attached to their registration status at the university. Often students seek support at the university, where they may not always be able to find the type of support needed.

International students make a commitment to Canada and their university when they choose to enroll in courses in a Canadian university. This commitment requires that students not misrepresent their ability to afford the international education experience that they are signing up for. I have come across students who misrepresent their ability to afford the cost of living and their tuition in Canada. Their dream of pursuing a Canadian education is big and at times leads

them and their families to make difficult sacrifices, which can lead to the painful decision to return home when unable to continue paying their fees. I have heard student stories involving families selling their homes to afford the cost of tuition fees. Conversely, I have also heard stories involving students who are aware of their inability to pay but expect that once in Canada they will be able to access other sources of income. When dealing with multiple narratives, as an institution we are faced with having to make difficult choices and implementing policies that mitigate the impact of these decisions on the university. However, as we continue to recruit large numbers of international students, we also have to consider the impact of our policies on the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, moving beyond our assumptions, while still meeting institutional and operational needs. This can involve supporting the transition out for students leaving the university due to financial difficulties. Acknowledging the potential challenges for international students leaving the university for financial reasons would be a meaningful step in addressing the issues of equity in our universities.

**Pablo**

*Pablo, a first-year student, realized that his family could not afford the cost of tuition and residence beyond his first term of study at the university. Pablo expected that the university would be able to offer him a scholarship, or additional funding to help him continue his studies. Despite understanding his lack of options for funding in Canada, Pablo decided to continue to be enrolled in classes, incurring debt with the university, with the hope that something would change.*

Pablo's story brings to the forefront the importance of receiving clear financial information at the recruitment stage to help inform students' choices. With clarity, students and their families are better situated to develop sustainable financial plans, or to consider pursuing their education somewhere more

affordable. We have a responsibility at the recruitment stage to break misconceptions about funding options in Canada for international students. We have an opportunity to help students and their families understand their financial responsibility and the implications of not meeting that commitment. Prospective students need to fully understand their responsibility and commitment in order to avoid when possible entering into more complicated situations.

Once here, students have spent a significant amount of money on flights, visa applications and living arrangements, in addition to their tuition and other academic expenses. This makes it more difficult for a student to return home empty-handed once they have arrived in the country. The impact of this is large for anyone who ends up having to return home without completing their degree due to his or her financial situation. Students need to have a clear understanding of their responsibilities when choosing to pursue an education in Canada and understand the lack of financial resources for international students in Canada. One difficulty with this is that international student tuition is not regulated and therefore students may experience significant increases in the cost of their tuition throughout their education. Having this information, however, would help families and students plan accordingly.

When discussing finances and the financial vulnerability of international students we need to take into account that those who struggle are not just students who opt to come to Canada despite knowing their limitations. We have students who face shifts and circumstances that impact their original plans. Situations like this may only become more prevalent as the numbers of international students continue to increase at our institutions.

**Benji**

*Benji, a graduate student, did not budget enough funds for the duration of his graduate program. Benji understood that a two-year program meant four terms, and therefore expected that the funds he brought with him would be sufficient to cover his education in Canada. When Benji learnt that he was expected to maintain registration year-round, he realized that he did not have the required funds to complete. Benji had left a career back home to pursue a graduate education in Canada and was utilizing his savings to be here. Benji was left with few options and had to decide between returning home empty handed, after already completing a significant portion of his studies, or asking his retired parents for support.*

In stories like Benji's, intercultural competency can assist the university to ensure that program requirements are clearly communicated, and furthermore implement tuition regulations to ensure that the cost of studying in Canada stays consistent throughout the course of a degree program. This would allow international students to budget and prepare appropriately for the duration of their education in Canada.

The manner in which we support all students experiencing financial difficulties is important. Although we see students who choose to remain in Canada and incur debt without backing, other students are committed to meeting their financial responsibility to the university. Some students may just require flexibility in meeting that commitment. It is therefore important that we approach students experiencing financial difficulties openly, without making assumptions about their choices or circumstances. Instead, we need to value the opportunity to understand their individual situation. For these students, their success can be linked to the empathy and flexibility that they receive from administrators. The assumptions about international students, including assumptions about their wealth, create expectations around their ability to make

payments in a certain way. Not meeting these expectations can position students as outsiders who simply do not belong as international students in Canada. This is a problem, because receiving the right guidance and support can either help clarify options, or in some cases can ensure that students continue to be successful in achieving their education goals in Canada. This is significant bearing in mind the long-term impact on student success.

**Rose**

*Rose was successful in completing her education, however her path to graduation was not always clear. Rose depended completely on her family's support to afford her education in Canada. Her family had already finished paying for her sibling to be an international student and it was now her turn. The political situation in her home country started having an impact in the ability of Rose's parents to run their business. Rose got a job to supplement her income and always ensured that she could pay her monthly fees. Rose however depended on her family to make tuition payments, which was at times very difficult. Many times, Rose required flexibility to remain enrolled, while making payments over an extended period of time. In a couple of instances, this resulted in Rose taking time off from school because she was unable to settle her balance in time to register for the following semester. Despite facing different challenges along the way, Rose connected with student advisors across campus, including her program advisor, making clear academic plans along the way.*

The wellbeing of international students in Canada is intertwined with their university. This represents an opportunity for universities to consider the experiences of international students when developing financial processes and policies. The application of these financial processes and policies in an intercultural context can create inequity for students who are negatively impacted on the basis of their cultural barriers and circumstances. International students depend on their registration status at their university to meet the requirements of their immigration status and at my university to maintain their health insurance. When a student loses their registration, despite being in Canada, they also lose

their health insurance within the country and after three months of not being enrolled their immigration status expires. This complicates the relationship between universities and international students as the wellbeing of students is directly linked to their university. When students face financial difficulties impacting their ability to pay their tuition in the required lump sums, their attachment to the university should play a role in shaping the way that we communicate and respond to them. The responsibility that universities have to their international students calls for universities to develop processes that are effective in managing intercultural differences, even when it comes to financial processes.

**Lina and Juliana**

*Lina and Juliana were students from different countries that were facing political and economic issues. These issues affected the ability of both Lina and Juliana's families to meet the university's financial deadlines. Both families had the intention to pay in full, however were not able to pay the minimum amount required by the deadline. Both Lina and Juliana were deregistered from their classes and the immediate outcome was very damaging for both students. Lina and Juliana both experienced high levels of stress when this happened as they were in the process of completing midterms. Upon being deregistered, both students were unable to access the online portals to upload their assignments. Both of them had to speak with their professors and teaching assistants about their financial situation and as result they felt singled out and ashamed. This is where their stories begin to differ.*

*Lina quickly connected with staff and friends for support, while Juliana felt ashamed and chose to avoid discussing the situation further. Lina's stress and frustration were validated, and she worked to get reinstated as soon as possible. Juliana on the other hand, accepted her situation, but did not speak about it with anyone. Juliana dreaded having to start her courses all over again and it took her another year to actually address this situation and reenroll.*

The potential impact on the wellbeing of students creates urgency for us to consider process that take into account the barriers faced by students who may

fall outside of the Canadian norm. It is normal to implement payment deadlines; however, processes should consider how those from diverse backgrounds may experience those deadlines. This is what we may gain from a more intercultural competent university.

Changes on the world stage can influence the financial stability of international students. Situations like the Libyan and Syrian civil wars may not seem like typical challenges for international students, however they have brought to the forefront the ways in which political instability at home can impact the wellbeing of international students in Canada. International students are dependent on their families, or on other sources of income back home, including scholarships and sponsorship programs. During the Libyan civil war, the political instability in the country affected the ability of state-sponsored students to receive funds after the country's assets were frozen by the United Nations. I also recall the year when sanctions were placed on Iran and the inflation in that country changed so rapidly that as students were in transit from Iran to Canada, their financial resources had been devalued to the point that they no longer had sufficient funds to cover all of their expenses.

Global instability is in no way the responsibility of the university, however in recognizing the vulnerability of many international students, we need to develop equitable payment and support processes that take into account the diverse needs of our clients. This does not mean allowing students who cannot make payments to register and incur additional debt with the university. It is clear that the university should not act as a bank. However, in considering all factors associated with admitting a diverse student population, we can look to

develop processes that allow for students to meet their financial responsibilities in a more equitable manner. The way that we support and respond to the changing world conditions and challenges faced by our international students will influence their experiences, stability, and wellbeing, even in situations that result with students having to leave Canada and return home.

**Rob**

*Rob, a student from Syria, depended on his family to afford his studies in Canada. At the onset of the war in Syria, Rob's family began experiencing difficulties, as they could no longer run their business. Rob's family ended up leaving Syria for security reasons, while Rob remained in Canada concerned about his financial situation and unable to join his family. Rob was able to finish his term, however due to an outstanding balance was unable to continue registered in school. This situation concerned him deeply as his status in Canada was going to expire soon. Rob required assistance understanding other options for him in Canada and support in navigating the abrupt changes in his life. Ultimately, Rob was able to change his status in Canada and remained in the country. After having to take some time off from school, he returned and completed his education.*

I fear that by saying that international students are vulnerable in Canada I may be read as creating stereotypes about this student population. I also do not mean to take agency away from students, when many show great resiliency and resourcefulness when facing financial difficulties. I want to instead focus on the challenges that international students face navigating our financial structures and policies, as these can be at times in conflict with situations outside of their control. While we do have an opportunity in educating students about their obligations in coming to Canada, we should also apply an intercultural lens to our processes in an effort to be more effective at managing intercultural challenges. These challenges and situations do not mean that students will not meet their responsibilities to the university; instead they open the door for universities to

recognize their responsibility to international students and as such develop processes that reflect a commitment to supporting their wellbeing. These opportunities will be explored further in the next section.

## **6.2 Opportunities in Intercultural Competency Development**

When analyzing the preparedness of university policies to manage intercultural situations equitably, I reflect on my own struggles supporting students in the face of financial instability. Every story is unique, and in some situations, it is not clear if there is merit to the circumstances being voiced by the student. It is precisely this that pushes me to consider the impact of our intercultural competency in helping keep biases and assumptions in check, while considering each situation carefully. The outcome of this would be connecting each individual student with the appropriate resources for their situation. I often act as an advocate for students navigating our policies and processes. This role has become more difficult over the years as changes in the financial processes at my institution have left little room for flexibility. Increasing the intercultural competency of the university could allow us to respond more equitably to diverse situations, by reconsidering our expectations against multiple international student financial situations. For example, implementing different payment plan options, would take into consideration the situation of international students from countries that limit the amount of money citizens are permitted to send outside of the country each month. This would reduce the stress experienced by these students, who often have to look for creative ways to meet the payment deadlines. Developing intercultural competence at the institutional level would help innovate and implement reasonable accommodations that still adhere to the

financial needs of the university. This clearly does not mean lowering student fees or granting free tuition. Instead it means being proactive in seeking outcomes that fill the gaps experienced by international students in Canada.

Re-imagining financial processes and policies through the lens of intercultural competency holds great potential for both the university and students. A barrier in this process however, is thinking about financial processes as needing to be fixed or equal for all. Minimizing the impact of these policies on diverse populations, in this case international students, calls into question the preparedness of an organization to manage intercultural situations. “The attribution of similar needs, desires, and values to others in fact moves simplification to a higher level of abstraction. Now it is not the people who are simplified but cultural difference itself that is subsumed into the familiarity of one’s own worldview.”<sup>88</sup> Seeing international students as having the same experiences of other students robs them of their differences and minimizes their experiences in Canada. Developing intercultural competence would support the university in grappling with these differences of experience and culture.

Over the years I have seen my institution taking steps to try to accommodate some situations experienced by some international students. For example, in some cases they accept a stamped proof of payment to accommodate delays in the actual transfer of funds internationally. This is particularly helpful for those students from countries that further limit this process and shows that there is a willingness to consider student experiences. However, we continue to

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<sup>88</sup> Bennett and Bennett, “Developing intercultural sensitivity,” 155.

see opportunities in other situations, including the process that deregisters students from their classes halfway through a semester when students fail to meet the minimum required payment by the deadline. Removing students from their classes halfway through a semester has significant implications for all students, however in the case of international students, these implications are compounded by the consequences of not being enrolled, such as losing their health insurance. Developing processes that are effective in intercultural situations would help mitigate the needs of the institution and the experiences of students. This would involve considering the potential outcomes of a process that can put the status of students in Canada in jeopardy.

This analysis has to seek understanding of the university's experience and the structures that may influence current policies and processes, in order to find the space to move us forward. "To blame dominant culture and ideologies and/or privileged people for causing suffering separates the world into those who are victims, oppressor, and oppressed – a violent division that cedes power to people with more privilege and further disempowers those who have less."<sup>89</sup> For the university it is logical to implement financial deadlines and consequences that would help reduce the number of outstanding accounts. Deregistering students with outstanding accounts for example allows the university to identify students who do not withdraw from courses, but also may not be at the institution. It could also be argued that it helps students avoid a debt that they will be unable to afford. For the university, this process can therefore be seen as an important tool

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<sup>89</sup> Doetsch-Kidder, *Social Change and Intersectional Activism*, 27.

to track and manage the finances of the institution. The focus of those behind financial policies and processes has been to solve payment issues from the university's perspective. Despite issues of equity in these processes, the university can project all responsibility onto the student as significant attempts are made to create awareness prior to students being deregistered. Despite these efforts to communicate financial deadlines, we are faced as an institution with complicated issues and situations experienced by international students. The way we communicate, approach, and support students experiencing financial challenges, can negatively influence students' perception of the university. We need to look beyond the intention and purpose of our processes, and instead consider their impact on multiple student experiences.

### **6.3 Finances and Changing World Conditions: Summary**

I never expected that equity and financial processes could coexist, however this analysis has reinforced the need to strive for more equitable outcomes in international education, even when it comes to their experiences navigating the financial structures of the university. The wellbeing of international students in Canada is intertwined with their university, placing universities in a difficult position having to balance their business and operational needs, with the promise to support the wellbeing of students. In increasing their international student population, universities need to commit to making our campuses more equitable for students with diverse backgrounds. This involves recognizing and addressing opportunities to meet our responsibility to our international student population. We have an opportunity to develop processes that are more accessible, while still respecting the operational needs of the university. Developing and applying

intercultural competence in our processes creates the space for conflicting priorities and situations to be married. Addressing the multiple needs of our international student clients may not always be possible. However, our approach to and understanding of these challenges can lead to the university supporting students at all stages of their experience, even if they have to return home due to their financial situation. Based on the impact that financial challenges have on individual students, shifting our approach has the potential to create more equitable outcomes for all students, including international students in Canada.

## **7. Conclusion**

My experiences working with international students for almost a decade have fueled my analysis of inequity in Canada's international education system. This analysis has focused on the experiences of international students navigating systems that fail to address or accommodate cultural barriers equitably. Relying on my observations and experiences working in a Canadian university created a space for me to present stories to highlight different opportunities in developing the intercultural competence of universities. International education as a whole involves multiple policy areas and experiences, which requires considering different points of view and research in making conclusions about the state of international education in Canada. This thesis seeks to contribute to this conversation, by recognizing the structures in which international education in Canada is built, while highlighting the opportunities for incorporating a different approach to engaging with international students at our universities. I have witnessed many student stories of inequity, but the ultimate purpose of this thesis is to empower universities to reimagine their processes and approach to account for the experiences of international students. My intention is to help universities identify why and how to effectively manage intercultural situations that arise as we intentionally increase the numbers of international students at our institutions. Although I could have dedicated a significant portion of this thesis to discussing Canada's colonial heritage as a factor underlying the inequities faced by international students in Canada, I wanted to focus on the opportunities to bridge these challenges and reconcile structures with the experiences of individuals relying on them.

## **7.1 Facing Inequity in International Education**

Learning how to manage difference is not natural for many of us as we are wired to shy away from or even be afraid of situations that may offend us, or others. When I arrived in Canada, I remember being told that one of Canada's values was being politically correct. This was described with pride as an outcome of being a welcoming society. Over the years working in international education I have come to challenge that statement as political correctness prevents us from managing differences and instead perpetuates the status quo. Canada continues to project the image of a perfect multicultural society. People seem happy and proud to stand in neat little boxes delineating their differences. This apprehension to question and engage with difference creates an imbalance of experiences in international education. We are missing the opportunities to help address the cultural barriers experienced by some students, while continuing to rely on stereotypes and generalizations to define our international student population. Developing the intercultural competence of universities would help challenge current approaches and create a shift in the way that we value and respond to individual student needs. Canadian Studies has offered me a vessel to value my own voice and lived experience in contributing to this objective. Combining the roles of researcher and student with my work as a university administrator has been a source of conflict, but also a source of meaningful analysis that has informed my position, responsibility, and understanding of Canada.

While working with international students at a Canadian university I have identified the speed with which trends and research produce shifts in the way

that we work with students. Recent trends in supporting student mental health and wellbeing demonstrate the capacity that universities have to respond to changing generational needs. This has been evident in my own institution where we have developed training modules and tools for students, faculty, and staff to prepare everyone across the university to flag, refer, and support students in distress effectively.

Recognizing this capacity to learn and to be open to new approaches has supported my enthusiasm for considering new opportunities to address inequity campus wide for international students. Striving towards a more equitable international education system is an important goal, but one that needs to incorporate the entire university as international students navigate and access all areas of the university. This has been explored here by examining the experiences of students in academic, administrative, and financial contexts.

Addressing the role of universities in achieving equity for international students in Canada has become even more relevant after Canadian universities committed to advancing equity at their campuses. As reported by Universities Canada on October 26, 2017, Canadian universities “have adopted seven Inclusive Excellence Principles to advance equity, diversity and inclusion on campus and in society.<sup>90</sup> The principles mainly address hiring practices and equality of opportunities for the advancement of individuals from underrepresented groups. The third principle for example expresses a

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<sup>90</sup> “Universities commit to advancing equity, diversity and inclusion by adopting new principles,” Universities Canada, accessed 27 May 2018, <https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/universities-commit-advancing-equity-diversity-inclusion-adopting-new-principles/>.

commitment to “taking action to provide equity of access and opportunity. To do so, we will identify and address barriers to, and provide supports for, the recruitment and retention of senior university leaders, university Board and Senate members, faculty, staff and students, particularly from under-represented groups.”<sup>91</sup> To fully identify and address barriers, we need to understand the complexities of working with a diverse population. Universities in Canada have to dig deeper in recognizing the multiple layers that form our identities in order to implement long-lasting options that address entire individuals and not just characteristics of their ‘otherness’.

After identifying issues of equity for international students, it is fair to question the proficiency and extent to which universities intend to advance equity within their universities. Universities have an opportunity to lead this process by incorporating a strategy to develop the intercultural competence of the university as whole. This would facilitate looking beyond easily identifiable differences, like the colour of my skin, and instead address messy and complex cultural barriers currently defining the experiences of so many international students. Advancing equity at our institutions needs to incorporate equity for international students as well. Although this was not overtly included in the current commitment, universities need to understand and address the impact of current approaches, services, policies, and programs on our international students. The analysis presented in this thesis has become even more relevant, contributing insight into our international student stories and experiences in Canada. These stories of

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<sup>91</sup> Universities Canada, “Universities commit.”

inequity support the need to shift towards advancing equity within our universities more broadly.

There are many opportunities for advancing equity within international education in our universities. International students are expected to adapt; however, their experiences and cultural barriers are dismissed in supporting their transitions to new environments. This results in students not having the opportunity to truly process changes, which can come to impact their own identity. I have seen students struggling to manage conflicting cultural expectations, for example by maintaining two sets of social media accounts – a profile for each image that they are expected to maintain. This can be very taxing on an individual. I have also seen students break down with fear at the prospect of having friends and family from back home visit them in Canada. These situations reflect our inability to work effectively in intercultural environments, which is influencing the wellbeing of individual international students.

International students face difficulties that fall outside of the scope of a university, however by also creating spaces for students to develop their intercultural skills, we can support their resilience in navigating challenges. Developing the intercultural skills of students, faculty, and staff will result in universities as a whole responding to intercultural situations more effectively. The outcome of this is a more resourceful and inclusive university that is positioned to address the cultural barriers causing inequity for international students in Canada.

## **7.2 Branding Canada Through an Interculturally Competent Lens**

Nation branding in international education has played an important role in

keeping Canada competitive in the recruitment of international students. It is important to maintain a national branding effort that will draw student's attention to the benefits of pursuing their education in Canada; however, the brand itself needs to be adaptable in reaching prospective students within their own cultural context. Through the application of intercultural competency in the design and delivery of this brand, individual students will not have a fixed expectation of their Canadian experience, but rather will focus on developing their own skills and resiliency to be flexible and better prepared to manage diverse challenging situations. Universities will be better positioned to offer tools prior to students' arrival in Canada with the objective of helping students achieve different outcomes. This flexibility will mean that universities will not be used as tools within the nation branding exercise that perpetuate the images and narratives that currently blame students for their inability to adapt to our Canadian ways. Images are powerful in projecting desired stories or versions of Canada, however there is an opportunity for images to also help students have realistic expectations of their transition – including the challenges and rewards of their international student experience. Branding efforts however by nature seem to focus on solely the rewards of the experience, making this shift difficult at the recruitment stage. This difficulty is echoed in different aspects of the international student experience. While the brand sets the tone for a positive experience, we struggle to meet students within their cultural context creating significant barriers for international students in Canada.

### **7.3 Developing Intercultural Competency and Future Opportunities**

Developing intercultural competence is not a straightforward process as it

involves shifts in an individual's core. However, it is a worthwhile venture given that it could have great results in advancing equity. Culture is a social construct, but it can dictate the ways in which individuals perceive themselves and others, the way they respond to situations, and the way they experience and value moments. Understanding the depth to which culture influences our behaviors is essential in developing intercultural competence. Intercultural skills can provide us with the tools to engage and manage intercultural situations effectively. As intercultural environments, universities require this proficiency to achieve better outcomes across multiple student experiences and to look beyond consistency towards equity.

The next step in this process involves assessing how the university should approach the intercultural skills development of all students, faculty, and staff. This thesis has focused on addressing the importance for universities to develop their intercultural competence in order to achieve equity in international education. However, I have an opportunity to continue my research into what developing these skills may look like and how the university can support the development of processes, services, and policies that are effective in intercultural contexts. There are different approaches and methods to developing intercultural competence. Laura B. Perry and Leonie Southwell question the success of these intercultural skills education programs and indicate that further work is required to assess their effectiveness.<sup>92</sup> I agree with this notion to a certain degree. It is difficult to assess an individual's intercultural competence when different cultural

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<sup>92</sup> Perry and Southwell, "Developing intercultural understanding, 460.

barriers and situations can challenge us differently. Not all international students for example experience the same level of cultural barriers in Canada – things that do not affect some students may challenge others. It is impossible to prepare for every possible intercultural situation. However, by pushing to develop the intercultural competence of a university, we can help individuals and units develop their ability to recognize areas of potential cultural conflict for students, and foster shifts in institutional culture and approach to take into account their experiences.

This can seem complicated, but it could be simplified by reflecting on how current services and programs take steps to address cultural barriers, and by developing student centric approaches that allow students to customize their experiences. Universities in Canada are facing an ethical dilemma and in concluding this thesis I still see many opportunities for pursuing this analysis further. Having an intercultural mindset is an important piece of the puzzle for achieving equity in international education and an essential aspect of fulfilling our promises to the international students who enrich our universities and society by coming to study in Canada.

#### **7.4 Recommendations**

Throughout this thesis I highlight opportunities for universities to rethink the way we approach international students in Canada. I discuss how increasing intercultural competencies on campus can be a means to help us rethink our approach, attitude, and services. The following eight opportunities and recommendations for universities represent areas in which we could begin to see meaningful changes towards supporting international students more equitably in

Canada:

1. Open the process for students to seek appropriate academic accommodations on the basis of their language skills and other academic cultural needs. This can include offering accommodations such as additional time for students with language needs to complete exams, access to already existing notetaking services when available, and offering additional resources for students to learn about the norms and expectations of their current academic environment, including non-punitive opportunities in the area of academic integrity.
2. Provide information and resources for faculty to connect students facing diverse cultural barriers in the classroom with services and support.
3. Regulate yearly international student tuition increases and more clearly disclose the total cost of an educational program at the recruitment stage, including living expenses, associated payment deadlines, and administrative barriers implemented in cases of outstanding payments.
4. Address issues of food security on campus. Increase funding and consult with students across campus, including cultural groups, to help diversify and increase the options available on the on-campus food bank.
5. Make attending an international student orientation mandatory to help combat student isolation, build trust, and intentionally connect students with support staff, services, and peers, in support of all students having the opportunity to build relationships and access resources and information.
6. Establish a process and criteria for international students to seek financial assistance, including consulting with Advancement to evaluate the possibility

of fundraising to establish a fund for international students who are close to completing their program of study and face sudden financial difficulties.

7. Develop a strategy for developing intercultural competency across campus, including offering training and resources in new staff and faculty orientation programs.
8. Address issues of equity facing international students in Canadian Universities as part of all universities' commitment to achieving equity on campus by 2020.

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