



How Can International Students be Supported in Post-Secondary Education in Canada? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

International students may encounter culture shock, a state of confusion or disorientation that arises as they adapt to an unfamiliar culture and leave behind their familiar one (Amos & Lordly, 2014). Since international students in Canada come from diverse countries, their perceptions of post-secondary education can vary greatly, often leading to academic challenges. This qualitative study, drawing on Acculturation Theory, explores how post-secondary institutions can more effectively address international students' needs. Data was collected through four focus group interviews with faculty, staff, and international students at a Western Canadian post-secondary institution. Students shared personal and academic needs while faculty and staff discussed their awareness of these needs and resource utilization. Findings emphasized the importance of promoting intercultural competence and personalizing learning experiences. Faculty and staff expressed a need for additional training and resources. The key implication is that effective support requires institutions to understand students' home-country educational perspectives and provide appropriate campus resources.

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Practitioner Notes

1. To enhance teaching and learning for international students in post-secondary institutions, these institutions should offer academic support that effectively meets students' current needs.
2. Faculty and staff need additional training to effectively support international students in their academic programs and career preparation.
3. When faculty and staff have a strong understanding of international students' needs, they can provide more effective support.
4. Post-secondary institutions should promote cultural competence to help faculty and staff adapt their teaching methods for diverse student populations.
5. The study findings demonstrated that targeted training programs and culturally sensitive support strategies enhance international students' academic integration and overall success.

Keywords

international students, academic supports, intercultural competence, post-secondary education

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Introduction

Several studies have been conducted about the academic and personal needs students have when entering Post-Secondary Education (PSE). Regardless of their gender, cultural background or maturity level, these students need to have a successful and positive experience in PSE to meet their objectives. However, international students entering PSE in a different country seem to be the ones who need extra support in a variety of ways, such as within language, culture, educational environment and teaching methodology amongst other difficulties they may encounter. The literature has emphasized the importance of providing international students with extra support from their arrival to the new country until their program completion (Choudaha, 2016). In their study, Balzer et al. (2019) found that when struggling international and domestic students take advantage of the academic supports offered to them by their institutions, these students become more successful. This is an important finding that supports existing efforts within the Canadian post-secondary institutions. The literature suggests that when post-secondary institutions supplement course instruction with additional support, students better understand their course material and have higher chances of completing their degrees (Balzer et al., 2019).

Although new laws have been implemented for international students entering Canada (Government of Canada, 2023), university enrolment numbers remain high. Canada's higher education system comprises over one hundred public universities and over two hundred public colleges, with education falling under provincial jurisdiction. In recent years, international students have become a central part of the Canadian higher education landscape. As of 2023, Canada hosted over one million international students, with a significant proportion enrolled in postsecondary institutions. This influx has positioned international education as both an economic driver and a cultural force, prompting national discussions around policy, support services, and institutional responsibility. Given this context, understanding the lived experiences of international students is critical for shaping inclusive and responsive educational environments.

As international students acculturate or assimilate to the host country, they may experience culture shock, which Amos and Lordly (2014) describe as a disoriented state resulting from moving from a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one. For post-secondary institutions to provide successful learning experiences for international students, it is essential to understand how these students perceive education in their home countries. The international students that arrive in Canada each year come from different countries in the world and their perception of post-secondary education can differ immensely. Faculty and staff have been faced with the important task of supporting these international students and preparing them for their programs and field of work. Thus, a better understanding of the international students' needs and their cultural background will enhance the support provided to these students. Additionally, deeper cultural awareness can better inform faculty and staff about effective approaches to supporting international students.

International postsecondary students often face migration-specific stressors that can impact their academic performance (Silva & Ravindran, 2016, p. 10). Canadian post-secondary institutions have observed these challenges firsthand, particularly noting that some international students in a specific program are struggling with course material comprehension, assignment completion, academic navigation, and practicum placements.

These concerns, initially identified through department meetings with faculty, staff, and the associate dean, prompted a comprehensive investigation. To better understand these students' needs and develop effective support strategies, this study gathered perspectives from three key stakeholder groups: the international students themselves, their instructors, and the institution's learning support staff. To gain deeper insights into this issue, four distinct focus groups were conducted involving eight faculty/staff members and seven international students from a particular program at this institution. The staff interviewed in the focus groups were from the library services, student advising, career services, and accessibility amongst others. This study sought to address the following research questions:

Research Question 1. What are the international students' academic needs?

Research Question 2. How do these needs differ from those of domestic students?

Research Question 3. What can our post-secondary institutions do to support the international students?

Literature

Current research emphasizes that international students encounter various acculturative challenges, such as loneliness, discrimination, language barriers, financial difficulties, and the need to adapt to a new culture. They also face significant pressure to meet personal and family expectations for academic achievement, all while navigating an unfamiliar educational system. These challenges are linked to, and can even predict, psychological distress and thus academic disruptions. However, many of these students may not recognise their symptoms or may avoid seeking help due to stigma or denial, which can act as obstacles to accessing support (Silva & Ravindran, 2016).

This research study addresses the matters related to the international students' needs when navigating PSE within the academic realm, but it also encompasses other aspects that are part of the students' lives. This review of literature recognises these broad topics: loneliness, discrimination, language barriers, financial difficulties, and the need to adapt to a new culture as the main agents for students' success or failure. This study proposes further investigation within these subjects to fully answer the three research questions.

Acculturation Theory

Culture shock, along with its stages, is an integral part of the acculturation process and we see our international students going through this process every academic year. Researchers across various disciplines have developed several theories related to acculturation, however, contemporary studies have primarily concentrated on different strategies individuals use, the impact of acculturation on them, and interventions to facilitate the process (Berry, 1992).

Berry introduced a model of acculturation that identifies individual adaptation strategies based on two key dimensions (Berry, 1992). The first dimension focuses on whether individuals retain or reject their native culture, asking, *"Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?"* The second dimension addresses the acceptance or rejection of the host culture. According to Berry, individuals make use of four acculturation strategies, assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation. These strategies have been observed as coping strategies being used amongst the international students who enter PSE in Canada. Some

international students may assimilate to the new culture they are in when they fully embrace the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture, abandoning their original cultural practices. Some may separate, when they choose to reject the dominant or host culture, focusing instead on maintaining their original culture. While other students may integrate and successfully adopt aspects of the dominant or host culture while also preserving their own cultural heritage. This balance often results in biculturalism. However, a few international students may get marginalized when they disconnect from both their original culture and the dominant host culture, rejecting both. This study builds on this theory to identify strategies that can help international students overcome these challenges and access the support they need to succeed in PSE in Canada.

Faculty and Staff Cultural Awareness

Faculty and staff in PSE institutions can support international students by fostering cultural awareness amongst themselves and within the student body. By being involved in international student affairs, faculty/staff will learn from them and will in turn develop a better understanding of their students' needs. According to Atobatele et al. (2024), faculty involvement significantly impacts international student success both inside and outside the classroom. In the classroom environment, effective teaching methods and culturally responsive practices are essential success factors, while outside the classroom, faculty contribute through mentorship programs and community activities. Professional development and training are crucial for faculty to effectively support international students, particularly in developing intercultural competencies and understanding unique challenges these students face. Through these various forms of engagement, faculty help international students succeed academically and integrate socially into their new educational environment.

Supports in Post-Secondary Education (PSE)

The literature presents various supports that currently exist that could help the international students as they begin their first year in PSE. These supports have shown significant effectiveness when utilized early in the academic year. Students are more likely to succeed if they acquire the skills to become independent learners at the onset of their social integration into post-secondary institutions (Brooman, & Darwent, 2014). According to these scholars, the PSE institutions “need to understand the effects of the interventions during this initial stage of the student life cycle” (p. 1538). Additionally, the institutions are required to be prepared for possible different outcomes after these supports are made available to students, as every student will use or not use the supports according to their own perceived needs.

Campus Activities

In her book Miller (2021) advises that institutions should plan continuous activities for first-year students to connect with the campus. Miller suggests including keynote speakers, concerts, exhibitions, and sports events, amongst others. Miller instructs “spreading the news” about these activities amongst students, using releasing instruments such as the student associations offices, websites, by placing posters around the campus and distributing materials through the course advisors' offices. Miller also has a message to the students themselves that will support their academic success in the long term: “I encourage new students to explore their campus. You need to know where your classes are, how to get to and from the bar or coffee shop, and how to get to

and from the library even if you're not ready to use it yet" (p. 49). These recommendations have been found to be crucial for international students entering PSE in Canada.

Building Resilience

In their study, Gamble and Crouse (2020) state that building resilience within the students' community could be the answer for supporting the students entering PSE institutions and for completing their degrees. Gamble and Crouse define resilience as an approach that includes the development and nurturing of skills which would build and strengthen students' abilities to learn and to cope in difficult or new situations. Gamble and Crouse reiterate that "communication, problem-solving skills, emotional intelligence, and mental health and well-being are key characteristics of a resilient student. These skills are also needed to navigate increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century" (p. 70). But how are these skills developed? According to Gamble and Crouse, these skills are developed through strategies that build students' resilience, such as "learning how to take care of their physical health and well-being, through optimistic thinking, keeping things in perspective, focusing on what one can control and reaching out for help" (p. 75), amongst others. Gamble and Crouse emphasize that resilience is not only related to academic success but also to accomplishments in life in general.

Academic Advising

Another important factor to be considered when discussing success in PSE, is the academic advising services. Academic advising services can support students within their academic choices, and it can also make students' lives easier to navigate within the university walls. However, to receive the full benefits of the advising services, students need to make an initial contact with their program advisors and commit to a continuous connection throughout their academic journey. Yet international students may not go through this process as they are not familiar with these procedures. In her study, Freeman (2008) stated that it is crucial for any PSE institution to "educate students about the purpose and practice of advising as a teaching/learning experience rather than a simple task, such as registering for classes" (p. 14). But is the office of advising services working well with international students? Freeman pointed out that undergraduate students look for support within the advising services; however, they don't seem to be happy with the service they are receiving. Freeman stated that, when asked what they are unhappy about, the undergraduate students are likely to say that they are not happy with: "parking, dining hall food and advising" (p. 12). Freeman suggests a "transformation of the university's advising centre" (p. 13), a transformation that would establish effective working relationships with faculty and staff and also develop practices that support students' success amongst other initiatives (p. 13).

Faculty Encouragement

When discussing ways to support PSE students' success, it is important to also consider faculty's encouragement as a strategy. Alcott (2017) found that "teacher encouragement has the greatest influence on those students most likely to be on the margin for university attendance" (p. 773). Instructors can be an important agent in terms of students' success, as the literature suggests that faculty's encouragement can aid students' progress, and it can have a long-term impact on students' learning process. Alcott stated that, "from the perspective of many students, teachers are likely to represent the most immediate embodiment of the educational system through which

they are navigating” (p. 792). The students seem to appreciate faculty’s encouragement and validation, as Alcott indicated “...my findings suggest that students are responsive to non-formal cues and legitimation” (p. 793). Although faculty’s encouragement can be subjective, the literature shows that it can be helpful to students’ learning when instructors’ praises contribute to their students’ overall achievements. Alcott indicated that through their compliments to learners, teachers can contribute to students’ academic improvement and attainment (p. 793).

Use of Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Another potential support that may assist students financially when navigating PSE is the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) by their institutions. The OER term was first defined by UNESCO in 2002 as “learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others” (para. 1). The term “open content” was coined by David Wiley in 1998, as per Virkus’s (2010) brief history of OER. Virkus explains that “one role of open content in the history of OER is its popularization of the idea that the principles of the open source/free software movements can be productively applied to content, and the creation of the first widely adopted open license for content - the Open Publication License” (para. 2). In their research study, Fischer et. al.’s (2015) findings showed that:

Students in courses using OER enrolled in a significantly higher number of credits in the next semester. This may be due to the cost savings associated with OER. In community college settings where tuition costs are based directly on the number of credits taken with no cap on costs for “full-time” enrolment, funds saved on textbooks can be applied directly to enrolment in additional courses. (p. 169)

Most international students are not purchasing textbooks due to high-priced costs. According to Ma and Pender (2021), the average undergraduate will spend about \$1,200 on textbooks and supplies each year. Other benefit of using OER is that students will have immediate access to the materials required by their course instructors, which may also improve their academic performance.

Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education (UDLHE)

Another student support that seems to be widely used by educators in PSE in Canada and in North America is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL, 2024). In his study, Thibodeau (2021) stated that “the UDL began in 1984 when Dr. David Rose and Dr. Anne Meyer, two researchers from Harvard School of Graduate Education developed a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (para 1). These scholars initially started their work creating innovative technology to support students with special needs, but by 1990, their work progressed to address the needs of every student and the overall needs of the schools as well. They started to develop adaptations and changes to teaching methodologies that could support everyone – the UDL framework was redeveloped. Those changes, according to Thibodeau, “mirrored what was happening in architecture with buildings designed so that all people could access them regardless of their disability” (para 1). Thibodeau cites the “curb cut” as the most common example used to describe a way to address people’s individual needs (para 1).

Summer Employment Programs

An alternative strategy to offer PSE students financial support and to improve academic performance appears to be the summer employment programs. This approach seems to be an excellent way for PSE students to learn more about their field of work and to gain hands-on experience along with financial profit. In their study, Schwartz et al. (2021) found that Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) can bring positive impacts on students' academic outcomes. Their study found that students who worked during the summer performed better in exams and tests administered by their education institutions. These students also had superior accomplishments in their area of study and the students' retention and graduation rates also appeared to improve with SYEP.

Internal and External Pressures

International students entering postsecondary education in Canada often face a range of pressures that can impact their academic performance. These include both internal pressures, such as personal expectations, anxiety about success, and feelings of self-doubt, and external pressures, such as financial constraints, language barriers, immigration policies, and cultural adjustment. When compounded, these challenges can create significant stress, which may contribute to lower academic achievement during their college years. On their study, Arthur and Hiebert (1996) examined the various ways students cope with the transition to PSE. They stated that "although academic situations were the most demanding, the reasons varied considerably" (p. 99). Arthur and Hiebert have shown that other demands, such as workload, homework, expectations of performance by themselves and others, the nature of their field of study, the difficulty of the subject materials and concerns about family members and friends have a great impact on students' learning and achievements. The study suggested that students need to identify and develop their own specific ways to cope with these demands as these can be unique situations for everyone.

International Students' Mental Health and Overall Health

Mental health and overall health have also been the subjects of discussion at many educational institutions. Canada appears to be leading the way in terms of applied research within the holistic approach of mental health and health promotion that could possibly advance students' overall success. In their study, Lisnyj et al. (2021) examined factors affecting PSE students' stress and academic success. They found that "there has been an increase in the frequency and severity of stress experienced by Canadian post-secondary students, which has adverse implications on their academic success" (p. 1). This study's findings showed that "several overlapping factors exist which demonstrate that stress is complex with various sources impacting various levels" (p. 2). A lack of communication between students and instructors seems to be one of the many factors influencing PSE students' levels of stress; this issue is undermining the understanding of students' academic needs. Lisnyj et al. suggest that more research needs to be done in this area to also "look at the effects of the Covid -19 pandemic on students' mental health and academic learning" (p. 19). The scholars suggest that on campus services on mental health and students' overall health supports and resources should be provided and openly available to PSE students.

Gender, Race, and Culture Influences

Gender, race, and culture influences seem to be major sources of barriers that PSE students encounter when transitioning to PSE. In their longitudinal study on under-represented students and the transition to PSE in Canada, Robson et al. (2018) found that race was a determinant factor for students being accepted into PSE and completing their degrees. Their study, completed in the Great Toronto Area (GTA), showed that Black, Latinos, and Southeast Asian students were less prepared for PSE than their white counterpart students. Robson et al. (2018) stated that “students in these groups had lower than average GPAs, higher identification of special education needs, or lower likelihoods of taking academic-stream courses” (p. 39). Another important finding in this study was the fact that Black students, on average, presented lower grades and higher rates of Special Education Needs (SEN) and were less likely to be on academic courses. The males within the Black group of students were also the ones who presented the lowest grades and the higher rates of SEN. The authors recognize the need for further investigation, as they realize that this study only “scratched the surface on identifying the intersections that affect PSE” (p. 54). Robson et al. address the complexity of this reality, and they indicate that there is a need for developing local policies and strategies to identify and support the marginalized student groups. In a second analysis within the same research study project, Robson et al. observed the changes within the transition to post-secondary between the two Toronto high school cohorts. Robson et al. stated that “not all students with high academic achievement will excel and, against their odds, many students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds will still have high levels of academic achievement, a trend known as academic resilience” (p. 28). Robson et al. indicated that both race and gender alongside immigration background and special education status, will play a role in defining who attends and successfully completes PSE.

In terms of isolating culture as an indicator of academic failure or success in PSE, the literature shows that aspirations and engagement within each family heritage could be the source of students getting superior achievements in college. In their study, Kiyama and Crespín-Palmer (2020) examined the cultivation of PSE aspirations in immigrants and refugee families through community education. They found some particular ways in which students were able to have a rewarding PSE experience due their family heritage. Kiyama and Crespín-Palmer stated that their study’s main goal was to document “the ways in which immigrant families cultivate their children’s PSE aspirations and engage in advocacy and in activism in an effort to challenge educational systems that are unjust and inequitable” (p. 12). Kiyama and Crespín-Palmer suggested that PSE institutions which engage with the immigrant and refugee families could generate meaningful experiences that would ultimately translate to a smoother transition for their youth to college. When students can bring aspects of their culture into their learning environment, they have a greater chance of achieving academic success. Each culture has a rich repository of knowledge which is transmitted through the community systems as “currency” for exchange and learning (p. 18). The aspirations that each student brings to class, when encouraged, can become a major catalyst for academic success and lifelong learning achievements.

Method

As a former instructor at this Canadian PSE institution, I regularly collected and analysed my students’ assessments, additionally, I discussed students’ progress with them, collectively and individually. I met with the support staff team regularly to discuss the effectiveness of the

institution's academic support for each of the courses I taught. Therefore, to fully attend to my problem of practice and to develop a research project, I continued to do all these procedures for my study. However, as this practice also became part of my research study project, I attended to both mandates, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the USA and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) in Canada. I followed both mandates as during the time of this research project I was a doctoral student at Gonzaga University, situated in the USA, and I was conducting my research study at a PSE institution in Canada. I carried out this process according to both institutions' research ethics boards guidelines. My research study is categorized as a *descriptive study* and the IRB has determined that my study satisfies the criteria for exempt research, which that this study presents minimal risk to the participants. Alongside with the IRB's approval, I also have an ethics research protocol from the PSE institution's Research Ethics Board – REB.

Data Collection

The methods I used to collect data were online Microsoft Teams focus groups interviews with the international students and with the academic support staff and the faculty team at this PSE institution. Online focus groups were selected as the primary method of data collection due to the participants' limited availability. Many international students worked long hours outside of their academic commitments, and staff and faculty also had demanding teaching and administrative schedules. As such, in-person meetings would have posed significant barriers to participation. Online focus groups allowed for greater flexibility, accessibility, and inclusivity in scheduling. This aligns with findings from research methods literature, which highlight that virtual focus groups can be especially effective when working with time-constrained or geographically dispersed populations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Archibald et al., 2019). Additionally, online formats can reduce participation barriers and increase comfort among participants, potentially leading to more open and authentic discussions. Within my literature review I was able to see many researchers conducting focus groups interviews with their participants in order to hear their voices. I held four online focus groups sessions for each of my two groups of participants, the students, and the faculty support staff. These two groups of participants were able to share their experiences when administering or using the academic supports that are available to students at the institution's campus. The international students also shared their needs and struggles throughout their academic journey in Canada.

Participants

The participants were seven international students, four from India and three from the Philippines who were enrolled in a particular program at this Western Canadian PSE institution. The other participants were eight faculty members and support staff from this same institution, which is composed of instructors, librarians, English Language Learners (ELL) tutors, writing tutors, international student navigators, student's success team, and student advising staff members.

The international students were recruited through a poster where the details of the research study were shared. The international students from this program who contacted me after seeing the poster were selected to be part of this research study. However, only students who were not currently taking classes with me could participate in this study as per the Research Ethic Board (REB)'s recommendations to avoid conflict of interest. I had seven international students taking

part in my focus groups interviews. The faculty and staff were recruited through emails sent out to the faculty/staff email list provided by the institution. The ones who responded to that email were chosen to be part of my focus groups interviews. I had eight faculty/staff participating in my focus groups interviews.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Participants took part in an online focus group interview conducted in 2023, where they responded to ten open-ended questions. The questions for international students focused on their experiences at this PSE institution, while the questions for faculty and staff explored their experiences in working with and supporting international students. This data was recorded, coded, and organized into common themes that emerged from each session, as portrayed by both faculty/staff and students. Interview transcripts were analysed using open and axial coding methods (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Through an iterative process of coding and constant comparison (Glaser, 1992), the codes were consolidated and synthesized into overarching themes spanning the entire qualitative dataset. I wrote the results in a narrative format, and I utilized different tables to show the common themes surfaced from my participants' conversations.

Table 1

Themes and sub-themes derived from the international students' focus group interviews

Themes	Sub-themes
Instructor Support and Teaching Methods	Outdated teaching methods Students' feedback disregarded by instructors
Cultural Awareness and Diversity Practices	Lack of cultural diversity amongst instructors Racism and bias Lack of cultural awareness from instructors Most instructors only spoke English
Language and Communication Barriers	Difficulties communicating with instructors Cultural Shock
Student Engagement Participation and Well-Being	Fear of speaking out Lack of mentorship opportunities Loneliness
Institutional Equity and Fairness	Lack of equitable tuition for international students – financial struggles Lack of access to scholarships, bursaries and financial aid to international students
Academic Supports and Resources	Lack of options for online classes Lack of textbooks availability
Practicum Experiences/Issues	Unfair distribution of work with different roles for international students

The themes and sub-themes mentioned above were derived from focus group interviews with international students. I used the word-based technique which involved taking notes of the words that were repeated frequently in both groups; these repeated words then became themes. These themes were identified by the students as crucial factors determining their success or failure in their courses, depending on how these issues were addressed. It was noteworthy that several students across different focus groups shared similar thoughts and personal experiences that directly related to each of these themes. According to Bloomberg (2020) theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research analysis.

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes derived from the faculty and staff's focus group interviews

Themes	Sub-themes
Language and Cultural Challenges	Difficulties communicating with international students/language barrier
Academic Barriers and Instructors Support	Need for deeper cultural awareness Stigma and cultural differences Learning about the students' background Promoting student engagement and participation
Accommodating Students Needs	Providing early intervention Furthering in-class teaching support
Flexible Academic Support	Flexible schedules On-line and in-person individualized support
Access to Academic Support	Helping students to navigate academic supports Easy (free) access to resources (e.g. OERs)
Instructors' Role	Better understanding of instructor's role by students and instructors Instructors also need support to help the international students
Practicum Experiences	Provide better quality of practicum experiences to international students

The themes and sub-themes outlined in Table 2 were identified through focus group interviews with the faculty and staff. These themes represent the factors that faculty and staff members believe contribute to the success of international students within this particular program. Some faculty/staff mentioned that many of these supports are already in place and functioning effectively, while others require further development to better address the needs of international students.

Results

The data collected in this research study contributed to understanding the reality in which our international students, faculty, and staff are immersed within this program at this Canadian PSE institution. The results of these focus group interviews provided answers to the research study's

questions. To further illustrate these insights, the following tables present quotes from students and faculty/staff that deepened our understanding and helped fully address the research study's questions. A key insight is summarized at the conclusion of each table set, highlighting the most significant findings and their implications.

Table 3

International Student's Needs – Student's Perception

Participant	Observations/Remarks:
1	"We go through a culture shock as soon as we arrive in Canada. Then, we experience racism and bias within our classrooms – coming from colleagues and instructors."
2	"We experience loneliness and helplessness; we feel homesick, and we doubt our ability to survive and/or do well in a new country."
3	"Some of us are fearful of speaking out and being labelled as rebels or as a difficult student."
4	"The language barrier is one of the main factors that hinders my academic success in Canada."
5	"The biases, racism and peer pressure are real factors that can truly test our ability to cope and do well in our program."
6	"We need a more equitable tuition fee. We also need financial support, such as bursaries and scholarships for international students."
7	"We like when we don't have to buy expensive textbooks, we rather have free resources, such as the Open Educational Resources (OER). We save a lot of money by using free academic resources."

Note. These observations were collected from the international students as responses for question number 1

Table 4

International Student's Needs – Faculty/Staff Perception

Participant	Observations/Remarks
1	"The international students when they first arrive in Canada need to get acquainted with their new environment, such as culture, language and especially with our Canadian weather."
2	"The international students need extra time to process information, as English is not their first language in most of the cases. They should be granted that time by their instructors."
3	"Given that English is not the first language for many international students, they often require additional support to navigate their lives in Canada in general, not only in school. They need support accessing the resources offered to them."
4	"We need to further develop our cultural awareness to better support these students, and we require our institution's support in this matter."

- 5 "The international students need support learning about how to overcome their financial challenges. Creating a budget, finding jobs, keeping those jobs. They need help with everything."
- 6 "When the international students arrive in Canada, just a few days prior to the beginning of their classes, or sometimes even a week after the beginning of their classes, they understandably prioritize survival over learning. We need to keep this in mind."
- 7 "International students need to receive early intervention in terms of academic supports, we can't leave that until the middle of the semester. And we as instructors need support as well to help these students."
- 8 "Students need to be engaged within their classes and within our campus activities. Information needs to be shared with these students to promote meaningful connections."

Note. These observations were collected from faculty/staff as responses for question number 1

International Students Needs

Through these quotes, international students and the faculty and staff at this PSE institution helped me to answer my research question number one, which sought to identify the international students' academic needs. Both groups of participants voiced the idea that international students face a variety of challenges and needs as they transition to studying in Canada. Many students report feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and self-doubt, often fearing to speak up in class due to concerns about being perceived negatively. Financial strain is another significant issue, as international tuition fees are higher. These students require bursaries, scholarships, and access to cost-saving resources like Open Educational Resources (OER). Additionally, international students need structured support to navigate their new environment, including cultural orientation, academic assistance, and guidance on financial planning and job opportunities. Faculty and staff recognize that these students require additional time to process information in a foreign language, early academic interventions, and engagement opportunities to foster a sense of community.

Table 5

How the international students' needs differ from those of domestic students – Students' Perception

Participant	Observations/remarks
1	"Some of us don't have time to access the academic supports offered at our institution as we need to work long hours to pay for higher tuition fees. Our academic success may be affected due to this factor."
2	"Embedding the academic supports within our courses would allow us to use them, as we don't have time outside the classes to pursue these resources. This strategy will increase the international students' academic success."
3	"I feel that I am becoming a better writer after attending the sessions with the writing tutor. As English is not my first language, I always feel insecure when handing in assignments."

- 4 "I truly enjoyed having the academic writing tutor coming to our class to work on our assignments with us. I believe that helped me to get a better grade that otherwise I would not have achieved."
- 5 "The international students need to have supports and resources that are also focused on the practicum portion of our courses – that will help us to be more successful. We need a better understanding of the Canadian cultural childcare system."
- 6 "We need academic support (and other resources) that would prepare us in advance for the role we will play in workplaces in Canada."
- 7 "Some instructors could enhance their teaching methods by incorporating feedback from students. This, for international students, would be a valuable form of academic support. Also, when instructors learn more about cultural diversity it reflects on their teaching practices."

Note. These observations were collected from the international students as responses for question number 2

Table 6

How the international students' needs differ from those of domestic students – Staff Perception

Participant	Observations/Remarks
1	"International students who take advantage of the academic supports provided by the institution have shown a better academic record."
2	"When providing international students with significant support, students tend to do better academically."
3	"The supports need to be tailored to attend to the international students' needs, so these students will take advantage of the resources."
4	"Flexibility in learning is crucial when working with post-secondary students, and this holds even more true for international students."
5	"Students who ask for support and accommodations are the ones who receive these resources, if they don't ask for support, we can't help. But we understand that this may be a barrier for international students."
6	"Navigating the system is a major barrier for the international students, they need an early intervention process to help them to understand how the supports work in Canada."
7	"Due to some students' cultural background, they do not ask for help, as this may be understood as a sign of weakness, or that they are unprepared to be attending a post-secondary institution in Canada."
8	"When we learn more about our students' cultural backgrounds, they seem to open up more in class and thus participate more."

Note. These observations were collected from faculty/staff as responses for question number 2

Unique Challenges Faced by International Students

The needs of international students differ from those of domestic students in several keyways, primarily due to language barriers, cultural differences and financial constraints. Unlike domestic students, many international students must work long hours to afford higher tuition fees, leaving them with little time to access academic supports outside of class. To address this, embedding academic resources within coursework can significantly enhance their success. Moreover, international students often require targeted academic support, particularly in writing and language development, to build confidence when preparing their assignments. Cultural differences also impact their learning experience, as some students hesitate to seek help due to perceptions of weakness, making early intervention and tailored support crucial. Additionally, international students require specialized resources to navigate the Canadian academic and professional landscape, particularly in practicum-based courses, where understanding local industry expectations is essential. Faculty and staff recognize the importance of flexibility in teaching methods and the need for increased cultural awareness to foster inclusivity and engagement. Unlike domestic students, international students often require structured guidance to navigate institutional systems and access support effectively. Addressing these unique needs can help bridge the gap and create a more equitable learning environment.

Table 7

Availability, Effectiveness and Utilisation of Academic Support Services at this institution – International Students Perception

Participant	Observations/Remarks
1	"Some of the academic supports offered at our institution do not attend to my needs. For example, the library only offering one printed copy of a course textbook is not helpful. There is a need for more physical copies of the textbooks."
2	"The Student Connect Centre takes a very long time to reply to students' requests, sometimes students miss important deadlines due to this wait period."
3	"The International Student's Office truly supports the international students – not only in terms of academics but also in terms of personal matters as well."
4	"The academic resource at our institution that we use the most is the library support – especially the writing tutor sessions (groups and individual). The writing tutor is awesome!"
5	"We would like to see more options of online supports for international students."
6	"International students need more access to bursaries and scholarships. They need support in finding these opportunities and support when applying for these grants."
7	"I don't use any support offered at my institution, as I work full time and don't have time to access these resources. That is why incorporating these supports into the classrooms would benefit us."

Note. These observations were collected from the international students as responses for question number 3.

Table 8

Availability, Effectiveness and Utilisation of Academic Support Services at this institution – Staff Perception

Participant	Observations/Remarks
1	"The academic supports at our institution are readily available and are proven to be effective. Students who take advantage of these services normally overcome their academic barriers better than the students who don't access these supports."
2	"Our institution offers a great variety of academic supports – over eighteen different types of supports are offered to students, ranging from library services, counselling services to financial support and students' advice."
3	"The most utilized student academic service is the library support – the writing tutor being number one on students' list."
4	"The academic supports at our institution offer a lot of flexibility in terms of scheduling services – online and in-person."
5	"The supports can also be tailored to the student's needs – students have access to the Accessibility Services where accommodations can be made according to the student's personal requests."
6	"The career centre also provides support for current and former students at our institution helping them navigate the workforce."
7	"The International Student's Office is the first stop our international students – these students can access not only academic supports, but also receive immigration matters advice."
8	"The Counselling Services are also available on a drop-in basis, and it may help students to cope with the difficulties that come when living far away from home."

Note. These observations were collected from faculty/staff as responses for question number 3

Fostering Inclusion: Institutional Strategies to Support International Students

To better support international students, post-secondary institutions must ensure that academic resources are both accessible and tailored to their unique needs. Expanding the availability of physical textbooks, particularly in the library, can help students who rely on institutional resources. Additionally, improving response times at student service centres, such as the Student Connect Centre, would prevent students from missing critical deadlines. Given that many international students work full-time and struggle to access support services outside class hours, integrating academic resources—such as writing tutors and career guidance—directly into coursework would greatly enhance their success. Increasing online support options can also provide greater flexibility for students balancing work and studies. Additionally, institutions should enhance financial assistance by offering more bursaries and scholarships while providing guidance on how to access and apply for these opportunities. Faculty and staff recognize that the most utilized supports services include library resources and writing tutors, highlighting the importance of

maintaining and expanding these offerings. The International Student Office plays a crucial role in both academic and personal support and strengthening its resources can further assist students in navigating their educational and immigration challenges.

Discussion

This section revisits the research questions and examines the key findings that emerged from participant responses. The study explored the experiences and challenges of international students at this PSE institution, as well as the perspectives of faculty and staff regarding the support available to these students. The discussion is structured around the three research questions with subheadings used to clearly present the outcomes.

Addressing International Students' Needs

The international students could benefit from the supports offered by this PSE institution in two spheres, academic and personal. This was a common theme discussed by both the international students and the faculty/staff who took part in my focus groups interviews. The students indicated the importance of sharing their culture with others, including the instructors, so cultural awareness could be fostered on campus. The students also mentioned that they appreciate their instructor's direct support and encouragement, validation, and their willingness to learn more about each student's culture and background. Alcott (2017) found that "from the perspective of many students, teachers are likely to represent the most immediate embodiment of the educational system through which they are navigating" (p. 792). Thus, the importance of instructors understanding the students' needs and learning more about their cultural backgrounds.

Differences Between International and Domestic Student Needs

The results of the qualitative data I gathered from both sets of focus groups interviews helped understand the faculty/staff and the international student perspectives of the differences between international and domestic student needs. These key findings are supported by my review of literature, Balzer et al., (2019) indicate that international students entering PSE need support to succeed in their academic journeys. The international students entering the PSE in a different country need extra support in a variety of ways, such as within language, culture, educational environment and teaching methodology amongst other difficulties they may encounter. The literature has emphasized the importance of providing international students with extra support since their arrival to the new country until their program completion (Choudaha, 2016). This work within this PSE institution serves as a crucial support system, significantly contributing to the success or failure of the international students in their program.

Institutional Support for International Students

This study's data emphasizes that support services and academic resources should be readily available to the international students. These supports should be tailored to students' particular needs whenever possible. According to Kiyama and Crespin-Palmer (2020), each institution and its students will need to work together to find what works best for them and for their community of learners in general. Therefore, consulting with the international students about their needs on a constant basis should be a priority and a continuous practice.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings discussed above, several recommendations emerge for improving institutional support for international students. First, institutions should prioritize culturally responsive support services that acknowledge the unique challenges international students face, such as linguistic barriers, work-study balance, and social integration. Second, student support staff and faculty should receive training that highlights the differences between international and domestic students' experiences and expectations in higher education. Third, institutions could implement flexible scheduling, hybrid advising options, and more targeted communication strategies to accommodate students' diverse time constraints and cultural contexts. Finally, ongoing feedback mechanisms, such as participatory forums or student advisory panels, should be embedded into institutional practices to ensure international students have a voice in shaping their academic and social experience. These recommendations aim to foster more equitable, responsive, and student-centred environments in Canadian higher education.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of international students at this Canadian PSE institution, highlighting their unique challenges and needs compared to domestic students. Key findings reveal that international students face cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, financial strain, and a lack of tailored academic support. Additionally, they often hesitate to seek help due to cultural perceptions and time constraints caused by work commitments. Faculty and staff recognize these challenges and emphasize the importance of early interventions, flexible academic supports, and enhanced cultural awareness in their teaching practices.

The findings also indicate that international students require institutional support beyond what is typically available to domestic students. Their needs extend to embedded academic resources, more accessible financial aid, and structured guidance in navigating both academic and professional environments. Addressing these gaps can significantly enhance their academic success and overall well-being. Faculty and staff indicated that they also need support to better assist international students with their specific needs. I proposed the development of a course to help faculty and staff become acculturated and learn strategies for supporting international students. This course is currently under development.

To foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, post-secondary institutions should refine their student support systems by integrating academic assistance into coursework, expanding financial aid opportunities, and improving access to essential resources. Cultural awareness should be fostered on campus and in classrooms to support international student engagement and to build community with domestic students. By implementing these strategies, institutions would be able to provide the international community with the necessary support they need to thrive both academically and personally.

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been met as expected as per Purvis and Crawford (2024). The author lists the following CRediT statement: Sasse: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Writing—original draft, Data curation, formal analysis, writing—review & editing.

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