



The Integration Challenge: Connecting International Students with their Canadian peers

From the perspective of international students themselves, this paper identifies both internal and external barriers that impede the formation of friendships between international students and their Canadian counterparts across Canada's post-secondary campuses. Shedding light on why international students do not make friends with Canadian students in greater numbers, this paper presents a number of recommendations that can be drawn on by institutions, policy makers and other stakeholders to support greater international student integration. This is an excerpt of a longer piece, published in "A World of Learning 2014" available for download [here](#).¹

The number of foreign students in Canada continues to grow rapidly. In 2013, there were 293,500 international students in Canada, up 50% in the last five years.

The benefits of increased numbers of international students are clear: apart from contributing billions of dollars to the Canadian economy, international students bring a diverse set of experiences to the Canadian campus and community. This creates a high degree of exchange of ideas among different groups of people, has the potential to improve scholarship and foster a culture of global understanding, and forms an integral part of internationalization.

In the past two decades, Canada's post-secondary education institutions have become increasingly aware of the advantages of internationalizing their communities of learning. Indeed, the exponential growth of international students studying and graduating at Canadian institutions reflects both

a catalyst for internationalization as well as an outcome of efforts to achieve it.

Yet emerging research indicates that one of the strategic advantages of an internationalized campus — the formation of social bonds between international students and their Canadian counterparts — has been unsuccessful. In CBIE's 2014 survey of more than 3,000 post-secondary international students at 25 universities and colleges across Canada, 56% of respondents reported having no Canadian students as friends. Even those international students who plan to stay on in Canada after studying are no more likely to have Canadian friends — only 46% of them do. In addition, 36.6% indicated that it is difficult to get to know Canadian students. This follows similar results from CBIE's 2013 International Student Survey.

Recent statements on ethical internationalization emphasize the importance of international student

1. A list of works cited can be found in *A World of Learning 2014*.

integration. CBIE's Code of Ethical Practice details the importance of "Promot(ing) the interests of international students in the institutional community, and provid(ing) meaningful opportunities for interaction that promotes intercultural and mutual understanding between international students and other members of the institutional community and, to the extent possible, the surrounding community"(CBIE, 2013). The International Student Mobility Charter, developed by CBIE and several sister associations and adopted by the European Association for International Education (EAIE), states that: "When admitted to an education institution, international students are automatically also admitted to a country, a new community and its different culture. International students' integration and interaction with the academic as well as the wider community needs to be actively facilitated to maximize the value for all stakeholders" (EAIE, 2012).

However, countries are struggling with this aspect of internationalization. Canadian results mirror discouraging research reports elsewhere.

A recent US study (Gareis, 2012) found that almost 40% of international students in the US indicate that they have no close American friends and would like to have more meaningful interaction with Americans. Students highlighted internal as well as external factors for their lack of social bonds. Internal factors included "shyness" and lack of strong language proficiency. External factors included what is seen as a lack of interest in other cultures on the part of US students.

In Australia, the issue of international student integration has been studied for many years. In a 1973 study on loneliness, two-thirds of international students reported feeling loneliness and/or isolation during their studies (from Weiss, R., 1973, in Nuffic, 2007). In a 2011 study, many students indicated that they have only superficial interactions with Australian students (Gresham and Clayton, 2011).

Australia Education International's (AEI) 2006 International Student Survey found that 87% of international students at the school level, 80% of international students at the post-secondary level and 91% of international students studying preparatory English language courses would like to have more Australian friends (AEI, 2012). AEI attributes this to Australian students having an existing circle of friends and not seeing a particular benefit to social bonds with international students.

In the UK, a 2004 survey jointly conducted by the British Council, Universities UK, UKCOSA and the Council for International Education found that two-thirds of international students have few or

no British friends. The survey results show that most international students befriend students from their home country or other international students. In fact, nearly 60% of international students said that their friends were other international students only, including students from their home country; 32% said they have a mix of UK and international friends; and only 7% of international students said that the majority of their friends were British.

A survey by polling firm YouthSight of 500 international students at 105 post-secondary institutions in the UK elicited similar results. In the survey, 40% of international students indicated that they spend most of their time with students from their home country (The Huffington Post UK, June 2013).

While this disquieting global trend of lack of international student integration is increasingly recognized across Canada's campuses, the barriers to the formation of social bonds between international students and their Canadian counterparts, as well as best practices to address such challenges, remain only partly identified. Though Canadian institutions invest significant resources in orientation and integration programs, and many use researched best practice models, there remain both internal (student) and external (institutional, structural) factors which influence the formation of friendships between international and Canadian students.

METHODOLOGY

The present mixed methods study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods: analysis of results from CBIE's survey of international post-secondary students in Canada conducted during April May of 2014, semi-structured interviews with a subset of these students, and an extensive literature review.

The survey elicited 3,095 complete, useable responses from international students at 25 post-secondary institutions in ten provinces. Respondents come from 138 countries and were comprised of 52% males and 47% females; 1% did not state their gender.

Forty students were invited for interview; 16 responded. Interviewees were evenly balanced in terms of gender: eight women and eight men. They were enrolled at institutions located in seven different provinces and represented a variety of fields and levels of study. Three were studying towards a diploma, six were Bachelor's students, five were studying at the Master's level, one was studying English as a Second Language and one was studying French as a Second Language. The 16 students come from 11 different countries, in five

regions: six are from East Asia, three from South Asia, three from Africa, three from South America and one from Europe.

During webcam, recorded, semi-structured interviews conducted between June and August 2014, participants were asked to reflect on their social integration in Canada and what specifically would make it easier to connect with Canadian students, and how Canadians might benefit more from the presence of international students on campus.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following section will consider the results from both the 2014 CBIE International Student Survey and the 16 semi-structured student interviews in tandem.

International Students Struggle to Form Friendships with Canadian Students

As detailed above, CBIE’s 2014 ISS revealed that just over one-third of international students in Canada find it difficult to get to know Canadian students. Furthermore, 56% of students reported that they do not count Canadian students among their friends in Canada, and one in every two students finds it difficult to meet Canadians outside of their university/college context.

In the survey, the proportion of international students reporting friendships with Canadian students varies widely by region of origin, indicating that cultural and linguistic differences between students from different background may play a role. Students from

the United States were most likely to report having Canadian friends in their social group (84%), followed by students from Europe (53%). Students least likely to form friendships with Canadians are those from the Middle East and Northern Africa, where only 28% counted Canadian students in their group of friends.²

Despite these rather troubling figures, 82% of international students consider Canada to be a ‘...welcoming and tolerant society.’ Furthermore, the majority of students (76%) agree that ‘Canadians are friendly once you get to know them.’

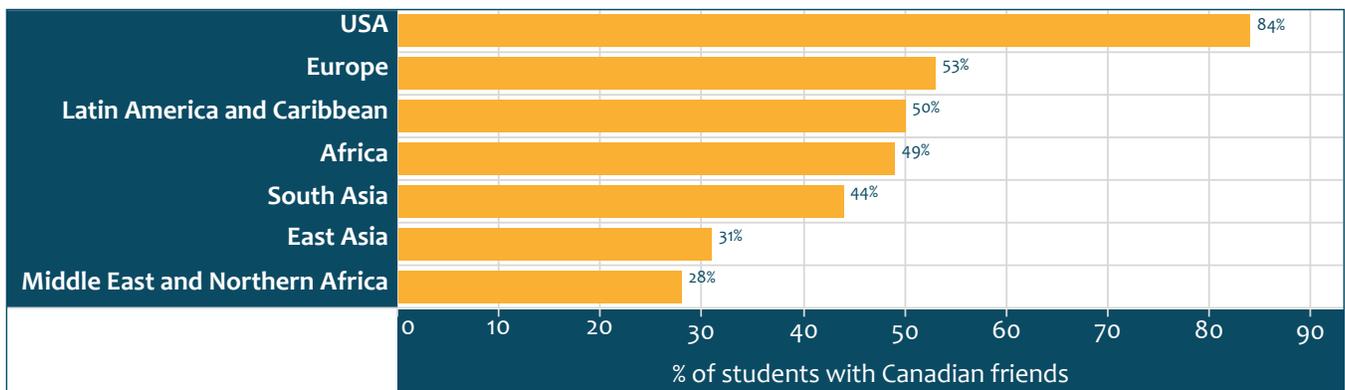
Where are friendships formed?

Unsurprisingly, almost all international students participating in the semi-structured interviews indicated that they were most successful at meeting Canadians through their **program of study**: the classroom, study groups and group projects.

Students also indicated meeting Canadians through **extracurricular activities** including interest groups, religious groups, volunteering, employment, and sporting activities.

Nearly half (46%) of respondents in the 2014 ISS were participating in an **international student group/association**. Similarly, almost all interviewees described meeting and forming friendships with other international students through the international student community in some form, though according to the 2014 ISS a meagre 37% of international students participate in their institution’s international student orientation program.

Despite this small number, almost all interviewees felt that they were especially close with their fellow international students and reflected positively on their



2. Oceania and Eastern Europe regions were not included in the analysis due to the limited number of responses (under 100).

experiences at the international student office during their first days, where many of their first connections were formed.

Many students also reflected positively on the number of occasions (structured and unstructured) they have had to exchange and celebrate their cultures through food and dance, and welcomed the idea of having more opportunities to do so with Canadians.

Many interviewees are working part-time during their studies. Some students cited this experience as an opportunity to meet Canadian friends, while others considered the time commitment as a barrier to forming friendships. Interviewees worked a variety of jobs on-and off-campus, such as alumni development, providing campus tours, being research assistants in laboratories and working in the food service industry.

BARRIERS TO FRIENDSHIP WITH CANADIANS

Interviewees cited a variety of barriers at play when it came to their efforts to form friendships with Canadians. These barriers often compounded upon one another, presenting multiple social challenges for international students.

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers are those that interviewees identified about themselves — their own characteristics and cultural traits which they self-identified as inhibiting their ability to form friendships with Canadian students.

It should be emphasized that international students in Canada are undergoing a significant process of cultural adaptation while at the same time striving for academic success in a new environment.. Internal barriers are influenced by these drastic cultural changes, and should not be perceived as abnormal behaviour, but rather behaviour that evolves over time. As students confront these changes, the kind of moral support and cross-cultural understanding offered by institutional student services professionals is highly valuable. Of course, students need not only to be aware of these resources but to reach out to access them.

In the 2014 ISS, one-third (30%) of international students reported that they **'prefer to mix with (their) own culture.'** Those students who were in agreement with this statement were considerably less likely to have Canadian friends (only 31% in contrast to 56% of all respondents).

“**Most international students have international student organizations, or clubs and societies, specifically dedicated to international students. I have never seen Canadian students come to those. So even if you go to all the events organized by the university, you don't get to meet Canadians.**”

— *Palama, Sri Lanka*

The likelihood of having friendships with Canadian students was also slightly negatively affected if the student **did not participate in extracurricular activities.** Among the group of “inactive” students, only 46% reported having Canadian friends.

Many students shared that they felt too shy during their first days in Canada to fully participate in big activities organized by their campus, such as orientation week.

Some students felt that their **limited language skills and their accent** contributed to their lack of confidence, as well as the challenge of navigating Canadian cultural nuances.

Feeling a lack of confidence in Canadian cultural contexts, many interviewees described how they at first gravitated towards peers who shared their cultural and linguistic background as a source of comfort and support. While such support was critical during times of distress, several students recognized the downside of only fraternizing with their familiar peers.

Institutional Barriers

In the 2014 ISS, nine out of ten students indicated that they were likely to recommend their institution to fellow international students. However, as Canadian campuses internationalize, interviewees identified some institutional barriers which they felt inhibited their ability to form friendships with Canadian students. These can be classified as those socio-cultural and physical barriers which are presented to students by their environment on-campus.

Interviewees who were involved in **diversity events on-campus** found that such activities **were heavily promoted to and attended by international students** — lacking a two-way cultural exchange with Canadian students.

Some interviewees lamented that they were unable to participate in their institution's orientation activities, or that when they did so, they found such activities to be poorly timed and rushed — and ultimately not overly meaningful — as they were simultaneously experiencing visa processes, arrival and settlement processes and cultural adaptation.

The composition of students in certain programs of study was also cited as a challenge by a few interviewees. For these interviewees, their particular **fields of study have a high proportion of international students, making it difficult to encounter Canadians in their academic spaces.**

Canadian Students

In the survey, 74% of respondents said that they would like more opportunities to experience Canadian culture and family life. Unfortunately, some student interviewees cited negative social experiences with Canadian students, sharing that from time to time they sense **Canadians are also shy or fearful of interacting with them.** Some students surmised that Canadians in urban areas were more accustomed to cross-cultural experiences and were therefore more approachable than in rural regions.

Where friendships with Canadians were formed, many interviewees underscored a sense of superficiality in such relationships.

“... It's difficult because most graduate students are in fact international students. In my department, we have I think 60 or 70 graduate students, out of them I know only three people are Canadians. In that respect, it is very difficult to get to know Canadians... unless you become friends with some of them or one of them through a course you are taking, where else can you find them? ... the structure is organized in such a way that international students always get to know international students, but not Canadians.”

— Palama, Sri Lanka

In addition, several students described the 'circle of Canadian friends' as something that was difficult to penetrate.

Some interviewees described the particularly challenging atmosphere in the classroom. One interviewee felt that he was resented by his classmates due to his position as top student, while another felt that Canadian students avoided doing group work with him and his international peers because of their lower level of English.

Internal and external barriers can become compounded, posing amplified challenges for international students as they integrate socially into their Canadian institution.

For example, interviewees shared that when cultural communication styles and the lack of familiarity between international students and Canadian students are apparent, this impedes the building of meaningful friendships between both parties.

Students also shared that even when they felt they had found a Canadian friend, the relationship remained superficial due to a lack of common interests and cultural references.

Several students echoed this experience with their Canadian peers, regretting that the students did not have more in common culturally. For example, interviewees mentioned that if they were more interested in Canadian hockey and the local pubs, they might be able to relate more and build friendships from common interests.

ENABLING FACTORS FOR FRIENDSHIPS

Internal enabling factors

Most interviewees employed strategies to address the barriers to forming friendships with Canadians. Many described themselves as outgoing, persistent and curious about other cultures in order to connect with Canadians. These three fundamental characteristics gave them success in engaging with Canadians, as well as other international students.

Some students intentionally limited their interaction with students from their home country in order to be more outgoing and form connections with Canadians.

Many interviewees shared that the longer they were in Canada the more comfortable they felt in approaching and interacting with Canadians. This was mainly due to feeling more settled and feeling more knowledgeable and confident about Canadian culture and languages.

“ Canadians are very forthcoming people, they would take us to a German club or Italian club with those houses and where people celebrated that culture. Or just go to a bar or watch a movie or go to a park or watching the World Cup right now.”

— *Khaleel, Pakistan*

While cultural and linguistic differences were generally perceived as barriers to overcome in order to become friends with Canadians, some international students are able to find Canadians who have an interest in their background and form meaningful friendships with them through language exchange and political discussion. In these cases, cultural and linguistic differences served as conduits to friendships between students rather than barriers. At first, some interviewees found it difficult to discern which Canadian students they would best connect with, but found that once the connection was made the relationship grew easily.

External enabling factors

In addition to the support received through international student services which facilitated friendships between international students, several interviewees noted that their professors and Canadian students played a key role in creating an inclusive social atmosphere.

Within the classroom, interviewees found that when their instructor played an active role in encouraging students to interact with one another through group work and debate, international students were able to engage with their classmates and contribute their international perspective to the learning.

Several instances of Canadian students extending a warm welcome to their international peers were also cited by interviewees, such as inviting them to join in a party, club, or other social activity.

ADVANTAGES OF FRIENDSHIP WITH CANADIANS

Interviewees were almost in universal agreement that there are unique advantages to forming friendships with Canadian students, particularly with regard to language acquisition and orientation to Canadian culture and lifestyle.

When diversity is valued, rather than perceived as a barrier between classmates, it can lead to better outcomes.

In the ISS, 65% of respondents shared their intention to find work in Canada following their studies. Participants in the semi-structured interviews were keenly aware of the value of having a Canadian professional network to support them in their job search.

Several interview participants highlighted the value that they found in experiencing a multicultural society through meeting diverse Canadians. Such students were able to learn about new cultures and many shared that this has fostered in them a stronger appreciation for diversity and global citizenship. Many students considered this a unique opportunity that Canada afforded them that would not be available elsewhere. In keeping with this sentiment, in the *2014 CBIE International Student Survey* 91% of respondents indicated that studying in Canada had helped them to better understand people of different backgrounds.

“ It’s a small world in the engineering industry; I’m interested in oil and gas, which is a small world. Everyone knows someone somewhere else. It might happen that my classmates they will be my future coworkers...”

— *Clara, Venezuela*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 16 participants in the semi-structured interviews were asked for their recommendations on how institutions and individuals might facilitate a greater number of, and more meaningful friendships between Canadian and international students. The following section describes the most salient themes that emerged. In many instances interviewees qualified their recommendations with reference to their institution's location, size, and mission. The following recommendations should be viewed through the lens that there are unfortunately no one-size-fits-all solutions for institutions and communities, but that that recommendations presented can be adapted to local contexts and available resources.³

1. If you could recommend one thing to your institution that would make it easier for you to connect with Canadian students, what would that be?

Consider a more integrated approach to student engagement

The most common recommendation for institutions was for international student offices and student life coordinators generally to create and facilitate more inclusive opportunities for international students and Canadian students, fostering greater multi-level exchange.

Incorporate cross-cultural awareness and skills-building into the global classroom

As Canada's campuses continue to internationalize, a culture that is simultaneously inclusive and appreciative of difference should permeate every aspect of the institution. In recent years many institutions have taken steps to address other social challenges such as sexual assault by incorporating awareness into orientation and core curriculum. In this era of rapid globalization, cross-cultural proficiency is a competency which is of universal benefit in both an economic and social sense, and should be considered an essential skill in the pedagogical approach.

Consider strategies for striking a balance of international and Canadian students

The number and concentration of international students from a particular country plays a role in integration. International Student Barometer data (2014) indicated that the higher the numbers of students from one country on a particular campus, the lower the degree of integration.

It is important for institutions to carefully reflect on the value of a diverse campus, while opening their doors to the many qualified students from a range of countries including those with large populations and high demand for quality education experiences abroad. In the late 1970s, a CBIE taskforce called for the "right mix," advocating that institutions pay attention to diversity in planning enrolments of international students and strike a balance that works for their unique circumstances — this challenge persists today.

In addition, several interview participants recommended that institutions make an effort to strike a better ratio of international students and Canadian students within their program of study.

While these ideas raise serious cautions about discrimination and the trouble of 'quotas,' these were perspectives shared by a number of students and it is hoped that this suggestion may inspire creative solutions which are equitable and beneficial to all students.

Re-conceive student orientation as an ongoing, non-linear process for all students, and strategize around how to address barriers to participation for international students, especially at the beginning of the term.

By giving international students an understanding of institutional and community processes, as well as the local culture, there is the potential for these types of programs to allow international students to integrate more smoothly into the campus and community.

While it is recognized that it is difficult to move formal student orientation dates, institutions could underscore to international students the value of arriving to campus early so that they might have more time to settle in and participate meaningfully in the activities.⁴ Providing orientation-like socials and events throughout

3. In offering these recommendations, we recognize that many institutions and professionals are already implementing their own highly effective practices to engage students and that some of these may seem simplistic to those who have been providing cross-cultural engagement programming for some time.

4. A number of institutions already emphasize this in letters of acceptance and by other means. These best practices should be emulated by more Canadian institutions.

the year may also support international students to connect with Canadian students as they experience their cycle of cultural adaptation.

In addition, some students indicated that the orientation program was either too dense or too superficial, as they had varying levels of engagement with their present community, from students who had attended high school in Canada prior to their post-secondary studies, to those who arrived simply for their current program. Institutions may wish to consider a tiered orientation program with options for greater and lesser information.

Encourage group work between international and Canadian students

As mentioned earlier, when all stakeholders have an appreciation for cross-cultural differences, group outcomes can be improved overall. As internationalized campuses would like to maximize the advantages of having a diverse student body, it is first imperative to ensure that all students are skilled in cross-cultural communication, and then exposed to real-world situations where they can collaborate and innovate with those who have different ideas and perspectives.

2. If there was one recommendation that you could make to Canadian students on how they might benefit more from your presence in the classroom, what would you say to them?

Access the cultural knowledge and perspective of international students

International students look to Canadian students for information on local language, culture and orientation. However, international student interviewees felt strongly that Canadians can seek out and benefit from the global perspective of international students on their campus. This perspective could support better global understanding and foster better international cooperation in all fields, especially those that involve social relations, international development, political

studies, and international business and trade. Again, in keeping with cross-cultural competencies, such endeavours would need to be supported by a general attitude by students that differences represent opportunities rather than risks. Some interviewees gave examples of instructors and Canadian classmates providing them with more space and patience to speak up in class.

CONCLUSION

While the prospect of making friends is not a primary factor in choosing a study destination, good relationships between Canadian and international students are an indicator of the cross-cultural social inclusion characteristic of an internationalized campus. When Canadian and international students do not fully benefit from each other's presence through meaningful social interaction, everyone loses. Moreover it is hard to say that internationalization has been truly achieved on a campus or in a school where, despite opportunities, connections between the two groups is rare.

There are many innovative programs at CBIE member institutions which seek to address the issue of international student integration, with particular attention paid to creating greater and deeper interactions with Canadians. Though their results are encouraging, 56% of international students do not have Canadian friends. We have some distance to go. Clearly institutional research on the effectiveness of current programs and action based on the results should be considered by institutions aiming for comprehensive internationalization. And if increasing international enrolments is on the institutional agenda, enhanced resources for student services aimed at academic and social adaptation should be applied.

It is hoped that the results of this study will support a better understanding of the barriers to the formation of social bonds between international and Canadian students, and that recommendations put forward in this paper will be drawn on by professionals, institutions, policy makers and other stakeholders working to create inclusive, enriching educational experiences for all students in this era of rapid globalization.

CBIE RESEARCH IN BRIEF Canadian Bureau for International Education

ISBN: 978-1-894129-79-4

ISSN 2368-3333, Key title: CBIE research in brief

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.
Également disponible en français

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