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## Towards sustainable internationalization in post-COVID higher education: Voices from non-native English-speaking international students in Canada



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### Abstract

International students have been a dominant topic in Canadian government and institutional strategies in recent years (Tamtik, 2017; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2020). As of 2019, the Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) reports over 600,000 international students in Canada across all levels of study. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the complexities around student engagement, learning and community building are complicated by remote learning. International students, in particular, face increasing challenges due to isolation from home countries and a reduction of in-person support services. We must now, more than ever, identify and address the lack of supports available to international students. This qualitative study provides voices from non-native English-speaking international students in Ontario universities speaking about the institutional support systems they have experienced in Canada. The findings are reported in a narrative format.

**Keywords:** international students, internationalization, higher education, COVID-19 pandemic

### Introduction

*“Life as an international student in Canada has been like a [sic] riding a rollercoaster for me.”  
(Student Participant C)*

Internationalization of higher education in Canada, and more specifically in Ontario, has been on the rise over the past twenty years. In the 2015–2016 academic year, international students made up 11% of the postsecondary student population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2018). As of 2019, the Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) reports over 600,000 international students in Canada across all levels of study. In 2020, border closures related to the global COVID-19 pandemic left many international students isolated from their home countries and elevated many of the struggles faced by

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international students in Canadian higher education settings (Vandeville, 2020). While it is too soon for formal research reports, the transition to virtual learning has no doubt added further academic challenges for international students. With new limitations on student mobility, international students will likely experience more pronounced barriers—such as educational access issues and prolonged study processes—which ultimately have an impact on multiple aspects including finances and study plans. While the pandemic has its own unique set of challenges, it also exacerbates and highlights pre-existing challenges for international students. The University of Toronto, for example, has announced several measures to address international students' mental health, visa issues, residences for students, and assistance for incoming students. While these speedy measures to support international students from universities seem timely and helpful to mitigate struggles worsened by the pandemic, the unique challenges international students face have existed for decades—ever since the universities' strategic goals shifted to increase student diversity and internationalize the campus (Chan, 2005; Gertler, 2016).

### **Reflexivity**

Topics around international students in Canada are dear to my heart. In the summer of 2003, I arrived in Canada as an international graduate student from South Korea pursuing a Masters of Education in curriculum studies with a specialization in teaching English as a Second Language. During the second term of my studies, I heard about available teaching positions from ESL Services in the university where I was studying. While my Canadian classmates encouraged me to apply, as they were, I was unsure I would ever have a chance to teach English in a Canadian university as a second language speaker. The posting note was for a role teaching English to francophone students from Quebec. It took a lot of courage for me to apply, and I was surprised to get an interview. I was very relaxed during the interview, a calm that came from an assumption the role was out of my reach. To my surprise, a couple of weeks later, I received a letter of acceptance announcing that I would begin teaching in July, 2004. This opportunity felt like an example of an accepting multicultural Canada, but there was another factor at play—the internationalization of higher education (Knight, 2004). Universities in Ontario were highly interested in increasing the number of international students for the dual purpose of mitigating fiscal challenges and promoting diversity on the campus. This is how I started as an English Language Educator in Canada. In Fall of the same year, I started teaching in the English for Academic Purposes program where I taught international students, predominantly from East Asian countries, such as China, South Korea and Japan. This opportunity gave me a new perspective – shifting my lens from international student to that of educator.

Over the course of my teaching career (now spanning nearly 15 years), I have had the privilege of teaching students from around the world, many of whom pursued further studies in undergraduate or graduate programs. As soon as international students arrive in Canada, they face a variety of challenges—language and cultural barriers, financial difficulties, interpersonal problems, racial discrimination, loss of social support, alienation and homesickness (Guo & Guo, 2017; Smith, 2016; Stein, 2018, Yeh & Inose, 2003). What I witnessed and experienced with international students in my English language classes was not all that different from what the literature reports. The students I taught faced a lack of support from the university. Rather than having a support system in place for international students in all programs in the university, the issues were usually dealt with on a case-by-case basis, which prevented students and educators from accessing the support easily. There was a lack of readily available financial support. Some of my former students faced discrimination and racism from faculty members because of minor linguistic errors in their papers and their accents. Others were accused of cheating during exams. Most of the time, I was their moral support, but at times I was called in as a witness in appeal meetings. Between 2016 and 2017, these experiences led me to join and participate in the Human Rights Task Force and Anti-Racism Committee to raise

awareness around international students' issues on the campus and serve as an advocate. Some people I met in this capacity were either ignorant of the issue or not empathetic to the students' concerns because many of them felt frustrated with the rapid institutional stance on increasing international students to offset the fiscal challenges. In addition, some believed international students were lowering the academic standards in the classroom because of their passive participation in class and linguistic challenges in their verbal and written communication. I did encounter a few concerned and caring faculty members who were interested in providing systemic and institutional support for the international students and were also enthusiastic about creating experiential learning experiences for both international and domestic Canadian students learning English. However, currently, international students are not considered an equity-seeking group according to Canadian university policies (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). This reality may play a vital role in making it more difficult for international students to access adequate support and resources supporting their success in Canada. My interest in institutional support for international students continues to be motivated and informed by anecdotal experiences, such as these, as an educator of international students.

As Cho and Yu (2014) contend, university support is crucial for international students' success in both the host university and society; however, international students have fewer educational, social, and cultural resources to draw from when compared to domestic students. For example, international students tend to be ineligible for scholarship opportunities that domestic students are able to take advantage of such as Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants or institutional scholarships unless they are specifically allocated for international students. When the students need mental, social and financial supports, such as counseling services in their first language, scholarships or financial support for international students, they are often faced with little or no support. Despite the efforts of myself and others, the conditions and support for international students have hardly improved since I was last an international student in 2003.

### ***Internationalization of higher education in Canada and international students***

Internationalization of higher education in Canada, and more specifically in Ontario, has seen dramatic growth in undergraduate international student enrolment. According to Statistics Canada, during the 2017–2018 academic year international students made up 14% of the post-secondary student population in Canada, which is over 2.1 million. According to El Masri and Sabzalieva (2020), international students in particular have become an integral part of Canadian higher education, such that the COVID-19 disruption to the flow of international students has been seen as “the biggest and most immediate financial challenge facing universities and colleges” (Usher, 2020). While media reports caution a possible drop in international student enrollment with limited student mobility during the COVID-19 crisis (Ansari, 2020), a Canadian university such as the University of Alberta (Johnson, 2020) reported their enrollment has not been significantly impacted compared to the pre-COVID-19 situation, including the number of international students. Meanwhile, international students are expressing frustration with having to take classes online while paying the inflated international student fee. El-Hawary, an international student from University of British Columbia, reported that she feels she is not receiving the benefit of the social and professional capital as classes are delivered online (Ansari, 2020).

In addition to being a lucrative revenue stream, international students have diversified the student body of Ontario universities and offer many benefits to host institutions, the local community, and the country at large. International students provide valuable globalized perspectives to academic institutions as well as socio-cultural connections (Guo & Guo, 2017). The province of Ontario is reported to host 48% of the national international student population (Canadian Bureau of International Education Report, 2017). COVID-19 will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the

internationalization of higher education, and challenges may have emerged in the areas that have not been in the institutions' radar prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, the majority of the university and college courses have been converted to online in Canada making it possible for students from around the globe to study, virtually, from anywhere. Limitations such as relocation become null. On the other hand, if classes start being offered in person again, the complications of travel, isolation and quarantine, stigma related to country of origin, and socio-economic status could deter students from looking abroad and may encourage students to look locally for their education. While education systems around the globe have pivoted towards new virtual delivery models, the supports students require, specifically international students, remain critical to their success – perhaps even more so. A recent study from China about the COVID-19 and online learning in higher education revealed that international students are facing loss of sense of togetherness in an online environment, the high cost of internet and a challenge for logging in from different time zones (Demuyakor, 2020). These results show that in addition to the traditional challenges international students have been experiencing, a new set of support measures needed by these international students may have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Research Context, Methods, and Questions

### Methodology

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted research on the perceptions of adult international students regarding support in post-secondary institutions in Ontario, Canada. Two sites of investigation were selected from Ontario universities, both with large international student enrolments. This exploratory study was conducted on the campuses of the two institutions and consisted of semi-structured interviews with four international students whose first language is not English. I recorded interviews from the four student participants for this study. Each semi-structured interview lasted 30–45 minutes using interview prompts. At the time of study, all four were enrolled in post-secondary institutions in Ontario though at different stages of their respective programs. I relied on snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in an effort to have a diverse representation of student backgrounds and programs of study. The students included in this research represent different geographical origins, languages, and programs of study within their universities. The participant demographics are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** *Demographic of the participants<sup>i</sup>*

	<i>1<sup>st</sup> Language</i>	<i>Years of study in Canada</i>	<i>Student the Canadian university</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>in</i>
<i>Student A</i>	<i>Mandarin Chinese</i>	<i>2&gt;</i>	<i>EAP / A language-upgrading academic program</i>		
<i>Student B</i>	<i>Punjabi</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>Undergraduate Studies</i>		
<i>Student C</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>2&lt;</i>	<i>Graduate Studies</i>		
<i>Student D</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>1&lt;</i>	<i>Graduate Studies</i>		

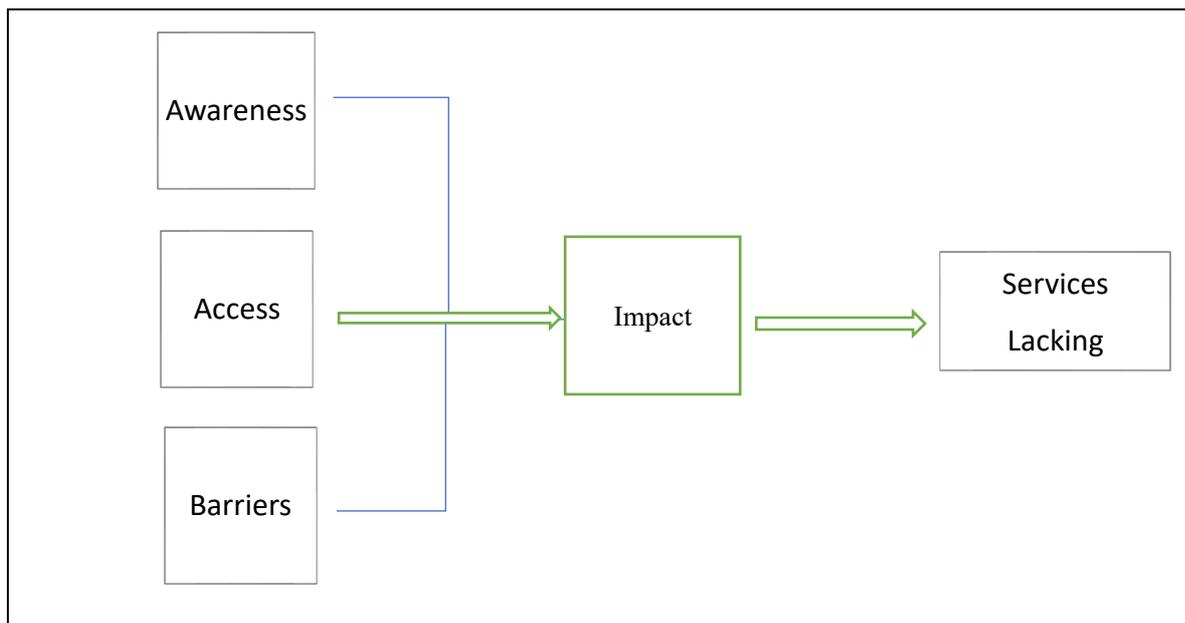
The research focused exclusively on the international student experience with support systems at universities in southern Ontario. The interview questions were designed to answer the main research questions in terms of the awareness, use, the challenges to use the support, and the impact and the gaps in the support system in their university. The main research questions included:

1. How aware are international students of available support?
2. What support do they take advantage of?
3. What challenges do they face in making use of this support?
4. What impact does this support have?
5. What other support measures do they feel they need?

The nature or kinds of support were intentionally not specified during the interviews in order to develop an exploratory approach with the student participants.

### Conceptual framework

The research questions for this study were guided by the framework Roberts and Dunworth's (2012) Australian case study provided. Their study focused on a) the students' awareness of available services, b) the degree to which services were accessed, c) how useful the services were perceived to be, and d) the factors that might inhibit their use (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012, p. 519). The diagram below illustrates the conceptual framework that was used in this study.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework adapted from Roberts and Dunworth (2012) and Roberts, Boldy, and Dunworth (2015)

### Data analysis

The analysis of the data from the interviews was guided by the research questions and the conceptual framework. The interviews were coded based on the five research questions under the themes of awareness, access/use, barriers, and impact of the support. The qualitative interview data was further analyzed using the seven international students' needs identified by Pelletier (2003), namely: 1. practical needs; 2. emotional needs; 3. cultural and integrational needs; 4. language needs; 5. pedagogical needs; 6. needs relating to the curriculum and assessment; and 7. needs associated with performance outcomes.

### Findings

The interviews and findings presented below reflect the student participants' awareness of the services, challenges, and successes with their respective support systems. In addition, my study aimed to identify additional services that international students perceived to be lacking. Because the student participants are non-native English speakers, their narratives may include errors in terms of grammar and word choice, but their statements have been left as they are. Voices from the student participants are reported in a narrative format and excerpts from the interviews are selected to answer the research questions.

### **Narratives from the non-native English-speaking international students**

Student A was originally from an East Asian country and was studying in an English Preparation Program. They had a conditional offer to get into the Undergraduate Business program. This participant's English proficiency was perhaps the weakest amongst all the student participants. When I asked about the awareness and the use of existing supports, Student A noted:

*"I learned from another student she said that we can get some support from professors. I can get help from the professors because my program will be all international students, but if I have to be in class with Canadian students, I will probably hide in the corner. I signed up for Conversation partners program. I didn't find it very helpful, because I felt the Canadian students are not caring about me. They just want their hours and get my signatures. After talking to them for a while, they keep look at the time and I don't think they are really interested in what I have to say."*

*"I know I pay much more tuition fees than the domestic students, but I don't think I should pay for the same tuition money as the domestic students. I heard their tuition fees are supported by the taxes their family paid for. More scholarship opportunities would be great though."*

*"I think it's hard for students to get engaged in communicating in person. Perhaps, there could be more supports based on Social Media so the Canadian students can get engaged more."*

In this response, the student identified their social circle as the information source that led them to the support systems. There was a level of trepidation and disappointment from the student when they reference interaction with Canadian students. Martin and Nakayama (2010) found that international students whose first language is not English often experience difficult fully engaging in diverse relationships with domestic students as well as other international students in their everyday lives because of limited linguistic skills and limited understanding of cultural norms.

Student B was in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of an undergraduate program majoring in Women's Studies. The student was originally from a South East Asian country speaking Punjabi. This student identified themselves as a student activist. This student's perspective was very critical of how racialized international students were faced with numerous challenges.

*"One of the biggest challenges, I face is lack of personal counselling support. That's one of the reasons why I got involved in activism on campus. The current counselling support they offer is really not helpful for the racialized international students. indigenous students as well. They barely have any racialized international staff in the counselling service. The lack of racialized staff in the counselling impacted me because first few sessions of counselling with the staff there I spent most of my time explaining my culture and why I'm doing the way I am. That's a lot of energy and it is really draining..."*

*Coming to a counselling session and they look at you and say 'Yeah, I know where you are coming from' is important to me instead of dealing with people who look at you 'I don't understand why.' I asserted myself that at the student-at-risk committee why we need more racialized staff in that service and staff who can speak other languages so the students don't have to explain their unique difficulties."*

*“I believe, some of the reasons why there is lack of support for international students is partly because they are very vulnerable and the institution takes advantage of that. We are more comfortable talking to someone who’s racialized or look international however many of us are more accustomed to intolerant responses from the people around the campus.”*

*“The feeling of unworthiness in international students is a systemic thing and it’s such an internal struggle. Although the bond between domestic and international student has to happen, first the system needs to change for that to happen. The international students need to heal and understand the violence and oppression in the institution and be OK with asking for help. Even accessing or asking for help is looked at as such a shameful thing in my culture. Culture shock is really huge and people cannot imagine the immense impact on you walking into a completely new space. Financial support is also important and it’s an untapped support systematically and we pay so much more tuition money than the domestic students. Financial barriers could easily lead to a systemic exploitation and impact students’ general well-being as well. “*

*“Another area is academic side. Language barriers are big in the classroom. I as an international student have to uphold high standards in terms of writing and speaking. I have heard some students mocking other classmates’ accents in class. There seems to be no negotiation, conversation or an atmosphere that allows for those conversations to happen. These issues in class need to be addressed and to truly accommodate our language needs.*

As Sterzuk (2016) claimed, while institutions have become more linguistically and racially diverse, the practices and the policies solidify a racial hierarchy in the institutions by allowing only a certain “standard” English. This was manifested in Student B’s story about what was happening in the classroom when international students were experiencing language barriers, including different accents.

Student C completed the language preparation program requirement before starting a Master of Education degree. The student originally came from a Latin American country and spoke Spanish as a first language.

*“I got an email about tutoring service for my essays, so I was able to use the service which I found it very helpful. Although my classmates and my students whom I TA say my English is not a problem although I have an accent, I feel I need extra help with the academic writing.”*

*“I would like to be able to access personal counselling service, but I don’t think it will be helpful for me if I have to consult with them in English. I find having to speak English all day all week very draining and exhausting. If I could have a chance to consult my problems in my first language, it will be more therapeutic and meaningful to me without extra burden of having to speak another language.”*

*“I don’t want to be treated differently from the Canadian students in terms of expectations in academic work. Yes, we do pay a lot more tuition fees than the domestic students and my first language is not English, but that was my choice and the university is offering TAship to me, which alleviates part of the financial burden for me.”*

*“More cultural activities on the campus should truly focus on the international students*

*not focusing on the Canadian students and what they would be interested in. The focus shouldn't be how we can attract the Canadian students to come out to these cultural events across the campus. I like the idea of international film series. I sometimes go and watch a Spanish film. It's very relaxing for me."*

Student D was originally from another Latin American country pursuing a doctorate degree in education. Although the student stayed in Canada less than a year, this student had experiences in living, studying and working in different parts of the world including France and the USA.

*"The orientation at the beginning of the term provided me with lots of information. I attended several academic writing and presentation workshops tailored for international students whose 1st language is not English. I found them very helpful and it provided me with knowledge and reminders of academic expectations in the English-speaking University."*

*"One day I looked around my class and I realized there are at least 7-8 different countries represented in the class. However, we weren't encouraged to share about our international perspectives in class but we were discussing the Canadian/North American educational system which, for some of us, we are not even familiar with what that exactly is not having gone through the educational system here. I wish there were more official forms for international students to discuss the global perspectives they bring into the Canadian university."*

Students C and D were made aware of the support services and system from the institutional email and through an orientation program. Considering they were in the graduate studies, they may have been more actively looking for the support they needed and at the same time, the institutions may have been more proactively addressing graduate students' needs compared to the students from the undergraduate or English Language Preparation programs. From the interviews with Student A and Student C, while they admitted they were struggling financially and culturally, they did not want to be treated "differently" by the university in terms of tuition fees and academic standards. Student participants expressed that they would like to see their cultures, educational knowledge, and backgrounds valued in the Canadian universities. Kelly (2000) argued that, in Western institutions, "many current approaches to internationalization of the curriculum in higher education are ad hoc, tokenistic, and inadequate" (p. 163). Instead of a deficit-focused approach towards international students, recent research highlights a need to rethink how knowledge is generated and see international students as knowledge producers, not as passive consumers of Eurocentric knowledge (Guo & Guo, 2017; Stein, 2018). These studies shed light on the need for a more concerted effort in internationalizing the curriculum in higher education in Canada. While Canadian higher education institutions are enjoying the ever increasing number of international students and the diversity they bring to campus, the international students are frequently faced with stereotypes, discrimination and racism affecting their sense of security within those same institutions, which prevents them from having equitable learning experiences (Gui, Safdar & Berry, 2016; Rice & Lee, 2007).

### **Overview of findings**

The selected participants had different personal and cultural backgrounds as well as experience in their respective academic programs. When analyzing the interview responses, the perceptions and needs for support varied. Table 2 summarizes the participants' key experiences and opinions about existing and future potential supports based on the five research questions.

**Table 2** *International students' experiences about support*

Research Questions	International Students' Experiences Using Support
<i>How aware are international students of available supports?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragmented awareness of existing support based on their interest of needs</li> <li>• Different level of awareness and understanding of what support is/should be</li> </ul>
<i>What supports do they take advantage of?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rely on their home cultural community rather than accessing the systemic support</li> <li>• Rely on peers and sometimes professors in the classroom</li> <li>• Conversation partner program with the domestic students</li> <li>• Language and academic supports for academic writing and presentations</li> <li>• On a graduate studies level, TA/GA-ship is a form of financial support</li> </ul>
<i>What challenges do they face in making use of these supports?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of information about the available support</li> <li>• Student vulnerability from language and socio-cultural competency as well as racial prejudice on campus</li> <li>• Insecurity to admit they need extra help compared to the domestic students</li> <li>• International students should be treated equally with domestic students, so the academic ability and responsibility is on individual international students</li> <li>• In addition to the language barriers in class, accessing educational technology in English is a challenge</li> </ul>
<i>What impact do these supports have?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in overcoming cultural and educational challenges in a new English speaking academic space</li> <li>• Help understand the nature of assignments</li> <li>• Help complete their academic work</li> <li>• TA/GA-ship alleviates financial burden</li> </ul>
<i>What other supports do they feel they need?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More practical and experiential learning opportunities are needed, which could lead to professional success after graduation.</li> <li>• Personal counselling services where they can speak their 1st language</li> <li>• Mentor systems who can share the same language for emotional psychological support</li> <li>• Support in educational technology tailored for the second language international students</li> <li>• Lack of curriculum consideration to make more international student-centred approach</li> <li>• Workshops on Canadian culture and educational systems</li> <li>• Language workshops on culturally loaded language expressions and idioms</li> <li>• More cultural and international events led by international students (e.g. international film series)</li> <li>• More scholarship opportunities for international students</li> </ul>

Table 3 exemplifies the existing supports and gaps in supports that the participants identified based on Pelletier's (2003) seven international students' needs.

**Table 3** *Seven needs and relevant support emerged from interviews*

<b>International Students' Seven Needs by Pelletier (2003)</b>	<b>Existing Supports by International Students</b>	<b>Gaps in Supports identified by International Students</b>
1. Practical needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TA/ GAship for financial support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional financial support for international students (e.g., more scholarships)</li> </ul>
2. Emotional needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal counselling support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racialized and international staff representation in counselling support who can speak students' first language</li> </ul>
3. Cultural and integrational needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural events on the campus</li> <li>• Conversation partner programs</li> <li>• Home culture community support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural events planned from the international student-centred approach</li> <li>• More social media driven activities for meaningful engagement with the domestic students</li> </ul>
4. Language needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutoring support for essay writing</li> <li>• Academic Writing and Speaking Workshops tailored for students whose first English is not English</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-class and outside survival language workshop</li> <li>• More practical and professional English workshops</li> </ul>
5. Pedagogical needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support in-class</li> <li>• Support from the professors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More awareness from the faculty and students on what the unique difficulties international students are facing</li> </ul>
6. Needs relating to the curriculum and assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Management System providing a consistent learning environment for both domestic and international students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More curriculum reflecting international students' representation in-class</li> <li>• Technological literacy workshops for International students</li> </ul>
7. Needs associated with performance outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring system with peers who have similar cultural and language background and from the same program</li> </ul>

Opinions varied amongst the four participants about the types of support they needed. This range of values reflects on a micro scale what Ontario institutions are facing with the increasing population of international students and the range of support that the institutions can effectively offer. Students showed different levels of awareness. Some were keen to read university provided emails and information shared during the orientation but others relied more on the information provided by their peers from the same cultural groups. One of the cultural factors commonly shared was the sense of insecurity or shame when the students encounter problems. Students asserted that they want to be treated equally and do not want to be under a different set of standards academically and otherwise. While this belief shows their dedication and the determination they bring to their studies, at the same time, when a problem occurs, this likely will inhibit seeking out the help and support that might be needed for academic success. Additionally, and relating to this notion of insecurity and shame, one of the main concerns repeatedly raised by the students was the need to improve the counselling services that will have a significant impact on their mental health. Students also highlighted the need to shift the student-centred approach towards social activities and academic curriculum representing the ever-

increasing international student presence on campus and in the classroom. Voices from the students shed light on some of the support services that are working for them and further highlighted the services currently lacking to help ensure success in their studies in Canadian post-secondary institutions.

### Conclusion

In keeping with Roberts and Dunworth's (2012) findings, international student impressions vary even when they receive the same consistent support. Individualized support is optimal for student needs but presents fiscal and logistical challenges for Ontario higher education institutions. This is especially true for institutions that are looking to international students' tuition to generate revenues and mitigate their fiscal challenges. A thorough review of current universities' policies and practices is needed to implement systemic support. International students bring many benefits to the campus, but the benefits cannot be truly embraced without adequate support.

Internationalization and international students have been a dominant discourse in Canadian government and institutional strategies in recent years (Tamtik, 2017; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2020). This institutional priority has not changed since the COVID-19 pandemic in the Canadian higher education landscape. The University of Alberta has reported that they have maintained their international student enrollment amid the pandemic (Johnson, 2020) while the United Kingdom has reported a 9% increase in international student enrollment (Adams, 2020). This shows that while physical international student mobility may be significantly restricted due to border closures and travel restrictions, higher education institutions from English speaking countries remain a popular destination for international students. The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the face-to-face learning to virtual delivery mode for many international students. This means a significant number of international students will be accessing university education remotely while residing in their home country. The synchronous and asynchronous aspects of this remote learning mode brings advantages and disadvantages into cross-cultural learning environments. (Liu *et al.*, 2010). Students perceived their asynchronous discussions as "clear, free of the misunderstandings caused by accents and the impact of the time difference is less" (Liu *et al.*, 2010, p. 183). However, asynchronous discussion is unable to provide "the nuances of human interaction" (*ibid*). Therefore, the students felt that it was difficult for them to figure out the intentions of the other students during group work due to their different working styles and cultures (*ibid*). These challenges could be mitigated by offering synchronous discussions but the time difference can be another barrier with students accessing the courses from different time zones. The findings from this research were from before the pandemic, but the cultural factors affecting international students' online learning may have similar impacts during the COVID-19 online learning as well.

Fully online learning due to COVID-19 constraints may have exposed a new set of challenges and needs for international students, such as the inconvenience of learning from different time zones, the difficulty to access university social and academic supports, online test anxiety, a sense of isolation and other possible mental health issues. International students are one of the most vulnerable population groups of the pandemic and many of them will likely experience social and psychological distress affecting their academic performance (Firang, 2020). For future research and consideration, more research may be needed to investigate specifically the perspectives of international students who are pursuing their studies fully online either through remote synchronous or hybrid delivery. Considering the changes happening in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings from my study are especially poignant and shed further light on the importance of increased and alternative institutional supports for international students.

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<sup>1</sup> I had a fifth interviewee from an East Asian country, but this student participant said during the interview everything was fine and there was no problem with the support. However, as soon as the recorder was turned off, the student asked if they could share how they really felt about the topic. A sense of shame to admit a problem was clearly present