

University of Alberta

Exploring Graduate International Students' Sense of Belonging in Canadian Higher Education
Institutions

by

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Abstract

As the number of international students in Canada continues to rise, understanding and addressing the challenges associated with their sense of belonging becomes paramount. This paper, authored by an international student and instructor, explores the intricate emotions and perceptions surrounding the sense of belonging within the Canadian higher education sector. Utilizing Maslow's theoretical framework of belongingness, the study aims to comprehensively unravel the origins and manifestations of these feelings, shedding light on their impact on academic performance and social integration. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of international students, advocating for the creation of an inclusive and supportive academic environment in Canada. By identifying and addressing the factors influencing a sense of belonging, the paper seeks to enhance the academic success and holistic well-being of international students, ultimately fostering a community where every student feels connected and valued.

Keywords: international students, sense of belonging, community building, on-campus services

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Introduction

The number of international students studying in Canada is increasing. While studying abroad can be an enriching experience, it can also be challenging, especially for those who feel disconnected from home after moving into a new environment. A person's entire wellbeing is greatly influenced by their sense of belonging, which also has an impact on their academic performance, mental health, and social integration.

Being both an international student and instructor deeply engaged with the experiences of newcomers in Canada. I have keenly observed the array of challenges we encounter concerning our sense of belonging in this new cultural landscape. It is evident that the transition to an unfamiliar educational and social environment can be intricate and emotionally demanding.

In response to these observed challenges, my project is dedicated to delving into the nuanced realm of emotions and perceptions that international students have about their sense of belonging as international students within the higher education sector. The purpose of this study is to explore international students' sense of belonging in Canadian higher education. The goal is to comprehensively understand these feelings, their origins, and how they manifest in various aspects of their academic and social lives.

Through this project, I aspire to contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of international students, ultimately advocating for an inclusive and supportive academic environment that nurtures a robust sense of belonging for all. This project entails a

thorough environmental scan to find out what different services are offered in Canadian higher education institutions and how they can impact international students' sense of belonging. This is based on publicly available online information and friendly conversations with international services staff. This project also relies on my personal observations as an international student and instructor and ongoing friendly conversations with other international students, studying in different institutions.

This project can work collectively towards fostering an atmosphere where every international student feels a connection and belongingness, promoting academic success and holistic well-being.

Theoretical Framework

This project uses Maslow's theoretical framework of belongingness. Abraham Maslow, a prominent psychologist, introduced the hierarchy of needs in 1943 as a fundamental psychological theory. This framework is often illustrated as a pyramid consisting of five tiers, each representing distinct categories of human needs. Positioned in the third tier of this pyramid is the essential need for belongingness and love, a pivotal aspect of Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow (1943) postulated that humans possess an innate and fundamental requirement to connect with others and establish meaningful relationships. This need for interpersonal relationships and social connections is perceived as a precursor to achieving higher levels of psychological development. The sense of belongingness encompasses social relationships, such as friendships, intimacy, and family bonds, along with community and group membership, where individuals experience a sense of inclusivity and connection to a broader social entity.

Review of Literature

Sense of Belonging

According to various meanings attached to it, a sense of belonging is understood as an experience of belongingness, relatedness, membership, community, acceptance, support, and affiliation. Different studies have revealed different meanings of the sense of belonging. Some of those meanings are a feeling that members are valued to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together, or a person's perceived belief of indispensability within a system, or an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield a meaningful or effective response or reaction, or in an academic setting, sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class (Strayhorn, 2018).

From the above, we may understand that 'sense of belonging' deals with an individual's psychological experiences and their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context such as family, school, or college (Strayhorn, 2018). Apart from that, a sense of belonging also deals with physical aspects of existence and life performances of students, especially those who have moved away from home. Sense of belonging is a key factor influencing students' willingness to take ownership of their learning and performance.

It is an indispensable component of human drive, motivation, and ownership. Sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation which drives a student to reason, perform, take ownership, strive and be self-directed in their learning. Failure to satisfy this necessity to belong can lead to outcomes that are psychologically and developmentally inadequate (Toit-Brits, 2022). Thus, it becomes more important to study international students' sense of belonging in Canada.

A sense of belonging is a vital necessity and imperative to be a motivated, self-actualized student. Those who have motivation, self-determination, and a sense of belonging are successfully able to employ critical thinking, autonomy, ownership, responsibility, and in their pursuit of education, all essential qualities required to excel in higher education institutions of Canada (Toit-Brits, 2022). Therefore, being part of an institute of higher education, feeling accepted, and being included, is important to community engagement because students who feel that they are part of a community at their higher institution are more likely to be engaged in their community, thereby more likely to excel in their educational pursuits.

Community Building

The sense of belonging to a community is understood to mean a supportive network or structure one can depend upon for psychological support and significant association. Belonging to a community and achieving a sense of community is one of the major tasks of life. The absence of this sense of community is a destructive force, and could lead to alienation and anonymity (Jason, 1997).

Students' sense of belonging in educational institutions is influenced by a number of factors, including gender, ethnicity, socio- economic status as well as institutional practices, peer

relationships, student-teacher interactions, institutional climate, or circumstantial changes like the Covid-19 pandemic (Dost & Smith, 2023). Greater sense of belonging has also been linked with better wellbeing and mental health outcomes. Therefore, the sense of belonging to a community helps prevent anxiety, stress, and depression, increases academic motivation and resilience, decreases health problems and loneliness, and provides an overall increase in happiness.

Some researchers have examined the association of loneliness with the COVID-19 pandemic in academic institutions (Dost & Smith, 2023). They found that students felt more stressed about studying after the COVID pandemic, which was followed by the closure of campus and the subsequent transition to virtual classrooms, creating a void and absence of community building.

Being on Canadian campuses, international students have a unique opportunity to meet one another and develop and strengthen social relationships with each other and with the academic staff on campus. This is crucial for the development of a sense of belonging and a sense of security in a community. We need to strive towards building a community where international students feel safe and accepted. Building a community where they can share their vulnerabilities, sadness and joy, so they may be able to have better well-being and better academic performance, thereby better satisfaction and happiness in their academic pursuits needs to be prioritized (Jason, 1997).

Graduate Student Experiences

Graduate students, particularly international ones, encounter a sense of belonging that may differ from the experiences of undergraduate students (Hidalgo, 2021). Various studies have

delved into graduate student experiences, examining factors such as academic support and integration, social support and integration, adjustment and engagement, and cultural ties (Le et al., 2016; Darwish, 2015; Curtin et al., 2013; Chen & Razek, 2016).

Among female graduate international students at a predominantly white institution, the sense of belonging emerged as one of the main factors that gave meaning to the student experience (Le et al., 2016). These students associated their positive experiences with the support they received from various networks, including professors and advisors, host families, on-campus services, friends, and family in the host country. They attributed their academic success to the strength of their support system (Le et al., 2016). However, another study by Darwish (2015), which focused on how academic and social integration influenced graduate international student persistence, found that factors such as English proficiency negatively affected classroom participation and peer interaction, which, in turn, negatively affected students' sense of belonging.

Compared to domestic students, graduate international students have been found to place more importance on research and professional experiences, but were equal to domestic students in the importance they attached to social interactions and advisor support (Curtin et al., 2013). Research by Curtin et al. (2013) found that international students experienced a strong sense of belonging when they had a good relationship with their advisors. The relationships that students have with their advisors "illustrate the importance of advisors in positively affecting all doctoral students' sense of belonging and academic self-concept," which enhances their persistence and pedagogical experience (Curtin et al., 2013, p. 130).

Lastly, four additional key themes that influence the adjustment and engagement or sense of belonging of graduate students have also emerged in the literature. These themes are mentoring relationships, socialization, perceived self-efficacy, and the perception of engagement (Chen & Razek, 2016). These themes were developed as a result of exploring the perspectives of mentoring relationships, socialization, and factors of perception. For graduate students, academic and social engagement is strongly influenced by their adjustment to college life (Chen & Razek, 2016). Additionally, an interdependent relationship was further found between academic and social engagement, with an increase in academic engagement corresponding with a decrease in social involvement, and vice versa" (p. 16).

Based on the research review, 18 factors affect international students' sense of belonging (Hidalgo, 2021). These factors encompass a wide range of aspects, from academic involvement and social integration to cultural factors and the campus climate. These factors have a profound impact on international students' experiences and their sense of belonging. When students do not feel a sense of belonging at their institution, motivation, engagement, academic achievement, and attendance are all at risk (Cartmell & Bond, 2015). Increased sense of belonging has been found to result in higher self-efficacy and lower depression among student populations (Cartmell & Bond, 2015).

We know from the research the factors that influence a sense of belonging for graduate students include: relationships with advisors and mentors, relationships with faculty, academic involvement, host families, friend and peer support, culture shock, cultural/religious organizations, language ability, race/ethnicity, racism/discrimination, diversity, nationalism in the host country, homesickness, family and friends back home, on-campus services, learning communities, information networks, and dietary restrictions (Hidalgo, 2021).

On-Campus Services

International student populations in higher education institutions often require on-campus services that may differ from those geared for their domestic peers, such as the need for an international office that services their immigration needs (Hidalgo, 2021). On-campus services play a crucial role in the adjustment process for international students, aiding in their adaptation to the new environment (Lau et al., 2018). Research by Le et al. (2016) has demonstrated that, in addition to major factors like relationships with faculty and advisors, student services also significantly influence international students' feelings of belonging. Authors Wood and Harris III (2015) focused their study on the effect of academic engagement on the sense of belonging and found that the usage of student services, among other factors, was a significant predictor of a sense of belonging.

In their study exploring predictors of a sense of belonging Niehaus et al. (2019) also discovered that students' interactions with support services on campus, including interactions with student services staff, positively affected their sense of belonging.

Environmental Scan: Different Institutions' Services

For many international students, studying abroad is a challenging and exciting experience. They leave their home country and start a new journey, frequently encountering unfamiliar environments, cultural differences, and communication difficulties. But if they feel alienated or disconnected from their new surroundings, adjusting to a new environment can be a difficult task. To foster a welcoming and encouraging environment for international students, it is essential to enhance their sense of community and belonging.

Sense of belonging" refers to a person's perception of their value, respect, and inclusion in a group or community. Due to a variety of factors, including cultural differences, language obstacles, and social isolation, it can be challenging for international students to experience a sense of belonging. Universities and colleges therefore have a crucial role to play in making international students feel at home and part of the community.

International students who feel a strong sense of community do better academically, stay enrolled longer, and have better mental health, among other advantages. According to research, international students who have a feeling of community are more likely to be content with their university experience and are more motivated to learn. Additionally, establishing relationships and social networks can aid international students in overcoming feelings of homesickness and culture shock, resulting in a more satisfying experience all around.

A more welcoming, encouraging, and inclusive environment for international students must be achieved by enhancing their sense of community and belonging. Numerous advantages result not only to the individual students but also to the larger community and society as a whole. As a result, universities and colleges are actively working to foster a sense of community and belonging among international students. Here is an overview of what some colleges and universities in Canada do:

Seneca College

Seneca College is committed to offering international students a range of support services so they can excel in their studies and beyond. The college provides accessible learning services to students since it is aware that overseas students may need extra help with their studies. Students struggling with a range of personal issues can also access personal counseling services.

Another useful tool for international students at Seneca College is the Learning Centre. In addition to workshops, tutoring, one-on-one sessions, exam preparation, and online learning help, the center also provides a variety of other learning support options. The Learning Centre supports students in developing their academic abilities and succeeding in the classroom. In addition to fostering intellectual advancement, the center helps students make long-lasting friendships.

Seneca College offers a peer mentoring program to assist international students in adjusting to their new surroundings. This program, which is free, pairs incoming students with mentors who are familiar with the college's resources. Mentors assist incoming students in navigating the academic and social landscape of the college, forming relationships with other students, and excelling in their academics.

Another great option for international students is Seneca Works. The platform's main goals are to assist students in getting ready for the modern workforce and to link graduates with businesses. Seneca Works offers access to job postings, tools for career planning, and networking opportunities.

Seneca College provides a variety of activities, events, and courses, such as recreational and athletic pursuits, multicultural groups, and the Seneca Student Federation, to assist international students in remaining involved and connected.

Seneca College's mission to foster the sense of belonging and community building among international students is demonstrated by its commitment to provide academic and career support, counseling, mentoring, and a variety of activities and events.

Humber College

For fostering a stronger sense of community among international students, Humber College provides a variety of resources and events. Through their extensive academic support services, the college's emphasis on academic performance is clear. Additionally, the college helps students with their group projects by outlining the necessary procedures. Peer tutoring, courses on learning methods, and counseling services are crucial to the academic and community-building success of overseas students. Additionally, they have an advisor for international students who offers them specialized assistance. These academic tools are essential for fostering a sense of belonging among international students at Humber College and assisting them in feeling supported in their academic endeavors.

Another project that promotes a sense of community among international students is the peer mentoring program at Humber College. The program provides assistance to international first-semester students before, during, and after their stay at Humber College. This program makes it easier for international students to adjust to college life by helping them make new friends and build a support network.

In general, Humber College's academic support services, peer mentoring program, and international student adviser play a crucial part in enhancing international students' feelings of community and belonging. These programs support international students at Humber College as they settle into their new surroundings, experience support, and eventually achieve academic and social success.

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) College

For the benefit of its international students, SAIT College provides a variety of events and programs. The Student Engagement Office offers co-curricular activities that help in the development of crucial abilities like teamwork, leadership, and communication. Students can strengthen their feeling of community and form enduring friendships with their peers by taking part in these activities.

Students at SAIT who are interested in esports are welcome to join the SAIT Trojans Esports community. This community welcomes both competitive and recreational players, enabling them to meet people with similar interests and foster a sense of belonging on campus.

The English Conversation Partners program is another initiative that fosters a sense of community among students. Through this volunteer program, students are matched with a conversation partner for a weekly informal conversation session lasting about an hour. Students can communicate with their partners in person or virtually using programs like MS Teams or Zoom. For international students who are studying English as a second language, this program is very beneficial. Participants are requested to complete a survey at the conclusion of the semester to share their opinions on the experience.

The Interfaith Centre at SAIT is a gathering place for the campus where inclusion is embraced, and racial and cultural diversity is investigated. This center provides a warm environment where students from various backgrounds may interact, mingle, and learn from one another, building a sense of community and mutual respect.

Another initiative that gives students the chance to interact with people and cultures from around the world is International Educational Week. This week-long program consists of online social gatherings and informational sessions that encourage students to view the world broadly

and assist them in developing close relationships with classmates from various cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, SAIT provides first-semester international students with support both before and during their time at SAIT through a peer mentoring program. Through this program, incoming international students get connected with experienced mentors who can offer advice and support as they negotiate the difficulties of studying abroad.

Additionally, Phi Theta Kappa and other honor societies at SAIT provide members with exclusive benefits and programs. PTK offers chances for networking, community service, and personal and professional growth in addition to honoring academic accomplishments.

Other initiatives, like the SAIT Trojans Athletics & Recreation programs, Industry Mentorship Circles, and the Black Empowerment and Excellence at SAIT (BEES) committee, give students more chances to interact, form lasting relationships, and support one another in different facets of their lives. These initiatives aid SAIT students in achieving academic and personal success while strengthening the campus community.

Douglas College

Douglas College offers a range of activities and events to encourage students to feel involved and connected to the campus community.

A good example is "Summer You Belong," which features games like minute-to-win-it and team-building activities like crafting banners with the Douglas Students' Union. These enjoyable and engaging events give students the chance to get to know one another, develop collaboration abilities, and have a special time on campus.

Another fantastic chance for students to interact and have fun together is Friday Hangouts. These gatherings feature a variety of activities, such as movie screenings, exercise courses, and stress-relieving sessions. International students can socialize, have fun, and learn by taking part in these events.

The Edge is a great method for freshmen to acquaint themselves with the school and meet new people. Team-building exercises and games are part of this two-day event, which aims to provide students a sense of security and comfort in the college setting. International students can make new friends, feel more a part of the campus community, and develop a sense of belonging by taking part in The Edge.

Overall, these programs and activities at Douglas College aim to give all students—especially international ones who might be dealing with significant difficulties—a sense of community and belonging. By taking part in these activities, students can form relationships, gain teamwork abilities, and feel more at ease and confident in their new academic environment. A range of events and initiatives are provided by Douglas College to foster a sense of community among its international students.

Another initiative, called The Edge, aims to give freshmen students the self-assurance and comfort they need to fit in. Team-building exercises and games are used throughout this two-day event to help participants interact with their classmates and become comfortable with the campus.

Additionally, Douglas College understands the value of rest periods and downtime for students. They provide "It's Coffee Break!" as a part of this endeavor, which encourages students

to take a break, get a cup of coffee, and interact with peers. Additionally, during exam times, students can get free snacks and beverages thanks to the "Study Break on Us!" program.

Students have the chance to develop crucial abilities including teamwork, leadership, and communication by involvement in co-curricular activities through the college's Co-Curricular Record program. Additionally, they can use this record to display their abilities to potential employers. In general, Douglas College provides a variety of events and programs to assist international students and promote a sense of community. These programs give students the chance to interact with others, gain useful skills, and feel more a part of the college community.

Algonquin College

Algonquin College's AC Hub on Demand is a brand-new online event series that unites the whole campus community. Students can learn from specialists in the business and expand their professional networks by attending the speaker series, which includes a variety of individuals who share their experiences and knowledge with them.

Conestoga College

Conestoga College offers a range of programs and services aimed at improving the sense of belonging among international students. The college recognizes the challenges that international students face in adapting to a new environment, and therefore provides various resources to help them feel more comfortable and supported.

One way the college supports international students is through international workshops and activities. These events are designed to help students connect with each other and the broader college community, as well as to provide a space for students to learn about different

cultures and customs. These events can include things like cultural festivals, language exchange programs, and social events.

In addition to these workshops and activities, the college also offers international transition programs. These programs are designed to help new international students adjust to life in Canada and at Conestoga College. They cover topics such as Canadian culture, academic expectations, and navigating the college's resources and services. The college also provides International Student Advisor (ISA) workshops and information sessions to help students with any questions or concerns they may have about their studies or life in Canada.

To further support international students, the college provides immigration information and fraud prevention resources. This includes workshops and sessions on topics such as immigration regulations, visa and study permit applications, and protecting oneself from scams and fraud.

The college recognizes that mental health and wellness are important aspects of student success, and therefore offers counseling services to all students, including international students. This service provides confidential support for mental health and wellness issues, including stress, anxiety, depression, and more.

Conestoga's Student Success departments also offer various services to help students succeed academically, financially, and personally. The college's Student Financial Services provides information and assistance with financial aid, scholarships, and work-study programs. The college's Athletics and Recreation department provides opportunities for students to participate in varsity sports, fitness classes, intramurals, and competitive e-sports. The Co-

Curricular Record (CCR) is an official document that recognizes and records learning that a student has achieved through approved co-curricular experiences at Conestoga College.

The college also provides various resources to help students prepare for their future careers, including the Conestoga Career Center and Conestoga Entrepreneurship College. The ONE Card is another service provided by the college that is designed to make students' lives easier by offering an all-in-one solution for identity validation, accessing on-campus student services and off-campus purchasing, and using public transit.

Overall, Conestoga College offers a range of programs and services aimed at improving the sense of belonging among international students. By providing support for academic, financial, personal, and career success, the college strives to help all students feel comfortable, connected, and supported during their time at the college.

MacEwan University

MacEwan University helps international students through many services and support systems for students struggling personally, financially or academically. Confidential wellness and psychological services are provided to all students for free of cost in case they need support to discuss their health, wellness, personal, financial or academic struggles. The university has a Students Association which has a New Students Survival Guide for newcomers, a Breakfast Club which provides breakfast biweekly to participating students, a Peer Support Group offering in person as well as online video and chatting facility. The Students Association of MacEwan University holds various events throughout the year like Cinema Series, Student Surveys, Sustainamania, Queer Time Tuesday to support community building and student interaction in the university campus.

The Writing Centre provides support to students who need any kind of help with their writing skills. The Writing Centre helps students of all programs, in all years of study, and at any stage of the writing process. It can support in planning and executing a well-rounded piece of writing, as required by the student.

The Sport and Wellness Centre offers various programs to students for fitness like aerobics, yoga, barre, bootcamp or kickboxing. There are various courses and classes for water sports, as well as provision for swimming certifications. Different sports clubs and leagues provide an opportunity to play and make new friends for community interactions.

The Access and Disability Resources are meant to provide support to students who need any kind of support required for special accommodations in class or during examinations. Whether it is alternate format texts, assistive technologies or concerns regarding discrimination for any disabilities, this is the place to reach out.

For students who need any help planning their career, the Career and Experience Centre provides webinars, workshops and one on one sessions to discuss career related issues. The career portal, called MacEwan Life, serves MacEwan students and alumni looking for jobs and career-related resources, employers posting job or placement opportunities and faculty and staff managing experiential learning activities. Overall, MacEwan University provides all kinds of services to its students to create a vibrant, engaging and supportive community for incoming international students.

Concordia University of Edmonton

All international students at University of Concordia are welcomed through an International Student Orientation which provides international students an opportunity to engage with topics like, immigration, university deadlines, healthcare, settlement support like mobile, banking, transport, Social Insurance Number, university facilities and services, as well as any other queries that they may have as international students.

Apart from that, the university holds special events for international students throughout the year. These events provide opportunities to students to connect with each other personally, form a sense of belonging in a community, discuss their personal and academic experiences, celebrate different cultures and learn important information about each other's cultures.

For students looking to seek support anytime during their academic degree, personnel counseling services are provided free of cost to all students of Concordia University. Short term counseling as well as long term and group workshops are provided by specialists.

The Writing Centre at Concordia University provides one on one writing services, feedback and consultations to all students of the university. Apart from that, there are also a variety of courses for improving English writing and speaking skills of the students. These provisions can be availed by the students at any time while pursuing their degree. During summer, a five-week intensive course is also offered to those whose first language is not English, to help develop English grammar, writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills. It also provides international students with a memorable Canadian experience including cultural activities and a trip to the Rocky Mountains.

The Interdisciplinary Research Cluster on Linguistics and Language Education creates international awareness and respect for diversity in the campus. Its events include discussions on

experiences of different individuals who have lived/worked/studied outside of Canada and can provide their insights on how the world, literature, poetry, stories, clothing, and language connects us all in humanity. Such gatherings open doors for students to learn and appreciate other cultures, societies, and histories, thereby building a community for international students to feel a sense of belonging.

NorQuest College

Services for international students at NorQuest College begin even before arrival at the institute. Pre-arrival webinars and orientation sessions provide students with tools, resources, and information required to ease transition to student life. The International student handbook has more resources for new international students, including information about the most important items to take care of during the first weeks after arrival, tips about everyday life in Canada, and how to get involved socially.

The International Student Engagement Officer helps with adjusting to a new culture and integrating into the Canadian society, celebrating cultural diversity at NorQuest, meeting new people, overcoming homesickness, and building connections and learning about student programs, events, and activities on campus (i.e., volunteering, Peer Mentorship program, Jumpstart program, Campus Meet-Up, Global Café). Appointments with the Officer can be booked thrice a week, or the officer can also provide walk in services.

Similarly, the International Student Settlement Advisor helps with transitioning to Canada and NorQuest, documents needed to settle in Canada, accommodation, and budgeting, navigating the transportation system, cultural and social adjustment (connecting with ethnic organizations), helping with settlement of family members (language, employment, community

building), referrals to local and community services and sessions and workshops on tenant rights, financial literacy, and more. Appointments can be booked in advance thrice in a week or walk-in appointments are also welcome.

Esports is a community of people who gather to have fun and play games. It can provide international students interested in gaming, a unique platform to community building and engagement. NorQuest's Esports strategy focuses on three key pillars: community gaming and entertainment, competitive gaming through online and in-person tournaments and events, and academic research, programming that helps shape the inter-collegiate landscape for post-secondary institutions in Alberta and beyond.

For increasing intercultural knowledge and understanding amongst its students, NorQuest College also has a Global Citizenship Bootcamp. It is a 15-hour program that includes a series of workshops and reflections that, within the context of diversity, strengthen global experiences and understanding of systemic barriers that underrepresented students face to study and work overseas. Program activities and topics include Intercultural Development Inventory, Sustainable Development Goals, Intercultural Competencies and Cross-Communication, Cultural Adaptation and Culture Shock: Understanding of interculturality to optimize experiences and Career Opportunities in Canada.

The Career Centre at NorQuest also offers various services to students regarding preparation for jobs and future careers. Free appointments with a Career Coach focus on a variety of topics, including resume and cover letters, interview preparation, mock interviews, job search techniques, networking techniques, LinkedIn review, career planning and finding volunteer opportunities. Events held by the Career Centre allow for opportunities to network

with employers, expand professional skills, and prepare for future career goals. The Job Board has various job and volunteer opportunities that students can apply for. The NorQuest Networking Cafe is also a platform that connects students to the NorQuest community and alumni for meaningful career conversations, based on specific career interests and goals. Coffee chats can take place in person or online.

The Centre for Growth and Harmony at NorQuest College provides a holistic student-centered care within an inclusive, respectful, and private environment. There is a multidisciplinary team of registered psychologists, registered social workers, and nurses, dedicated to promoting health and wellness while striving to encourage growth, development, and lifelong learning. Support can be sought by students for distress in learning, mental health, basic needs, or health requirements etc.

Tutorial and Academic Coaching Services are also offered to students at NorQuest College. A team of professional tutors works with students to build academic skills, confidence, and independence. Services include assisting with homework, understanding assignments, clarifying course content, and helping prepare for exams. The coaches help with academic skills like study strategies, reading comprehension, exam preparation strategies, time management, or test anxiety. Sessions can be booked online, or drop-in appointments are welcome on all weekdays.

The Student Association of NorQuest College (SANQC) has many services for students admitted at the college. The Food Stability Support provides emergency food hampers once per term to students in need. Through the Helping Hands Campaign, students in need can receive gifts for themselves and their children. With fantastic support from staff, faculty as well as other

students, gifts are then purchased and donated to those students. SANQC also provides students with legal support as well as health and dental support plans. Apart from this, SANQC holds various events throughout the year, like, Games Cafe, Halloween Party, Headphone Disco, Jackbox party, Pizza Party, Bingo, Welcome Week events, Taste of Diversity etc. Events for international students include International Campus Check In, Downtown Tour, Campus MeetUp, Social Insurance Clinic etc. These events provide an opportunity for students to create friendships and bond with people of different cultures and backgrounds.

University of Alberta

Welcome Services for international students at University of Alberta include an online pre-Departure Session, Airport Welcome, a Campus Check In as well as an InfoMart Session. The Infomart connects with campus services and businesses from around Edmonton including university resources and supports, student groups, libraries, banks, phone companies, etc. Service Canada is also on-site to register and provide the SIN card.

The University holds an English Conversation Club every Friday, which gives students an opportunity to practice English speaking, sharing insights, opinions, and questions about a wide variety of topics, with people from all over the world. International and Canadian students can share and learn about different cultures in the world and make friends through this community building activity.

The University of Alberta Student Union (UASU) has many services for building students' sense of belonging. The Campus Food Bank provides groceries and meals for free of cost to registered students. In case students need transportation for purchasing groceries, the Grocery Bus is also provided for students' so they may stock up on groceries in time. UASU also

has a Peer Support Centre which provides a free, confidential, and non-judgmental safe place to talk to someone for support. It offers peer support, crisis management, information, resources, as well as a safe and confidential place to talk about any crises in life. UASU also has over 450 student run organizations and clubs, and this variety provides an opportunity to everybody to connect with anything that appeals to their taste. Apart from this, events like Karaoke Night, Dance Night, Trivia Night, Escape Room and Unitea organized by the UASU and different student run groups create opportunities for students to befriend their peers and become more engaged in building a sense of belonging amongst the community at the institution.

University of British Columbia

The programs aimed at community building and student ownership at the University of British Columbia are of various kinds, focusing on different needs of different students. The Peer Programs are aimed at improving the experience of students at the university and helping them improve their leadership skills. Peer Programs include coaches who help their peers in arts, science, financial wellness, university adjustment and transition, physical and mental health, campus wellbeing, as well as interest specific guidance. This creates a sense of being heard and acknowledged by their own peers and friends, thereby building a sense of community for international students.

The university also has a Student Assistance Program (SAP) which is a free, 24/7 wellness resource for students. Services include personal counseling, life coaching, group programs and more based on students' needs. It helps with support to mental, emotional, physical, and financial health. The services can be accessed through phone, video, and in person. The SAP is a confidential and safe space to discuss any kind of concerns and is also offered in

multiple languages. The university offers Counseling Services while respecting that students have unique personalities, cultures, and experiences. Many of the staff also identify as BIPOC and strive to bring a multicultural, anti-oppressive, social-justice orientation to the counseling process. They recognize Indigenous history, culture, traditional values, stories, and healing practices that support wellbeing alongside the use of Western therapies. Such detailed attention can help create safe spaces for international students to feel a sense of belonging at the university.

The university also has a Student Recovery Community (SRC) which is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive space for students who are in recovery or curious to explore their relationship with alcohol, drugs, and/or addictive behaviors, including disordered eating, gaming, gambling, pornography, and more. The SRC's peer support, evidence-based model is designed to empower students with lived experience to support one another on their chosen recovery pathway. The community supports all pathways of recovery—from harm reduction to abstinence, and everything in between.

The Alma Mater Society (AMS) is the official campus community platform of the University of British Columbia. It has more than 630 groups for students to join according to their interest. Each group holds activities, events, programs like Board Game Night, Detoxification Session, Women's Discussion, Film Screening, Blind Date with a Book, Meditation and many more, that are aimed at increasing student interaction, building community and increased sense of belonging amongst the students.

Apart from that, University of British Columbia has various events taking place throughout the year where student participation is encouraged, whether it be through celebratory

weeks or workshops on different issues pertaining to the world. All university students are given an opportunity to explore their interests and develop an understanding of different cultures and civilizational experiences.

Simon Fraser University (SFU)

The Global Connections program at Simon Fraser University is a peer-support program designed to help new students from international pathways and exchange students to SFU. A great community building initiative, this program provides the opportunity to learn about the culture of SFU while making new friends and exploring what the community has to offer. Each student is matched with a Community Leader to support and answer all questions one-on-one about life at SFU. As a member of this program, students receive priority invitations to all the program events. It is highly recommended for students beginning at SFU, looking for diverse connections and friends across campus or intercultural learning opportunities or tips and useful resources from peers in a relaxed, small group environment or for personalized support in transitioning to SFU.

Simon Fraser University has created an International Student Award for building community among international students. The experience of living in another country provides a tremendous opportunity to learn about oneself and one's culture, and to develop an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures. The key to achieving intercultural understanding is to engage with diverse communities intentionally and mindfully, in a spirit of openness, respect, and curiosity. This award provides financial support for an international undergraduate student at SFU who has contributed to intercultural understanding and/or

demonstrated a commitment to intercultural engagement. It is valued at a minimum of \$1000 and is granted annually to one international student.

Art, culture, and community are vital to well-being, forming powerful forces of connection. For over 50 years, arts, and culture at SFU have led to dynamic programs in theater, dance, visual art, film, and music. These break down barriers to participation and understanding amongst students, researchers, and artists. Participants are deeply immersed in community issues, deploying interdisciplinary practice and critical making to bring about change. Such programs at SFU allow students to feel a sense of belonging in the environment they are in, giving them an opportunity to express themselves without any inhibitions.

The university also holds various events throughout the year, one of them being Lunch 'N' Learn, held once every week, where people meet for lunch and learn alongside one professional on any selected topic of concern. Such gatherings outside of classroom education provide a more informal space for communication. Other events celebrating different festivals, religions, communities and cultures like Asian Heritage Month, Ramadan, Yoga, Festival of Learning, Writing Workshop etc. are also held throughout the year. These efforts make the experience of community building at SFU a successful one.

New York Institute of Technology, Vancouver (NYIT)

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) at NYIT represents the students and provides a forum for their voice when dealing with the university's faculty members and administration. The GSA Supports and advises on student activities, nurtures student engagement, identifies and addresses student concerns and provides support to New York Tech and the student community. It is an association which provides students a safe space for all their concerns.

The NYIT also has The Learning Centre which offers a variety of free peer and faculty-led tutoring services. These resources are available to all New York Tech students, meant to support them in courses, build confidence and gain a deep understanding of course material. Students are encouraged to seek out tutoring whether it is one question from a study guide, or to help maintain a good academic standing across multiple classes. Peer tutors are available both in-person, and virtually (online).

Common Services, Initiatives, and Programs

This section highlights the common approaches that Canadian institutions have to foster a sense of belonging among international students. Almost all Canadian higher education institutions are committed to offering a variety of services and programs to enhance the sense of belonging and community building among international students, it is evident from informal conversations with students and staff at Canadian institutions as well as from information available online.

The provision of academic support services including tutoring, workshops, and one-on-one sessions is a common strategy across all universities. Through informal conversations, it would appear that with the aid of these resources, overseas students believe they can improve their academic performance, succeed in the classroom, and ultimately feel more like a member of the college community. Students facing various difficulties can also get personal counseling services in addition to academic support. This demonstrates that these schools are aware that international students may need extra help with their academic and personal lives.

In my environmental scan, I noticed that peer mentoring programs are another popular strategy. Most post secondary institutions (PSIs) have some kind of peer mentorship program

that pairs freshmen international students with mentors who are familiar with the school and its resources. Mentors assist incoming students in navigating the academic and social landscape of the college, forming relationships with other students, and excelling in their academics. This program is aimed at strengthening the sense of support received by international students at the institution and eventually help them feel more at home there.

Offering a variety of workshops, events, and activities is another typical strategy used by colleges. Institutions provide a variety of activities aimed at supporting international students in staying involved and connected, including recreational and sports activities, multicultural organizations, and student federations. These initiatives can give students the chance to make new friends, feel a sense of community, and feel like they belong.

Finally, every school has programs that support inclusivity and diversity on campus. Based on informal conversations, an excellent place to celebrate inclusivity and learn about cultural and racial diversity is the Interfaith Centre at SAIT College. The "Summer You Belong" event at Douglas College is similar in that it features activities that support inclusivity and diversity. These programs can increase international students' sense of belonging by making them feel appreciated and valued.

Overall, these schools are dedicated to offering peer mentoring programs, numerous activities and events, services for academic and personal support, and efforts that support inclusivity and diversity. These services and programs are intended to aid international students in settling into their new surroundings, feeling supported, and eventually succeeding academically and socially.

How Effective Are the Services?

The activities and services provided to international students have had impacts on enhancing students' sense of belonging, according to my personal observations and friendly and continuing dialogues with more than 30 staff and students at Canadian institutions. Here are some highlights of what students and staff think about the usefulness of these programs considering sense of belonging and community building.

"The International Services Centre was so helpful in making me feel welcomed and at home in Canada," says an Iranian international student at NYIT. She adds that, "They gave me the tools and encouragement I needed to adapt smoothly and stress-free to studying abroad."

"Being part of the international student association helped me meet other students who were going through similar experiences," says a Pakistani student at the University of Alberta. He continues, "We were able to help one another and exchange advice about adjusting to life in a new place."

A NAIT employee thinks the programs and services provided have been beneficial. She claims that by giving them chances to interact with one another and the larger campus community, "We try to foster a sense of community among international students. This enhances their sense of community and support while they are here.

"We offer a variety of programs and services that support the health and wellbeing of our international students" according to an international student who works with international students at Simon Fraser University. This helps individuals feel more motivated and involved in their studies and campus life while also ensuring they have access to the resources they require.

“The University of Alberta has done a remarkable job of including international students” according to a staff member who works on equity, diversity, and inclusion at the institution. She said, "By promoting a sense of belonging among our international students, we believe we are contributing to create a more inclusive and diverse campus community for all students, faculty, and staff."

Peruvian international student: "I never imagined studying abroad would be such an incredible experience. I was given all the tools I needed by the international services center to make a seamless move to a new country. I am appreciative of the help I got, and I feel more involved and inspired to work towards my academic objectives.”

"Being an international student can be difficult at times, but the international services center made me feel at home right away," adds another student from Mexico. “In addition to fostering my relationships with other international students, the events, activities, and seminars that they plan gave me the chance to learn more about the cultures and histories of various nations.”

Some students, however, do not think the services are as helpful. “I admire the effort the institution makes to provide events and activities for international students, but it feels superficial and shallow,” says a graduate student from India. “They don't fully consider the variety of our backgrounds and needs. It's like they are just ticking a box to say they did something.”

"I feel like York is not really interested in fostering a sense of community between international and domestic students," says a student from York University. She continues, "We are still considered outsiders, it is challenging to feel a sense of belonging."

"The services offered to international students are useful, but they don't actually address the most significant problems that international students confront", according to three foreign students from Mexico, Turkey, and Lebanon who are enrolled in colleges in Canada. "Along with cultural adjustment, other issues include homesickness, loneliness, and financial stress. More has to be done by colleges to help us in these areas."

Another international student says, "I think the college just views us as a possible source of income. The policies, such as charging overseas students a much higher tuition rate, only increase the pressure on our budgets. When we are constantly told that we are different from the locals and neglected compared to domestic students, it is difficult to feel like we belong."

A Chinese student says, "I enrolled at this college with the intention of meeting domestic students and learning more about Canadian culture. However, I feel that they have no interest in learning about me or my culture. I don't like how I feel; I feel like an outsider."

Recommendations for More Initiatives

Based on the list of services provided above, it appears that Canadian higher education institutions have their intentions set in the right place and are doing different activities to build a community and a sense of belonging for international students. Yet, there is always room for improvement. Here are some recommendations for the higher education institutions to improve sense of belonging among international students:

1. Offer language exchange programs: Many international students have difficulties with languages, so higher education institutions can facilitate language exchange programs where international and domestic students can learn from

each other. For international students, language limitations can be a major obstacle, especially if they are not native speakers. Colleges and universities can provide language exchange programs to aid in removing these language barriers and fostering intercultural understanding. To assist them learn from one another, these programs bring international and domestic students together who speak various languages. For instance, students from other countries who are fluent in Spanish can meet up with Canadians who want to learn the language. In return, the domestic students can help the international students improve their English language proficiency. These programs give students a chance to develop interpersonal skills and cultural awareness in addition to aiding in language improvement.

2. Encourage faculty to be more inclusive: Encourage instructors to be more welcoming of foreign students in their classes. This can involve providing additional materials or accommodations, being more conscious of cultural variations, and encouraging cross-cultural understanding in the classroom. Institutions should offer faculty members opportunities for professional development so they can learn about cross-cultural communication and inclusive teaching methods. Seminars may be planned by the faculty development department or the international services center and may address issues including effective communication techniques, identifying, and removing cultural learning obstacles and fostering cross-cultural understanding in the classroom. Institutions can offer faculty members resources and assistance in addition to seminars to help them make their classes more welcoming to international students. Giving

individuals access to online tools like the Center for Applied Linguistics, which offers methods for instructing students from a variety of backgrounds and languages, is one way to do this. Institutions can also give faculty members access to counseling or training in cultural competency, where they can get recommendations on how to make their instruction more inclusive. Institutions can also support instructors in developing programs that reflect diverse viewpoints and experiences. International students might find a higher sense of engagement and belonging in their classes as a result, and domestic students might gain from being exposed to various viewpoints and experiences.

3. Create opportunities for cultural exchange by holding festivals and events on campus so students can learn about the traditions of the college community. Additionally, this can foster cross-cultural understanding and help to dispel stereotypes. To encourage cultural interchange and understanding, colleges and universities might hold cultural events and festivals on their campuses. These occasions give international students a chance to share their experiences and viewpoints, demonstrate their culture and traditions, and connect with local students. Cultural fairs, food festivals, dance performances, music concerts, and other events are examples of this type of gathering. These events can also help dispel stereotypes and prejudices that may exist among the student body. Colleges and universities can promote a more inclusive and diverse campus environment by giving students the chance to learn about other cultures. Although some institutions already have various events held, these events can be followed by discussion sessions where students can discuss similar activities and community

building initiatives held in their home countries. In this way, they can find more connections and similarities in spite of coming from different parts of the world.

4. Improve upon existing services: The services of the International Student Engagement Office are offered to those who register for it, yet it is recommended that some services be made essential for all new coming international students. Many times, international students are not aware that such services are available to them for their support. If there are compulsory orientations, there would not be any doubt that students will reach out when in need.

5. Introduce the programs and services more efficiently: Introducing the programs and services more efficiently is crucial for improving the sense of belonging among international students. Many international students may not be aware of the services and programs available to them, and therefore may not utilize them to their full potential. One effective way of introducing these programs is through social media. Institutions can use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote the programs and services to students. By creating informative posts, videos, and images, the college can reach a large audience of students who are active on social media.

In addition, institutions can partner with international student organizations to spread the word about these programs and services. These organizations can act as ambassadors for the institutions and help to promote the programs to their members through word-of-mouth and other means.

Overall, introducing the programs and services more efficiently is an important step towards improving the sense of belonging among international students. By using social media and partnerships with international student organizations, the institutions can ensure that students are aware of the services and programs available to them and are able to utilize them effectively.

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