IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON AND OFF CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings of an ongoing pilot study investigating the on and off campus challenges faced by international students in Halifax, N.S. The overall purpose of the study is to encourage the development of initiatives that foster the sociocultural and economic integration of international students. The students that have been interviewed for this project reported struggling with various academic challenges, a lack of university support, and varying forms of social challenges that include discrimination in the community. Realizing that the current international student support service model is ill-equipped to fully address some of these challenges, mainly due to its largely reactive posture, this article recommends a holistic and preemptive approach for addressing international student challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Personal history matters in the classroom. When international students arrive to study in Canada, they do so as cultured people. They bring with them identities that are grounded in the social, political, economic and cultural structures of their country of origin. However, university classrooms can quickly become sites of struggle when learners from different sociocultural backgrounds converge in the same learning environment with varied expectations. In many ways, interactions between international students and members of the host nation highlight the fundamental provincial character of identity.

Bourdieu (1977) notes that "communication is possible in practice only when accompanied by a practical spotting of cues which, in enabling speakers to situate others in the hierarchies of age, wealth, power or culture, guides them unwittingly towards the type of exchange best suited in form and context to the objective situation between the interacting individuals" (pg. 26). Bourdieu shows the importance of considering the inner machinery of communication by highlighting its dependency upon culture.

Without the benefit of shared language and culture, communication becomes a back and forth of misrecognition of cues and symbols. Cross-cultural communication, both verbal and symbolic, is a serious challenge for all those who are involved. Consequently, it would be impossible to discuss the challenges that international students are facing on and off campus without first noting the importance of individual history and its central role in the interpretation of reality. Put differently, the way international students interpret their new symbolic environment is a direct function of their background. The body of knowledge that informs students' judgment has been termed "meaning perspective" by Mezirow (1991). When international students are disconnected from their sociocultural backgrounds, they sometimes struggle with transition-related challenges. A firm understanding of the

sociocultural genesis of international student identities positions us to better understand the potential challenges they are facing.

Most Canadian universities are aggressively recruiting international students. For example, Dalhousie University has increased its international student enrollment from 6.7% in 2008 to 10.6% in 2010 (Dalhousie Office of Registrar, 2010). Thus, there is an immediate need for studies that seek to understand the on and off campus challenges of international students.

Preliminary findings from this pilot study indicate that international students are frustrated with the level of support they are receiving. Given the amount of money international students pay in tuition fees, some students feel that there is an unequal exchange of value between students and their universities. For example, one student interviewed said the following:

> *"Exchange of value between students and international students must be more equal. For the value they get, I wouldn't say that things are equal now. In the written script, they are equal but I don't think they are. For the money they pay, and the value they receive, it should be investigated. Are they satisfied? This is just a market strategy. If you are looking to get more customers you should make sure they are being satisfied… it boils down to customer service. I don't think this inequality is done on purpose, it is just out of ignorance".*[1]

Migration sometimes causes a real loss of physical autonomy and ability to symbolically manipulate and control one's environment, especially in cases when there is a major difference between a student's country of origin and the destination country. These feelings of loss are sometimes compounded by feelings of disconnectedness and disappointment that stem from low levels of support services. Given what is at stake - success both in and outside of the classroom - students are often very eager to learn the necessary sociocultural rules and laws to expedite their integration. However, a lack of resources can not only derail students' enthusiasm but may harm their chances of finding a job in Canada after they graduate. As a result, some of the students interviewed for this pilot study expressed some deep-seated frustration with the lack of support services. One student said:

> *"During my time here, I have been a volunteer with the international student office for many years. I am still fascinated by how less attention is given to international students by the administration. It is sad because how is it that other universities have a house that they call a center for international students…it is sad because they are earning a lot of money from international students. I have had focus group discussions and wrote a paper about this…where in the world is the money that is made from international students being allocated? That's something that I have not seen".*[2]

As a result, a more structured yet flexible system with a built-in adult education mechanism is needed. This would ensure that the current model of support services is open to both recognizing that students bring unique challenges to universities and that a more efficient process of support must centralize considerations of the evolving nature of international students' needs. Because the current model of support services is mostly reactive, only a small number of students - those who actively seek out and locate the available resources - receive the help they need. Consequently, those who are unaware or unable to navigate the support services landscape are inadvertently locked out. This article presents a potential model for a support services program. This model is predicated on the principle of adult education and distributes the responsibility of providing support services amongst administrators, deans, department heads, faculties, university support services, international students and the community.

The program has three interrelated but separate phases. The first phase of the program is the transition phase. In addition to gathering information about students' needs and expectations during this phase, this program also recommends the implementation of a transition program. Such a program is meant to formally introduce students to university expectations, faculty expectations and the resources that are available to them. However, the most important learning tool given to students during this phase is introducing them to self-assessment. Through experiential learning, students will be given opportunities to refine their critical thinking and goal-setting skills. It is believed that empowering students to become self-directed learners gives them the best opportunity for success both inside and outside the classroom.

In order for self-assessment to be valuable to students, they must be provided with ideal competencies. Through a coordinated effort, all invested actors at the university level should develop competency models for specifically identified skills. These competency models should be provided to students in clear and concise language. A "zone of performance" document should accompany these competency models. This document recommends certain

or specific university resources based on the outcome of students' self-assessment. If a student is weak in the area of language comprehension, the performance zone may recommend a couple of hours of English tutoring a week. The main idea behind these competency models is to find a way to empower students and to support their development as self-directed learners. Because, logistically, universities don't have enough resources to help each and every student, the best available option is to help students help themselves.

SOCIOCULTURAL GRACE PERIOD

Because international students' academic, social, and economic integration varies, implementing a phase approach with a built-in 'sociocultural grace period' mechanism will offer universities the opportunity to monitor and help students over the course of their degree program. When international students migrate to a new culture, they need a 'sociocultural grace period' to acquire the social and cultural rules that are necessary for them to effectively function in the new environment. Support staff members need to consider implementing a "from first day to graduation and beyond program". The first phase of this program should include some kind of a transition program. In addition to learning the sociocultural rules needed for success in the classroom, students would also be introduced to self-assessment tools and the benefits of goal-setting. Formative analysis as a part of the self-assessment process empowers students to periodically assess their own learning progress. During this phase, students are also encouraged to provide university support staff with a list of their expectations and anticipated challenges.

THE SECOND PHASE

The information gathered from research data and from students' expectations and anticipated challenges should be used during this phase to develop university and department-level orientations for international students. This ensures that universities directly address students' needs and challenges. This phase should also include an introduction to student life in a North American setting. Faculty expectations should be shared, including acceptable communication styles (with considerations to gender and culture), rules concerning faculty-student relationships, classroom expectations, the protocol of asking for help, and where to go for help at the department and university levels.

THE THIRD PHASE

Because the program encourages a more coordinated approach to providing support services to international students, this third phase should include departmental professional development opportunities for faculty members. Support staff, established international students, and faculty members with experience teaching or working with international students should facilitate these sessions. As a means of improving their cultural understanding, faculty members could also form partnerships with other faculty members from the countries most represented by international student enrollment. Over time, faculty could rely on these partnerships for information on how to create a more inclusive classroom. Information gathered from these partnerships, from support services personnel along with the self-reported challenges and expectations of international students, could be used to develop international student-friendly teaching competency models. Using these, faculty members can self-diagnose to determine how prepared they are for teaching a diverse classroom. For example, one student asked the following in regards to faculty involvement:

> *"How culturally competent are faculty members in understanding the struggles of international students. For example, the writing center, do they have a specialized module for international students? Meaning, is it the problem of the student? Why did the university accept the students knowing how limited the students are in the first place? If the students are here, the faculty should provide services for them… Faculty members have to understand how to teach diversity it is a process of putting into action the ideas of multiculturalism. It starts with the curriculum; it starts with conscious[ness] building".*[3]

WHY A PHASE APPROACH?

The phase approach is important because it anticipates and seeks to address some of the challenges that international students are facing before they happen. So in this respect it is preemptive. It provides students with self-assessment models, critical thinking and goal-setting skills, while simultaneously empowering them to become self-directed learners. Moreover, the information provided by students could be used to modify support and teaching approaches. Implementing a phase approach program will allow universities to potentially avoid some of the following concerns expressed by a university faculty member:

> *"Some international students just don't understand how to take courses. They don't understand how to get a good mark. Some of them have real language difficulties…. they have difficulties writing papers. I guess I feel that I have enough on my plate*

as a professor that I don't think it's fair to change the class for Canadian students to accommodate the problems international students are having. I tell students that they should spend more time in the writing center, but they just don't seem to be getting a lot of support outside the classroom or they may not be able to find the support that is available outside the classroom." [4]

LIFE OFF CAMPUS: ARE VISIBLE MINORITY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COMFORTABLE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

The challenges facing international students sometimes extend far beyond the classroom. Although the majority of students interviewed for this pilot study felt comfortable on campus, most expressed serious concerns about racism, discrimination and racial profiling outside their respective campuses. There appears to be a campus/community divide, with students generally feeling more welcomed on campus than outside of it. These concerns are well-founded, with two recent CBC reports citing some serious instances of racism in and around Halifax. In February 2010 there was the case of a cross-burning in Hants County, just north of Halifax. Later that year, in September, racist graffiti was found in two Halifax locations. Given that 57% of international students who come to Canada are visible minorities, these cases raise some serious questions concerning the effects of racism on international students. One important element to consider is the incidents of racism international students might experience off campus. Many students interviewed expressed some personal concerns about racism, with the exception of one non-visible minority student. It should be noted that none of these students has problems with English. One student said:

"More needs to be done in the community to make sure that students are secure. Nova Scotia has a British heritage and you can see this when you deal with people. You think they are thinking we are not smart, actually the body language, it gives out negative connotation to different [skin] colors and accents". [5]

Some of the students interviewed expressed disappointment at the lack of opportunities for integration into the community. Moreover, students' negative experiences aroused some serious concerns about their job prospects after graduation. The following comments from visible minority students were illuminating, as they summarize the experiences of many of the students interviewed for this study:

"When they see a black person, education is not the first thing that comes to their minds. I think they think of us as a second class citizen". [6]

"There seems to be some subtle racism here. It is not in the open but I know what is going on. I feel it below the surface with some people. It affects your interaction with them, your self-confidence. I don't like dealing with them because you feel that". [7]

"I was discriminated against two days ago. I am really not sure though. I wanted to see 'Avatar' so bad that I didn't even care. I tried to see it in my country but I kept missing the cinema schedule. I saw two girls sitting by themselves; I assumed they were friends. I asked them if I could sit by them. I sat beside them. A few minutes later they moved one seat from me". [8]

LABOUR MARKET

Due to labour market shortages and anticipated demographic challenges, international students have been identified both locally and nationally as central to the amelioration of the labour market. As such, universities must do all they can to help address both the on and off campus challenges international students are facing. In line with the phase program suggested here, which encourages a more integrated on and off campus support services model, universities must take a more proactive stance against racism, especially in the off campus community. They owe it to their students, especially their minority international students, to collectively speak out against such social problems. Though sparse, these incidents are serious enough to arouse serious concerns amongst some international students.

Another concern that was expressed by some of the students interviewed is the hierarchy that exists in the labour market, which has Canadians at the top then landed immigrants and international students at the bottom. One student expressed the following about the labour market:

"When international students apply for jobs, they are told that it's a fair process, but from my heart, I don't believe it is. There is the written, the ideal, and then reality". [9]

International students face other difficult challenges in the labour market. Because a majority of students who graduate end up working in a field outside of the one they graduated in, international students may have to devote time to cultivating soft skills that are becoming increasingly valuable. These skills may include interpersonal communication skills, conflict resolution, personal initiative, and creative problem solving.

Beyond the challenge of skills, discriminatory practices in the labour market represent another hurdle. A recent study in the Greater Toronto Area found that "Canadian applicants that differed only by name had substantially different call back rates: those with English sounding names received interview requests 40% more than applicants with Chinese, Indian, or Pakistani names" (Oreopoulos, 2009 pg. 1). In addition to substantiating the concerns raised by some of the students interviewed for this project, the findings also highlight the seriousness of discriminatory practices in the labour market.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored some of the most immediate challenges international students are facing in Halifax, N.S. Given that it is pilot study, more work is needed to explore the issues raised here. Meanwhile, the phase model suggested offers a good step-by-step approach for helping international students throughout their transition both on and off campus. Given that universities lack the personnel to help each and every student with their unique challenges, implementing a program like the 'from first day and beyond' program that empowers students to become self-directed learners might offer the best opportunity for students' on and off campus success.

The next phase of this project will investigate whether a proactive or preemptive support service model, like the one described in this article, is more effective than a reactive approach model.

REFERENCES

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Qualitative interview with student four on October 15, 2010

[2] Qualitative interview with student two on January 20, 2010

[3] Qualitative interview with student two on January 20, 2010

[4] Qualitative interview with faculty A on October 28, 2010

[5] Qualitative interview with student four on October 15, 2010

[6] Qualitative interview with student one on October 26, 2010

[7] Qualitative interview with student five on October 25, 2009

[8] Qualitative interview with student three on January 22, 2010

[9] Qualitative interview with student four on October 15, 2010