

# Universities take steps to help international students succeed

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Schools are also looking to encourage domestic students to benefit from international students' presence.

As the blip-blip-bloop of the classic Skype ringtone connects me with Zack (Guanglong) Pang at Wilfrid Laurier University, it occurs to me that a little box like this on a computer screen may be the only window through which this international student has seen his family for the past few years – they live half a world away in his hometown of [Shenyang](#), an industrial city in the northeastern part of China. Mr. Pang, who at the time of this interview was finishing his bachelor of science degree at Laurier and preparing for a master's in geography at York University starting this fall, cheerfully returns my wave at the screen.

Despite the barriers of sterile IP telephony, his personality comes through and it's clear why he's considered an international-student success story. He's done all the right things, like going to his university's writing centre for help so often that by his final year he was invited to become a tutor; intentionally pursuing friendships with domestic students even though it would be so much less effort to speak in his own language; and feigning interest in topics that he knew nothing about (at least at first), such as hockey, just so he could build relationships with his four domestic roommates. Even living with domestic roommates is often too much of a challenge for many international students.

Internationalization has become a major goal of Canada's universities, and with the number of international students on a steady rise – they've more than doubled, from 83,000 in 2006 to more than 175,000 in 2016, according to [Universities Canada](#) – there's a growing recognition that supports must be in place to help them succeed. In response, universities are boosting the services of their international centres and connecting earlier. Airport pickups upon arrival, orientation sessions and ongoing social events aimed specifically at international students are now common.

At Laurier, where 1,000 international students account for just over five percent of the school's 19,000 student population, recruiters and alumni make contact via pre-departure orientations that address not only students but their doting parents. At York University, which counts around 6,000 undergrads and 900 graduate students from abroad, representing 12 and 15 percent of their respective student populations, predeparture activities include a Global Connections interactive webinar series organized by a team of "global liaisons" – international students hired to communicate as early as June with the fall cohort on topics from university services to food options on campus.

Marilyn Lambert-Drache, York's associate vice-president, international, says such early contact helps connect newcomers with university resources and friendly faces onscreen. "It happens frequently that a new student comes to our international office during orientation and recognizes a global liaison, saying 'Oh, I saw you on my computer screen, and you gave me good advice,'" she says.



Illustration by Rami Niemi.

Touching down in Canada is an important moment for international students. At Memorial University, where 2,500 of the 18,000-plus student population is international, more than 400 students arrive every fall.

“It’s like managing some crazy conference where everybody’s arriving at a different time,” says Sonja Knutson, director of the university’s internationalization office. So, she’s automated the process: a new app allows students to register their arrival time so that student staff members can arrange to pick them up. Other innovations include a housing website with listings vetted by locals to defend against fraudulent landlords and a multitude of Facebook groups organized by country of origin.

Hesam Hassan Nejad, who arrived at Memorial from Iran in 2012 to do a PhD in oil and gas engineering and is now on the executive of the graduate student union, says the initial airport pickup, complete with food and essentials, made him feel welcome. “When you’re in a new environment it’s difficult to get to know new people, find connections, and the language barrier is always there,” says Mr. Hassan Nejad. “Specifically, at the beginning, you feel stressed and your anxiety is high because you feel that you’re alone.”

To alleviate that angst, the next steps after landing are all about logistics. International centres offer coaching on everything from medical and insurance requirements to school regulations and immigration details. Staff members are also there for crises of all kinds, like visa issues or collaborating on a financial plan when the Zimbabwean dollar turns worthless. Many university career centres offer dedicated staff to help overcome the challenges of preparing resumé for the Canadian market (universities set aside some funds to help hire international students for part-time, on-campus jobs).

While helping students navigate these practicalities is important, helping them figure out the intangibles is also crucial. Ben Yang, formerly an international graduate student from Beijing, recalls the challenges firsthand and has devoted his career to helping students succeed – first as executive director of the international student centre at the University of Toronto, then as director of international learning and training at Georgian College and now as Laurier’s director of global engagement.

To tackle the social and cultural barriers, Mr. Yang has established a variety of activities for his international population. As an example, Laurier’s [International Students’ Association](#) hosts regular events on campus, from semi-formals to international movie nights. As well, a project called the [Global Kitchen](#) provides a space for collaborative food-centred cultural celebrations from Rosh Hashanah to Ramadan.

At York, the international centre has started holding a drop-in [Global Café](#) twice a week for both domestic students going abroad and international students looking to meet new friends over coffee and cookies. At Memorial, Mr. Hassan Nejad credits the internationalization office’s weekly coffee club with helping him make friends. “All the international students are welcome and it’s a great place to meet new people. It’s an open, safe place where all the students can gather together,” he says. He also got involved with other organizations within the university, including his home country’s international society and the university’s career centre.

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While such events have traditionally been for the benefit of international students, the goal now is loftier: the intentional integration of all students, foreign and domestic. This is partly in response to the fact that most Canadian students are not venturing into the wider world.

According to the most recent statistics [gathered by Universities Canada](#), just 3.1 percent of full-time undergraduate students (about 25,000) had an international experience in 2014.

This has prompted many Canadian universities to look for ways to pursue internationalization at home, which some see as a core competency in an increasingly globalized world. International students on campus “come with a diverse range of perspectives and they can give domestic Canadian students exposure to other cultures,” says Dr. Lambert-Drache.

In practical terms, this has translated into a peer program at York that partners domestic students with international students for regular events like pizza parties. To avoid the perception of an unequal relationship that results when such events are positioned as a mentorship, these programs now focus on the benefits to domestic students.

Memorial's peer mentor program takes this a step further by measuring the program's success through the domestic students' performance on the [Intercultural Development Inventory](#), (PDF) an online questionnaire that assesses shifts in cultural perspective. "We measure the intercultural competence of the domestic student before they become a peer, and then after they've finished their term and we've noticed that it does increase from that interaction with an international student," says Memorial's Ms. Knutson.

As a classroom example, two years ago Mr. Yang realized that Laurier's human rights and diversity program was reaching out to a local immigration centre to connect the 50 to 60 students with recent immigrants for a community service experience. He wondered if there might be an opportunity for the class to connect instead with international ESL students, relieving the immigration centre from having to find immigrant volunteers while also providing international students with an opportunity to build new domestic relationships. The new arrangement helps the domestic students see the value of the international students' experience and the international students to feel like they are educating their domestic counterparts, and so far the approach is working well. The course's structured briefings, debriefings and reflections help to facilitate an experience that is more guided and less happenstance.

"This is a very good example where students really learned from each other. International students, most importantly, felt appreciated because the Canadian students were actually interested in learning about their experiences," explains Mr. Yang. He adds that this type of approach evens the playing field. "Rather than have domestic students think about theirs as a goodwill helping role, it shows them there's something to be gained."

Such activities also help disrupt the tendency of some international students to only associate with members of their own cultural group, something that Mr. Pang at Laurier says is an easy pattern for his fellow Chinese students to fall into. "Because we have such a huge population here, we tend to stick together, which kind of forms a unique social bubble." It's also a matter of convenience. "By making friends with a Chinese student, I will gain lots of useful information efficiently within a short period of time, versus if I try to socialize with a Canadian, it's very time-consuming and stressful." This idea of "making a Canadian friend" is a common measure of success for those who study international student integration; even after several years, many international students have not.

While Mr. Pang's courage in pursuing domestic connections is commendable, he says it wasn't easy. "Domestic students are very welcoming but they won't initiate the first step in getting to know international students. And international students, especially with Asian origins, including myself, are quite shy," he says. "So, neither side is willing to break that cycle." He adds that cultural differences are also hard to bridge; for example, he'd never visited a pub or a club before he arrived.

And then there is the language barrier. "No one really holds interest in talking to you if you can't even talk properly, so it was quite a challenging experience at the beginning," he says. But Mr. Pang persisted, with positive results. "As time went on, we hung out more and they helped my English tremendously," he says of his roommates, with whom he ended up living for all four years of his undergraduate degree.

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Another approach to internationalization is to get domestic students to see it as a benefit and even a skill. That's led to initiatives like an intercultural certificate, a six-module course offered by [Laurier International](#), the school's diversity and equity office and its [Centre for Teaching and Learning](#), on topics like exploring difference, micro-aggressions and intercultural communication. More than 175 students obtained the certificate in the past academic year.

Getting faculty involved is also crucial. Guoqiang (George) Zhou, a professor in the faculty of education at the University of Windsor who has conducted several studies on the integration of international students on Canadian

campuses, says faculty need to remember that international students usually aren't accustomed to their teaching style. "In many cases, our pedagogical approaches do not match," says Dr. Zhou, adding that an ideal approach would see students and teachers together discussing what a classroom and a teacher looks like in each country. "Through this negotiation process, both sides understand each other better," he says.

At Thompson Rivers University, where 2,800 of the university's more than 25,000 students are international, cultural understanding is a strategic priority made concrete by an international research conference held in 2015 and 2017, and an annual four-day faculty development program called "[Interculturalizing the Curriculum](#)" put on by the [Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching](#). It includes everything from intercultural theory and models to Aboriginal pedagogy to curriculum reviews. Kyra Garson, coordinator of TRU's interculturalization programs, says these types of initiatives go a long way to improving cultural awareness, and work best when positioned to celebrate culture.

"The most important part of making intercultural understanding a strategic priority is that it doesn't focus solely on integrating international students, but rather recognizes and celebrates diversity both domestic and international," says Dr. Garson. Mr. Yang agrees: "In the past, it's been more like a one-way street. We place the burden of integration on the shoulder of international students. We talk about cultivating, educating global citizens ... so why are Canadian students not fully engaged or taking advantage of the opportunities at their doorstep?"

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. A [2015 study](#) (PDF) by the Canadian Bureau for International Education of over 4,000 international students showed that while 95 percent would definitely or probably recommend Canada as a place of study, only 29 percent said they saw themselves as having a lot of success being involved in campus activities. And technical challenges like study permit wait times are still a work in progress for some countries.

At Memorial, Ms. Knutson handles her 2,500 international charges with only 4½ staff on her team, a resource restriction that seems common. She thinks schools also could be doing more to help international students with their postgraduate transitions and career tracks (she points to her university's foray into entrepreneurship training for international graduate students as a bright new pathway). Mr. Hassan Nejad at Memorial sees mental-health support for international students as the next big priority, along with better communication about services.

Still, the international students who have worked their way through the Canadian system seem to have found value. Now acclimatized in his environment, Mr. Hassan Nejad says he has fallen for his new province and would love to find a job here, either in academia or industry. "All I can say about Newfoundland is that people are so kind ... and after a few years you really feel that this is your second home," he says.

Mr. Pang says he loves Canada's diversity and he too would like to stay here, and in academia, following his master's degree. He's already making his own contribution, with an undergraduate thesis on cross-cultural adaptation by Chinese students in Canadian universities that he presented at the [Canadian Association of Geographers conference](#) this past May at York University.

As for me, apparently my assumption about the Skype window was wrong: Mr. Pang communicates with his family daily through a popular Chinese voice- and text-messaging app called [WeChat](#). Turns out anyone can learn something new from an international student. All I had to do was ask.