

Demands, Challenges, and Rewards:
The First Year Experiences of International and
Domestic Students at Four Canadian Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Internationalization and globalization are a large part of the university discourse as institutions of higher learning attempt to make their campuses, programs and services, and perhaps more importantly their students more culturally aware and responsive to international and global contexts. A diverse campus provides opportunities for students to learn how to live and work effectively with others different from themselves (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). One way to internationalize a campus is to change the student body. As a result, many universities are focusing their efforts on attracting and retaining international students.

Political and economic forces such as globalization, internationalization, and federal funding cutbacks all interact to influence how universities function within society (Asmar, 2005). International students are a valuable component of the internationalization process in schools, colleges, and universities across Canada, both in terms of bringing an international perspective and more diversity to the classroom. Their presence on campuses and within communities provides significant cultural, social, economic and educational benefits. In particular international students bring international and intercultural perspectives to the classroom and the communities in which they live, which helps expand Canadians' views of the world. Knowledge about the global context contributes to Canadian competitiveness and innovation and creates enhanced opportunities for research and learning. There is also the benefit of international students returning to their home country with an understanding of Canadian people and culture (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), 2001; Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), 2005; Zhao et al., 2005). It is hoped that through internationalization, Canadian students not only understand other cultures but also form relationships with their international peers that result in long term trade and diplomatic interests

(AUCC, 2001; Zhao et al., 2005). This understanding is key to effectively living and working in an increasingly complex, interconnected and diverse world (CBIE, 2005).

According to *VISION 2020-Forecasting International Student Mobility* (cited in CBIE, 2005), the global demand for international student places in English-speaking destination countries will increase by 160% over the next 15 years to a total of 2.6 million. This collaborative report undertaken by the British Council, Universities UK and IDP Education Australia predicts the demand for distance education will realize a four-fold increase in the coming years. The demand for English-speaking destinations as part of higher education is influencing international student mobility (CBIE, 2005). Unfortunately, Canada is not known to be one of the top destinations for international students. The top countries are Britain, Australia, United States and New Zealand. However, there is room for Canada to become one of the leading providers due to its less expensive tuition and positive international reputation as a “friendly” country (Fine, 2004).

The US has seen a decrease in international student participation (37% in 1970 to 30% in 1995) as a result of increasing competition from other countries, notably Great Britain and Australia, countries with less expensive tuition and stricter US immigration rules (Dennis, 2004; Dillon, 2004; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). Several reports from the US indicate that complicated visa rules and concern about hostile welcome have deterred foreign students from enrolling at universities in the US and other countries (e.g., Australia, England and Canada) are benefiting ("Drop in International Graduate Enrollment not as Bad as Feared.," 2004; "The Future of International Education.," 2004; Kless, 2004; "US visa rules put off international students," 2004).

In Canada, international students must demonstrate they are able to pay fees for programs and courses, along with being able to financially support themselves and any accompanying

family members during their stay in Canada. They must also pass Immigration Canada's medical examination and satisfy authorities they will leave the country at the end of their study (Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC), 2005). The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) (2005) indicates that international students who choose Canada as their study-destination are primarily from South Korea, US, China, France and Japan, whereas international students who choose the British system predominately come from China (12%), Greece (9%) and US (5%) (Labi, 2004). Those international students who choose the US to study predominately come from Asian countries such as India, China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Other international students in the US come from Canada, Mexico, Turkey and Indonesia (Upcraft et al., 2005).

International students are found in higher proportions in the provinces Ontario, British Columbia and Québec. However, the top province in terms of international students as a percentage of total university population were New Brunswick (7.8), Québec (7.2) and British Columbia (6.6) (CBIE, 2005). Forty-five percent of international students studying in Canada are female (CBIE, 2005). McGill University hosted largest # of international students (5, 015) representing 9.2% of total international student population. Université de Montréal, University of Toronto, University of Québec, and York University were other top providers (CBIE, 2005).

Figure 1 below shows international student enrollment in Canada between 1992 to 2002. The number of foreign students enrolled in Canadian universities surpassed the 50,000 mark to reach 52,600 in 2001/02, up 60% compared with 1997/98. However, as a proportion of total enrolment, the number of foreign students remains relatively low, at just under 6% of the total university student population (Statistics Canada, 2004).

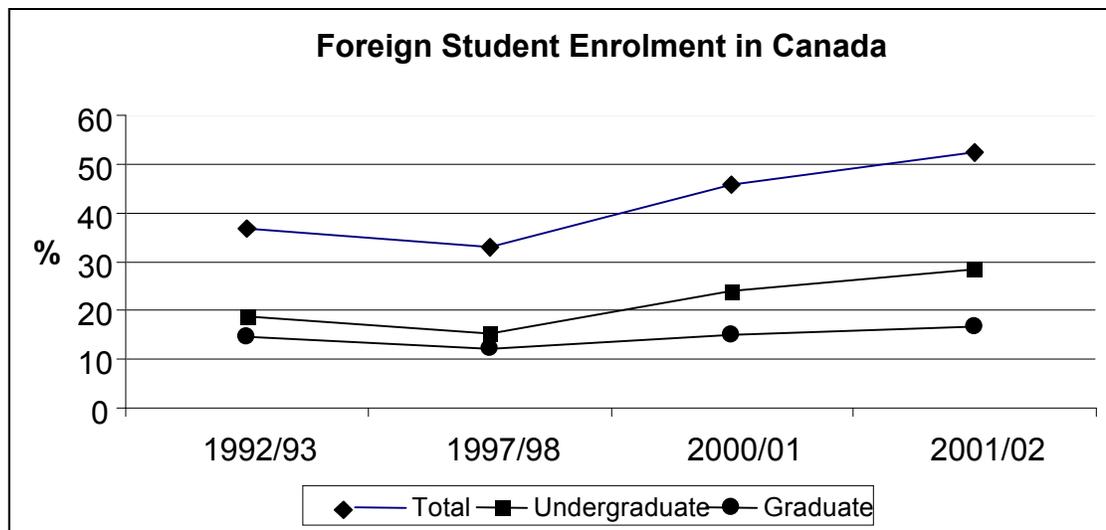


Figure 1. Foreign Student Enrolment in Canada¹

Canada's quality of lifestyle and its commitment to excellence in education were cited in *Canada First- The 2004 Survey of International Students* as the top two reasons 60% of international students choose Canada as their study destination (CBIE, 2005).

Canada's growing commitment to internationalization also provides the country with significant marketing advantages (CBIE, 2005). However, there are problems with the Canadian system that need to be rectified in order to establish Canada as a leading provider of post-secondary education to international students. For example, Canada has consistently under funded international education in comparison to other OECD nations. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (2004), on a per capita basis Canada contributes \$0.80 while Australia, United States and Japan contribute 9.077, 4.70 and 4.94 respectively (cited in CIBE, 2005). Canada is also falling behind in international student recruitment. Other countries (US, UK, Australia and New Zealand) have an overall government wide approach to international student recruitment. For example, Australia has specific immigration policies where

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¹ (Statistics Canada, 2004)

upon completion of studies, international students can apply for landed immigrant status and get bonus points for having their university credentials from Australia (AUCC, 2001). Canadian universities are attempting to compete with other English-speaking destinations by offering scholarships and early-arrival bonuses (e.g., access to residence and bookstore discounts) to entice international students to their campuses (Dubinsky, 2005). During the time of this study, international students were not permitted to pursue any off-campus employment opportunities during the term or holidays (AUCC, 2001), fortunately this policy has recently changed in 2005 and it remains to be seen how this policy change will impact international student enrollment and experiences in Canada (CIC, 2005) .

International Student Experience

Citizenship and Immigration Canada reports that “more than 130,000 students come to study in Canada every year”.² In the year 2002, the number of international students in Canada reached 144,664, of which 67,347 (47%) were university students and 24,427 (17%) were first year students.³ Numbers of this magnitude speak to the importance of understanding what Canadian university life is like for international and Canadian students. Success within the first-year of university is linked to long-term retention within higher education. First-year students, whether just out of high-school, transfer students or returning-students (e.g., older than average age of 21) face difficult issues as they move into the university community (Upcraft et al., 2005). Within this body of literature, the success of first-year international (e.g., defined as those without citizenship, landed immigrant status or permanent resident status in country of study) is

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² “CIC Canada -- Study in Canada: Overview”. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Retrieved November 2, 2004, from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/study/index.html>.

³ “Facts and Figures 2002: Statistical Overview of the Temporary Resident and Refugee Claimant Population” Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Retrieved November 2, 2004, from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pub/facts2002-temp/facts-temp-5.html#e>.

largely absent. However, as the previous discussion on globalization and internationalization has highlighted, institutions need to be more responsive to the diversity of their student population. In particular, universities need to develop a better understanding of how international students differ from their domestic student counterparts. In addition, universities need to learn how to help international students adjust to their host culture, and host culture learn from their international peers (Bunz, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002). For example, in a recent study comparing international and domestic student experience in the United States, international students (first-year) scored higher on academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, technology use. These factors would indicate that international students were well adjusted academically. However, the same study found that international students spent less time relaxing and socializing and were less satisfied than American students (Zhao et al., 2005). Social adjustment and satisfaction are also important factors to international student retention and success.

Fostering a sense of belonging is an important element in developing a campus community (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Such as sense of belonging is created through the building relationships with institutional agents and peers (Smith, Gauld, Tubbs, & Correnti, 1997). When they arrive at host country, international students often experience a loss of shared identity making transition difficult academically, personally and socially (Bunz, 1997; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Therefore, how culturally diverse (or multicultural) an institution is may influence which institution an international student chooses to attend. Zhao, Kuh, & Carini (2005) found that density of international students per total student population does have negative and positive effects on diversity-related experiences of students. For example, as the density of international student population increases, students tend to engage in more diversity related activities. However, low density may contribute to social isolation and an overcompensation on academics,

whereas high density could contribute to an inordinate amount of socializing by members of some groups which can have an adverse effect on academic performance and social integration with domestic students (Zhao et al., 2005). Hayes & Lin (1994) found similar results amongst international students who tended to stay within their own cultural subgroup. While socializing with one's own cultural group helps create feelings of shared identity, a sense of belonging and a place to share traditional values and belief systems, these same groups can lead to social isolation from the larger university population.

Individual coping styles and social networks of support are important influencers on how international students cope with stress and deal with the transition to host country (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Zhao et al., 2005). Tompson & Tompson (1996) found that a lack of a secure social network impacted how comfortable students were in academic settings, how they dealt with language issues, adjusted to day-to-day norms and behaviours, and to the informal classroom. They concluded that international student adjustment to their new community can be facilitated by early arrival, friendship families and opportunities for cultural exchange throughout academic year (Spencer, 2003).

English proficiency is a key factor in social interaction and adjustment for non-English speaking international students; their comfort level with English influences all aspects of their adjustment to their host culture, socially and academically (Pedersen, 1991 cited in Hayes & Lin, 1994). It is also important to remain cognizant of the complexity and multiplicity of issues for an international first-year student extends beyond ESL. Research indicates that academic success for international students flows from the confluence of a number of factors, including language proficiency, learning strategies, and classroom dynamics. The combination of making the transition from high school to university while undergoing additional stress of adjusting to a new

country can be especially arduous, both intellectually and emotionally (Tompson & Tompson, 1996).

Key adjustment problems of international students are 1) living adjustments (food, housing, weather, financial) (Abel, 2002; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Lyakhovetska, 2004; Planning & Institutional Research (PAIR), 2001, 2003; Schuh, 2005; Tseng & Newton, 2002); 2) academic adjustment (English-proficiency, differ educational system and learning skill set) (Abel, 2002; Bunz, 1997; Carter & Sedlacek, 1985; Crump, 2004; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Lyakhovetska, 2004; PAIR, 2001, 2003; Schuh, 2005; Tseng & Newton, 2002); 3) socio-cultural adjustment (international-vs.-host cultural norms, expectations and “stereotypes) (Abel, 2002; Asmar, 2005; Bunz, 1997; Crump, 2004; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Lyakhovetska, 2004; PAIR, 2001, 2003; Schuh, 2005; Tseng & Newton, 2002); and 4) personal psychological adjustment (e.g., homesickness, loneliness, depression, alienations etc) (Abel, 2002; Bunz, 1997; Carter & Sedlacek, 1985; Crump, 2004; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Lyakhovetska, 2004; PAIR, 2001, 2003; Schuh, 2005; Tseng & Newton, 2002). Asmar (2005) found that a strong sense of academic commitment of students was counterbalanced by not feeling they full belonged. This sense of alienation appeared to be related more to aspects of campus culture than overt discrimination, but expectations and (some) experiences of negative stereotyping existed (Asmar, 2005).

Equally important to the international student experience is a willingness to learn about another culture, a strong motivation and interest in opportunities to learn English, and common interests with their domestic peers (e.g., academic, social) which can assist in the transition to a new cultural environment (Carter & Sedlacek, 1985; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Tseng & Newton (2002) focused their work on the well-being of international students using a grounded theory approach. They found that well-being could be defined as personal satisfaction and positive effect and pursuing a meaningful and successful study abroad life. Thus strategies for well-being

obviously involved general as well as strategic tactics. Eight strategies involved were 1) knowing self and others; 2) making friends and building relationships; 3) expanding individual worldview; 4) asking help and handling problems; 5) establishing cultural and social contacts; 6) building relationship with advisors and instructors; 7) becoming proficient in English language; and 8) using the tactic of letting go (e.g., knowing when to let a problem go) (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Since English is one of the main educational goals of most international students it is very important for them to have contact with host students.

It is important to remember that individual differences, sex role differences, stigma (by host culture) and language difficulties have an impact on the social integration of international students (Carter & Sedlacek, 1985; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Tseng & Newton, 2002). International students who come from a collective culture and study in countries where individualism is valued require time to adjust to their new learning environment, to understand and develop strategies to deal with cultural differences and to understand student-faculty power relationships (Abel, 2002; Bunz, 1997; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). Abel (2002) found that international students do not necessarily have the skills of individual initiative from their prior educational experiences and often have expectations of more formal relationships with their professors. Faculty may perceive international students as undermining their academic success by not participating fully in class discussions and not asking for clarification of issues or assignments (Tompson & Tompson, 1996). It is important for faculty to contextualize the prior educational experience of international students and to provide accommodation in the classroom to help facilitate course participation. Key to success is the willingness of professors to clarify their expectations and to communicate regularly with students and with those responsible for assisting them (Spencer, 2003).

Equally important are the roles of social and educational assistance provided by study groups and peer tutoring. Carefully choosing professors and carefully monitoring the time spent

with other students, and at recreation and downtime are important strategies advancing academic success (Abel, 2002). Workshops focusing on critical reading, summary and review, oral presentations and writing help ameliorate some challenges common to international students (Spencer, 2003). It is important to remember that some international students come from academic backgrounds where they lacked access to computers and scientific equipment (Schuh, 2005). However, other studies have found that some international students are more comfortable and confident using computer technology for preparing class assignments, as well as for communicating with their instructors and other students. Some may use technology instead of talking directly to peers or instructors to avoid embarrassing exchanges created by language barriers and unfamiliarity with cultural idioms (Zhao et al., 2005).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES

As the demand for post-secondary education continues to grow, student demographics, such as more female and minority-student participation, and age variation are changing. Universities are also being influenced by technological advances in teaching delivery possibilities amidst fiscal constraints imposed by lower government transfer payments to post-secondary institutions. For these reasons, Dennis (2004) argues that retention will be an important “accountability measure,” especially for government funding. Any effort to increase the number of international students on campus must also be accompanied by programs and services that foster the retention of diverse students and facilitate the comfortable interaction between ethnic and racial groups (Carter & Sedlacek, 1985; Schuh, 2005; Smith et al., 1997; Zhao et al., 2005). Research, along with population statistics (e.g., Statistics Canada, 2004), suggests that the international undergraduate students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and will have

issues that are specific to their own ethnic or cultural background and home country that need to be accommodated to facilitate their success in a new host country.

International student services typically help international students with travel, orientation, financial aid, registration, housing, counseling, and (especially) successful adjustment to the campus and community (Komives, Woodward, & Associates, 1996; Schuh, 2005). In many cases, international student services offices are responsible for study abroad programs, foreign visitors, and the many international student organizations that exist on most campuses. At some institutions this office may be part of academic affairs or an international programs division; regardless of where the service is located administratively, student affairs have a major role in international student success (Komives et al., 1996, p. 441-442).

PURPOSE

In September 2003, researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, York University in Toronto, Ontario, McGill University in Montreal, Québec, and Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia undertook a cooperative, cross-national study to investigate the international student experience. This research is shaped by the question “what are the experiences and outcomes of international students in Canadian universities?” Surveys of international students and first-year international and domestic student focus groups were conducted at each participating institution during the fall and winter term of 2003-2004. The overarching purpose of this study is to track international and domestic students as they journey through their first, second and third year of undergraduate studies. In this report we focus on the focus groups held during the fall and winter term of the first-year students of 2003-2004.

SITE DESCRIPTIONS

University of British Columbia

In the academic year, 2003-2004 UBC was home to 40,945 students. The undergraduate student population was 33,566. The total international student population (including graduate and undergraduate) was 4,054, of which 720 were in their first year of undergraduate studies. The first year international student population was comprised of 403 females and 317 males. These students originated from fifty-eight different countries. The countries with the highest number of International students attending UBC were Taiwan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Iran, United Kingdom, India, and the United States. In general, first year international students were enrolled in the following degree programs: BA (N=273), BSc (N=191), BASC (N=106), BSFN (N=34), BCOM (N=33). More females than males tended to be enrolled in the aforementioned programs; however, more males than females were enrolled in the Bachelor of Science program. Undergraduate international fees at the University of British Columbia in 2003-04 were as follows: 15unit/30 credit program= \$15,870 and for 18unit/36 credit program =\$19,044.

York University

York University, Canada's third largest university is located on the north-most fringe of Toronto and enrolls approximately 40,000 students at all levels of study. Of this number, approximately 6% are international students. A survey conducted in 2004 indicated that approximately 38% of entering first year students are not born in Canada and the same percentage spoke a language other than English while growing up. The vast majority of students commute to their classes.

McGill University

McGill University was chartered in 1821 and began classes in 1843. It is located on the slope of Mount Royal in Montréal Québec, and also has a campus, Macdonald College, which houses the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, on the West Island. Students live in residences next to the campuses, in apartment blocks owned by the university, or in the city of Montréal. In the fall of 2003, 23,206 students were enrolled in degree programs, 17,903 at the undergraduate level and 5,303 at the graduate level (Planning Office, McGill University). Of this number, approximately 18% were international students. A survey conducted by the university in 2004 indicated that approximately 18% of entering first year students was not born in Canada and the same percentage spoke a language other than English while growing up.

Dalhousie University

The largest university in the Maritimes, Dalhousie University is situated in the primarily residential south end of Halifax, Nova Scotia. It offers more than 125 different programs⁴ and provides high quality post-secondary education to more than 15,000 students⁵. Dalhousie's international reputation combined with active recruiting strategies employed by university administration has seen the Dalhousie student population grow substantially over the past four years. This growth is reflected not only in domestic enrolment figures but also in international numbers.

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⁴ "About Dalhousie University", Office of External Graduate Programs. Retrieved November 11, 2004, from http://masters.mgmt.dal.ca/oegp_3361.html

⁵ "Enrolment Planning and Management Report #5", February 2004, Annual Report of the President and Vice Presidents 2003-2004, p.6. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from <http://www.dal.ca/~sradmin/files/ACF501E8I.pdf>

In the Enrolment Planning and Management Report #5, of the Annual Report of the President and Vice Presidents it is reported that

at December 1, 2003, 1,245 international students were enrolled at Dalhousie University, a 20% growth over the previous year, and a growth of 63% over 1999-2000. Currently, international students make up 8% of the total student body at Dalhousie University, 1% growth over last year.⁶

The international student population represents an important proportion of the Dalhousie student body and is a group that is actively courted by university administration through strategic recruitment practices.

The same enrolment planning report describes the international population as well distributed throughout all faculties and undergraduate and graduate programs, “with 56% at the undergraduate level and 44% at the graduate level” and as representing over 120 countries – China, the United States, India, Bermuda, and Saudi Arabia being the countries most highly represented⁷.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

University of British Columbia

According to the UBC Fact Book (2003-2004) international students have access to all available student supports and services provided by UBC. However, UBC recognizes that International students also deserve services that specifically address their unique needs. Through International House, international students are provided services and programs such as one-to-one advising, educational and social programs, ESL classes, and the Peer Program. The Peer

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⁶ “Enrolment Planning and Management Report #5”, February 2004, Annual Report of the President and Vice Presidents 2003-2004, p.6. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from <http://www.dal.ca/~sradmin/files/ACF501E8I.pdf>

⁷ “Enrolment Planning and Management Report #5”, February 2004, Annual Report of the President and Vice Presidents, 2003-2004, p.7. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from <http://www.dal.ca/~sradmin/files/ACF501E8I.pdf>

program provides opportunities for senior UBC students and new international students to meet, plan social events and develop a support network. International student services also coordinate the UBC Student Exchange Programs and provide social and cultural space to the international community at International House. International Student Advisors provide information and guidance about immigration and employment, medical insurance and adjustment to their new lives as UBC students in Canada. Another important service provided by International student services is the *International Student Handbook*. This handbook provides information on many topics including health insurance, meeting people and academic support.

Along with the services provided by the International Student Services, many other organizations on campus provide support and social activities for International and other UBC students. One such group is the Alma Mater Society (AMS). The AMS provides health plan coverage, variety of clubs and student societies. The AMS International Student Issues Commissioner liaises with the AMS and International House with the goal of identifying and addressing issues facing international students.

York University

York University is strongly committed to internationalization. The mission statement of York International states that “internationalization is a multi-facted process involving the movement and interaction of people and ideas. Internationalization is not only about crossing national borders. It also recognizes and builds upon the complex interactions between the local and global, as well as our unique York strengths of interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, innovation and commitment to social justice” (<http://international.yorku.ca/about/mission.htm>).

International student programs and services are located within York International, which is under the mandate of the Associate Vice-President International. International Student Programs and Services, through their international student advisors, provide orientation programs along with resources on housing, immigration, health insurance, and employment. They also provide a peer-support program called the “Buddy Program,” which matches new students with senior York students. Other services include information about income tax, finances and funding. (See <http://international.yorku.ca/intlstud/index.htm> for more information)

McGill University

International Student Services at McGill University aims to ease the transition of international students to university life and life in Canada. Services include social and orientation activities such as “Welcome Reception” and orientation programs, including a “Buddy Program.” Resources and assistance on individual immigration and financial aid advising (including taxation seminars) are also provided. To assist students in their preparation to come to Canada and for their initial few weeks in Canada, ISS provides a *Pre-departure Guide* and a *Welcome Package* which includes the *In Touch* newsletter and other information relevant to new students.

Other services important to international students are the *Health Plan Guides* for the compulsory International Health Insurance. ISS also provides cross-cultural counseling to assist their adjustment to Canadian culture. Academic success is key and therefore ISS provides several workshops and other resources to facilitate international student success while attending McGill. (See <http://www.mcgill.ca/internationalstudents/> for more information)

Dalhousie University

While at Dalhousie University, the International Students and Exchange Services Office is responsible for the well-being of international students. In its resource publication, International Student Handbook, the Office states that “International Student and Exchange Services is dedicated to fostering global understanding and goodwill and assisting international students to reap maximum benefit from their stay in Canada.”⁸ To achieve these aims the Office acts as both a resource center and an activity center to interested students. Services offered to international students include

- 1) administration of Dalhousie’s International Student Health Plan
- 2) provision of information and advice on financial, legal, and immigration matters
- 3) referrals to other campus services which assist with issues related to health, housing, language, and travel, personal and academic counseling
- 4) organization of Fall and Winter International Students Orientation programs
- 5) airport pick-up service in September
- 6) organization of a variety of social, cultural, and educational programs throughout the year
- 7) promotion of international development education and cross-cultural understanding across campus⁹

The ISES Office also has an international student lounge/resource library open for student use at any time during the day.

International students may also find support in the Dalhousie International Students Association (DISA). This association includes all international students at Dalhousie and works to “promote cultural diversity and understanding through social and educational activities and interactions”¹⁰. DISA strives to involve faculty and staff members, domestic students, and international students alike in celebrating the wealth of cultural diversity present at Dalhousie

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⁸ “Greetings from the International Student & Exchange Services Office.” International Student Handbook 2003. Dalhousie University. p.5

⁹ “Services for International Students” International Student & Exchange Services (pamphlet). Dalhousie University.

¹⁰ <http://is2.dal.ca/~disa/Disa.htm>

University. A significant example of an activity undertaken in pursuit of this goal is an “annual variety show, dubbed International Night, and held during the winter session. This event showcases cultural dances, acts and food from different parts of the world.”¹¹

DISA also works hard to enrich the Canadian experiences of international students by helping them to explore their new surroundings, acclimatizing them to their new environment, and exposing them to local culture. Events are organized throughout the year which provide foreign students with the opportunity to discover the city and province they have chosen as their Canadian home.

RESEARCH DESIGN

SAMPLING

Participants for the focus groups were recruited with the assistance of each institution’s international student services, along with the Registrar’s office that provided access to first-year e-mail list-servs. List-servs and posterings campus (e.g., student buildings, residences) were used to recruit participants. In addition to posters and list-servs, participants from the first-term focus groups were invited to participate in the second term focus groups via e-mail and/or telephone.

Focus Group Research

Two focus groups one for international students and the other for domestic students, were held at each institution during the fall and winter terms which resulted in four focus groups per institution. Separate focus groups were held to ensure that both groups of students could share their own perspectives based on their experiences as international or domestic students. The focus

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¹¹ See previous footnote.

groups used the same protocol so that comparisons could be made between groups and across institutions. Each focus group lasted from between 1.5 to 2 hours. Participants were paid for their time and were provided with dinner (e.g., pizza and non-alcoholic beverages) or snacks.

An issue arising in the conducting of the focus groups in this particular context was that some of the participants did not seem to take the process seriously (as noted in the Dalhousie focus group moderator) while another focus group had an international graduate student participate. In both instances these students' comments were not included in the analysis.

Another issue evident in the depth of the transcripts was the variance of experience amongst the moderators in conducting a focus group, therefore some issues of negotiating group dynamics and probing students' responses for more explanation was not consistent across all the groups. The quality of the interview transcripts (e.g., missing data) was an issue for some focus groups where the audio recording was not clear enough for the transcriber to distinguish what was being said. This may have been influenced also by the English-proficiency of some of the international student participants, but since missing data was not solely limited to the international student focus groups it would be wrong to assume that this was a strong influencing factor.

A limitation of a cross-national study is that although each group conducted their focus groups using the same questions and guiding analysis protocol, the analysis was not consistent across institutions. It also has to be recognized that the second term focus groups for a few institutions had considerably less participation which affects the breath and depth of the transcripts and resulting analysis. Therefore the challenge in compiling this report was to go back to the original transcripts using the coding provided but also re-coding components to make the analysis as inclusive of participating students' perspectives and voices as possible.

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RESULTS

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this project were first-year students enrolled at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia (Dal), McGill University in Quebec (McGill), York University in Ontario (York) or the University of British Columbia in British Columbia (UBC). Students were grouped according to whether they were domestic students or international students. Table 1 presents the number of participants from each institution. Combining all focus groups 148 students participated during 2003-2004 academic year. The fall focus groups were comprised of 50 international students and 48 Domestic students. The winter session had few participants, with 31 international and 19 Domestic students taking part. UBC and York maintained their numbers from the first and second focus groups. However, McGill and Dalhousie saw a drop of over 50% of their participants from the fall and winter focus groups.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants

Institution	Fall		Winter		Total
	International	Domestic	International	Domestic	
UBC	13	9	14	7	43
McGill	16	17	4	3	40
Dal	12	14	6	3	35
York	9	8	7	6	30
<i>Total</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>148</i>

The preceding sections of this report will present the analysis of the focus groups. First the first-term focus group analysis will be presented followed by the analysis of the second-term focus groups. For each term, the first section of the analysis will highlight themes that are common to both international and domestic students. The analysis will then explore experiences that were unique to either group. Any institutional specific themes will also be discussed within

this report. A summary of each focus group will be presented. A discussion of the analysis and findings will follow the summary of the second-term focus group.

FIRST TERM FOCUS GROUP THEMES

CHOOSING THEIR RESPECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

Participants in the focus groups shared several factors which influenced their decision to attend their respective institutions such as location of institution, desire to move away from home or remain near family, looking for a different experience, institutional and program reputation, knowing alumni, tuition fees/living costs and to improve English.

Regardless of geographic location or whether participants were international or Domestic students, all indicated that *knowing alumni* either immediate family (e.g., parents, siblings, and cousins) or friends, assisted in their decision making process. A sense of familiarity with the university prior to coming as a first-year student seemed to demystify some of the anxieties in attending university. For some international students at UBC and York, having relatives in Canada who could act as their guardian was also an important influential factor in their decision of where to attend university. Knowing alumni was the only factor prevalent across all focus groups within the topic of choosing their respective institution.

Personally, I have a few reasons that I choose here, because of course I lived here before and I'm kind of used to ways of living. I know it's a nice city. Vancouver's a nice city, so I chose it. And also my brother is a graduate student of UBC, and he told me that the applied science, which is engineering program here, is almost the best in Canada, so I chose here, and I'm studying in applied science now. And also another reason is that the tuition fee here, compared to the Hong Kong university, is at least 20% lower than Hong Kong, so it would just ease my family financial burden, I can say. And so that's it. – UBC international

I really like it., I got used to York from before I actually started going to the school. A lot of my friends go here so it's really comfortable here...actually to go here. – York domestic

Yeah, my uncles are here, so I came here. In my country education is not so good. I have to go abroad, but I choose Canada because my relatives are here. – York international

For international students at all institutions, *tuition fees and living costs*, especially when compared to the United States, influenced their decision to attend a Canadian institution.

Another important issue influencing their decision to study in Canada rather than Europe or the United States was the *ability to get a study visa* for Canada was much easier than in other countries. International students were not the only ones concerned with this issue; domestic students from McGill were also concerned with tuition fees and living costs.

I heard [Canada is] similar to the States, but it's more cheaper, so it's much easier for international students to come here...the cost. – Dalhousie international

Canada has a very low education cost, rather than US or Britain... Canada offers the same quality of life I've been having in the US. – McGill domestic

Improving English was another factor that influenced several international students' decision to attend university in Canada; this was evident across institutions. At McGill, many of the domestic students whose first language is not English also noted that attending an institution where they could improve their English was important to them.

I can practice French and English, and also McGill is a great university. I know that it has a great reputation, it's a good university. Also it's very international. – McGill international

The way we come here to study English and because North America is close to hi-tech. So we come here and have an opportunity to learn. – York international

I wanted to be that I have good English – McGill domestic

To Move Away From Home or *To Be Near Family* are conflicting themes that arose in the focus groups. For example, both international and domestic students from UBC and York, along with international students at McGill expressed their wish to be near family influenced their institutional choice. However, some domestic students from UBC, Dal and McGill indicated that their desire to move away from home helped them choose their respective institutions.

The main reason I'm here is because my relatives are here. And because in my country, the education is not [great]. . . The main reason I came here, I had so many opportunities and my parents are financially well off, so they bought me here to my uncle and aunt, who are my legal guardians. – York international

I came here because it was far way from home, and I just wanted to get away from everyone and stuff like that. It's a good place. It's a small city town kind of thing, so there's a lot to do and everything's close by. – Dal domestic

It's pretty close by to my house. I live in Richmond Hill. I can just train down. Commute very easily, and my cousin also comes here. – York domestic

I live in Vancouver. I kind of wanted to move to Ontario or somewhere because I live in a traditional family. My parents pay the tuition; they don't want me to move far away from them. They sent me they think that UBC is a very good school. . . And my sister went to UBC. She's two years older than I am so they just want me to precede her. – UBC domestic

I'm from a very small town in Northern BC. I really wanted to come here. I've lived in a small town my whole life, so I was very excited to come to the city, and UBC just seemed to have a lot to offer, and I was really interested in it. – UBC domestic

The *location* of the University of British Columbia and York University were reasons both international and domestic students choose their institutions.

I'm also from Ontario, and Vancouver is an awesome place for me to go see. There's a lot for me to experience in Vancouver, and it's really beautiful, and I know people that are here so I took the opportunity – UBC domestic

Me? Before I came here, I had no idea about here. Just some people telling me here is good and the society is safe and nice people. I think it should be okay for me. I also wanted to study in another country. - York international

Financial reasons, I like the atmosphere- it's liberal. Montréal is an awesome city. McGill has a good reputation. – McGill domestic

In addition to location, the *reputation and programs* at UBC and McGill attracted some of its international and domestic students. International and domestic students from McGill and UBC also expressed an interest in having a *different experience* influenced their decision to choose their institution.

ADAPTING TO UNIVERSITY

Students were asked about their experiences adapting to university life. This question had a wide range of responses and perspectives about classroom experiences, workload, time management, social issues and interacting with faculty and staff. For example, some domestic and international students from UBC, McGill and Dal felt that first-year *university was easier than high school*, especially in terms of work load. However, some domestic UBC and Dal students along with York's domestic and international students felt that university was harder than high school.

Yeah, I didn't find the workload to be as bad in my class with regard...like, I know that from back home... that was my big fear coming to university, I didn't know how I would be able to handle the big workload, but I've been finding that it hasn't been that hard to do that. It's more living quarters that I'm really trying to adjust with. – UBC domestic.

It's easier than I expected. – Dal international

Some of McGill's domestic students and international students from Dalhousie also commented on the *variation of workload from high school*. Part of this adjustment to academic

workload also involved dealing with larger *class sizes* which both international and domestic students attending York felt made their adjustment to university more of a challenge. Smaller class sizes and faculty who interacted with the students was viewed by domestic UBC students as a positive factor aiding their adjustment. While the workload may have been easier, both international and domestic students from Dalhousie commented that it was difficult to adjust to the unbalanced timelines and expectations of workload (e.g., all mid-terms in one week).

There is a difference between my country and here. In my country we had to study a lot of stuff, maybe to study about 5,000 pages per year. In my opinion that's too much. And for seven years it's guaranteed 5,000 pages. But you know, it's all generalized. ...But here it's more practical and more specialized. When you just learn something you can understand that and [remember] it for your whole life. That's different. – Dalhousie international

Classes got harder- faster, so they expect more out of you. Exams require more studying than writing a project. It takes more motivation. – McGill domestic

Yeah, it's been freaky. More so in the workload, definitely. Like, in high school, you could just float by and get 70s, 80s and be happy. But here it's like you have to work so hard, and then you're just barely passing. Or sometimes not. So, it's the adjusting part of it, it's totally different. It's good for social life, totally, but. .. yea, you meet a lot of people, and it's good experience to do so , but it's adjusting. – UBC domestic

Another thing that you have to adapt to class size. I think it's grown dramatically, and the fact that you don't get to know everyone in the class, and you don't a more intimate relationship with your professors and stuff. I think that's what you have to adapt to. - York domestic

An important theme that resonated amongst the international students comments across the country was they were *gaining critical thinking skills* in their Canadian university experience which influenced their decision to attend university in Canada. A few of UBC and Dalhousie's international students felt that while the workload was easier, they still had troubles due to their English skills. In fact, one's *ease of English* use could be seen as a determiner of comfort level in adjusting to Canada. This is also evident in the discussion of making friends from international

student's focus groups from UBC and Dal. For example, students who found English easier especially in terms of speaking found their adjustment to be more positive than those who struggled with the language.

English is my 2nd language, so it's a different kind of adaptation. . . it's different how to take notes and how to study – McGill domestic

I came here to learn English and to learn something...to learn something useful, and gain different experiences, different experiences than in China. – Dal international

Meeting new people and social issues were part of the issues in adapting to the institution.

Both international and domestic students across the country felt that making friends during their first term was a challenge, especially in large classes. Again, for international students across the country, meeting people was influenced by their comfort level with English.

Especially in [[large classes] because everybody leaves when class is over, because there are too many people. You don't, like, always two people sit with each other, and you only have the chance to meet once a week. – York international

I guess the main problem is the language problem. My English is not that good, and it's just that the words for some of the jokes... when Canadians talk about the jokes, I don't even understand what they're talking about, and they cannot dissolve myself into their communities. This is the main problem I find, but in general everyone is very nice. – UBC international

Although domestic UBC students felt that their transition to university helped them to become *more independent*, responsible and disciplined, some of their peers felt that adjusting to *living on their own* was a challenge.

I thought my first week was really hard, not in terms of workload but I didn't know anyone, I didn't live in res therefore I wouldn't meet people. And even in my first month, it was the most depressing time. It's true! I didn't know anyone for a year. I was only in high school for a year, I live abroad, so I really hated it, and I was even thinking "To hell with this" you know, I was thinking to go to college elsewhere and not stay here. It was really hard. Before I knew, like 150

people. It's not easy having to make friends. I had a close group of friends. - UBC domestic

I was worried that I wouldn't be able to adapt to the change of living on my own and being responsible for myself. Montréal is very student trendy. I learned everything I needed to quickly, the adaptation was quite smooth- how oriented everyone is towards helping you out. – McGill domestic

Both groups at McGill, UBC and York discussed issues around *time management skills*, adjusting to a new schedule, the independence and keeping organized.

In terms of workload, I guess it's time management. If you know how to manage your time you'll do well. If you don't you're going to fall behind. I guess that's the way it is for me at least. – UBC domestic

It's harder than I expected. I wasn't exercising my TA's office hours in the begging, and there was a lot going on, a lot of things in my life. I didn't get my school under control right away, so I'm really behind and it's a big deal. I don't believe in studying all the time at all. I think it's really good to live too. – McGill international

I think that's hard. I found in my first couple of weeks I fell behind, because no one was on me going, "You have to read this," and then you go to your tutorials and sometimes you don't even talk about the readings, and so I'm like, "I'm not going to read it. They're not going to know." And it catches up to you when you have a test or a quiz, and you're like, "Oh my god, I have to read this whole 150 pages to do a 10 mark quiz!" But you need to do well, because everything counts, and as our parents say, "It's paid education. You have to get your money's worth." – York domestic

From the focus groups, it seems that domestic students faced more challenges than international students in adjusting from high school to university. Domestic students from McGill and Dal also talked about having to learn how to budget.

I think that my budget's due to the fact that I don't have my parents out here, so I spend the money on nothing. And the case being, I have no idea where my money's gone, and it's not like I can go home. I have to ask them [for money] and wait like a week to get it. It's just...I have no control, so I don't know. – Dal domestic

International students from York and UBC felt that while English was one adjustment, another was the difference in learning/teaching styles, for example writing essays and dealing with the workload.

Difference between teaching systems, the whole system. System's basically the same in high school and university here, but in my country, for example, the first time I wrote my essay was in grade 11 when I came here. I've never written an essay in my life before. – UBC international

I think in part it's just that...okay, you write an essay and you think it's an "A" paper you get it back and you get a "B", you're like, "What's this? I put so much time into it." And then the comment at the end is, "It's so impersonal and general," and I'm not used to it, because at school it would have your name on it and exactly what is wrong with it, and here it's just like, "rephrase certain sentences for proof reading da da da." That's it. It's just vague and general. You go up to them and ask them they've read a million and one essays, and they don't give a hoot about yours!" – York domestic

Some of the international students from McGill and UBC discussed issues of adapting not only to the academics but also to the community, climate and Canadian culture, particularly with regard to English.

I'm okay to speak. I can express myself fairly well, but for listening, although I was in English school for seven years. But it's like the teachers back in Hong Kong were different. They would speak in English, but the speed and accent and everything is different. – McGill international

Montréal actually helps international students adapt, because it is so diverse in itself that you have different areas where you can go to and be reminded of little things at home– McGill international

A group of the international students from UBC had problems with the online registration and discussed how support services provided prior to their arrival and post-orientation would be helpful in facilitating their adjustment to UBC. For example, some students had trouble with on-campus housing since they were not aware prior to their arrival that they could apply for early

access to their residences and therefore had to deal with finding temporary accommodations until the residence was ready.

It was horrible the first time I came here, because I came here a couple of days earlier than housing was actually given to me, so I had to go around and find housing, and that was a very scary experience. I was lugging, I was pulling luggage throughout the town . . . My residence started on the 30th, I came here early because I wanted to come here a bit earlier to settle down, because I came from Hong Kong so I'd like some time to adapt to life first, but apparently there aren't such arrangements for international students. Or you have to apply and I didn't apply. – UBC international

In relation to *interacting with faculty and/or staff* at their respective institutions, both international and domestic students from UBC, Dalhousie and York had positive views about accessing their instructors.

I can say that I've had a great time. I really appreciate UBC because of the effort they put on. From the international orientation, the people, the teachers are excellent. The teachers I've had are excellent you just can't stop admiring them because they really were prepared, and it looks like they love what they're doing. – UBC international

Although Dalhousie students also had generally positive experiences with support staff, domestic students from York had mixed reviews about their interactions with staff. However, domestic students were less likely to take advantage of the opportunity. International students at York indicated they were more likely to use e-mail to contact their professor. There was also discussion about TAs within this question. International students at York and McGill were more likely to question the credibility of their TA, especially if the TA seemed young and inexperienced. Both domestic and international students at Dal also had mixed reviews about their experiences with TAs. A domestic student attending Dalhousie commented “*Yeah, I found that too. Some of the TAs, it doesn't seem like they know what they are doing. They're marking our papers...our essays...and I'm like, “How is this person marking my essays?”*” The desire for

experienced faculty teaching first year courses may be related to the high tuition students are paying and desire for “benefits” in relation to cost (e.g., experienced faculty – high tuition).

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

The theme that cut across all institutions and all students in this case was the goal of *further graduate work* upon completion of their undergraduate studies. Social experiences were also important to international students and domestic students from all institutions (e.g., developing friendships that would be important in their careers).

I'm pretty sure that I'm going to do graduate school and then go to work. – McGill international

It depends on the pressures that we face in the future. Of course many of us have opportunities in our own countries, but here it is a different kind – Dal international

After my bachelor's I would probably continue studying somewhere else. I figure I've got another 10 years before I get close to being a professional performer. It's all gained experience, a lot of work, a lot of studying. And a lot of money, but it makes me happy. It's my goal. - UBC- domestic

International students from UBC and McGill expressed having as *broad an experience* as possible that would prepare them for the job market and ultimately *personal and career interests in the field* influenced their educational objectives. The McGill international students also included items such as *travel*, and *career preparation* as their objectives while pursuing their education.

Great opportunity to travel around and study at the same time, and learn so much about other people and about yourself. If there's anything I take away from school, it will be that I learned much more about myself and other people. – McGill international

[UBC having an international reputation] opens up more options, in a sense because I speak English, and I get education based on English education, so that provides more changes, like I can work anywhere in the world, because now English is the most common language that everybody needs to learn, so it would be found anywhere. - UBC international

Again, *learning English* was included by most international students as one of their educational objectives. English was also important to domestic McGill students. An interesting note from this particular group at McGill was the reciprocal interest of international students wishing to *learn French*. This is a unique theme from the McGill focus groups due to the nature of the English-French opportunities that are not as present at other institutions participating in this study.

Domestic students attending UBC indicated that *networking* is one of their educational objectives, while both international and domestic students from UBC also saw *career preparation* as an important career objective.

I was offered admission to three universities in Ontario, as well, and basically when you go to a school for music you set up a whole bunch of contacts, and where you set up your contacts is where usually get your jobs in music, where people you know. So, I decided that because BC is a great place for me to live, and in my future, I would want to go to school where there are people that knew me and where I could set up contacts, because Vancouver is so musically alive it would be better for me. – UBC domestic

To be a successful businessman I think in the future I have to speak English, I need to deal with lots of international groups, other foreign corporations . . . I can understand how to communicate cross-culturally, and communicate, to speak different language, and try to talk to people from different cultural backgrounds. – UBC international

Some international and domestic students from York indicated that *graduating with good marks* and *quickly finishing their undergraduates* were important educational objectives; many of these students had the goal of pursuing graduate education.

I hope to do well, not just come and waste our money on the courses and not do well and have to do it again. We don't want to waste our years. We want to use them wisely and get it done as fast as possible so that we can be in a job as soon as possible. – York domestic

Social Integration

Social integration is a concern to first-year students. Three areas discussed with focus group participants were making friends, social life and loneliness. In terms of making friends, aside from York University (which is primarily a commuter institution) *residence* was seen as having a key role in building community, friendships and social groups. A barrier to making friends and learning that resonated with all students across the country was *large class size*.

And in the smaller classes, there's more student participation. There's one question...like one to one. If you're in a lecture, obviously you're just like another person, so you just have to sit there. – Dal domestic

Especially it's nice to live in residence, because I remember first couple of weeks they had so many activities planned. There was always something going on where you could go...so as long as you got out of your room and ventured out and introduced yourself to people then as soon as you started that it progressed really quickly, and pretty soon you're close with a bunch of people and you have lots of friends, even just acquaintances that you can say hi to if you pass through the

hallways. That is really nice. - UBC domestic

Many students commented that large class sizes hinders communication with other students due to the physical structure of the class along with the random setting in large classes. For instance someone you meet during your first week you may not see again in the next class so it is difficult to build friendships, let alone acquaintances in such a setting.

It's hard to meet [someone you meet previous class] because the class is so big. It's hard to meet anybody like, you talk even once you will not see them again. Like, you sit at different places all the time. Its hard to see the same people again. – UBC domestic

International students from Dalhousie commented that their *sponsor families* were a great *help* in helping their social integration. The *diversity of their campuses* was also appreciated by all students across Canada, this was particularly notable in the focus groups from UBC, Dalhousie and McGill. This particular appreciation is also evident in the *mixed ethnic diversity of students* from each of these institutions. Both domestic and international students at Dalhousie, UBC and McGill commented they felt that their friends were of mixed ethnic diversity. However, as the below quote illustrates, students are aware of different types of friends. Although, international students may be acquaintances-friends with domestic students at school, closer friendships are typically held with other students from their home country or ethnic background.

Well, I find that there is not exactly integration between Canadians and internationals. Most of the time I see Asians with Asians, Latinos with Latinos, and so on. Canadians are still friendly and kind, but not not like integration. Like, yeah, there is a difference between pals and friends. Like, you can hang out with, you can share a class together and talk to them, but it's not like you're friends with them. – UBC international

It was also commented on by international students at all institutions that their skills in English, particularly common-slang speech hindered them in developing friendships. Although these students knew of other ethnic students in relation to their classes, they noted feeling uncomfortable in social situations where less formal English was common or knowledge about Canadian culture spoken about frequently. Some international students from UBC, Dal, McGill and York further commented on the issues around *cultural differences* that hindered them making friendships with other students, particularly students not from their own cultural group.

It's easy to make friends with Canadians, but maybe I'm not good at English speaking, so I can't communicate very well with Canadians. So the best friends, the good friends are from the same country. I feel lonely, I will come and stay with [friends] much better. – Dal international

It's the culture that makes a difference, because sometimes when Canadians or locals tell me about some slang or the local stuff I don't understand, then I can hardly get involved in their conversation. – McGill international

The big problem is the language part. I feel I can't be interested. I haul myself around and I chance meet people. Very few are Canadians, so it's very difficult to read, not to study and just like this, your whole body and, like, your soul, come into this university and feels around the culture. Some things come to you. It's knowledge transfer. But now I just learn from the university. It's difficult to communicate. Maybe I'm a shy boy, but I can't communicate, combined going out to meet people- maybe it's my Chinese- York International

Orientation and classes were seen by domestic and international students at York University helping their social integration and developing friendships. However, as stated earlier, large class sizes hindered this socialization. International students at McGill and UBC also commented that their first-year orientation helped them make friends. Domestic students at Dalhousie were critical of the lack of alcohol at their first-year orientation events. Some felt that their orientations were too childish and not useful part of their first-experience.

I thought that frosh week was a good help in meeting people. I met a ton of kids during that, and I still hang out with them and stuff. So I thought that was good, easy way to get kids going. – McGill international

There was no liquor. There was one night out of seven. I saw people that looked like it was a boot camp! They were walking around the city with their heads lowered and they could not talk, and were not able to talk without permission. That's boot camp. Not frosh. – Dal domestic

This particular quote from an international student at UBC illustrates that although orientation can be a useful experience, other situations (e.g., housing, registration) can be stressful for students in their transition to university.

I guess I just...I took the international orientation, but I guess the problem was that everything was done on-line beforehand, before I came to UBC, and I guess I was just not too familiar with online procedures, and I had a problem with registering my courses. I had problems with finding a house to stay beforehand, because everything was on-line and there was no one to teach me or coach me, or demos. It was hard for me to understand what was going on. – UBC international

Students were also asked to discuss their social life as part of their social integration. It is important to remain cognizant that although students may not have listed all similar social activities, it can not be assumed that they did not participate in such activities. For example, going to movies was not mentioned by all groups, yet going to movies can be seen as a social activity that first-year university students may participate in. For many of the domestic students attending UBC, McGill, Dal and York activities included *going to clubs or downtown* and *participating in sports*. There was also a discussion by students from UBC, Dal and McGill around the *role of alcohol* as a social event (i.e., way to meet friends) at many of the First Year events, especially in residence. Some students “felt left out because of age” and therefore, felt uncomfortable at such events, while others felt that there were limited activities for under-aged students.

Oh, that's nice thing here in Halifax! If you're not 19 years old, you can't do anything. I'm 18, all my friends are 18, and Sunday nights and Saturday nights are just boring. Especially Sundays. No shopping in Nova Scotia on Sundays. I get bored some Saturdays too because I have this friend [we go shopping]. We spend 4-5 hours just to buy one pair of pants. – Dal international

In our residence, they have floor events every two weeks. But I dare not participate in because I don't know how to dance. I don't know how to drink. – McGill international

Well, I came here not knowing many people. I knew one person, but I was really tight with him. And on the first day, I met this guy over here. And four people who we have never met before walked down to [place], had a lot of beer, came back, and had a great night. And after than it was like friendship, that we just stuck. And that's pretty cool, considering I didn't know anyone here. Now I have a big group of friends. – Dal domestic

It's also harder if you are only 18. A lot of things are alcohol based, whether or not you choose to drink. Everything's clubs or bars or whatever. There's nothing really for people that are underage in Vancouver, not really too much on campus. – UBC domestic

International students at York also mentioned going to clubs downtown was part of their social life. As stated earlier, *residence* is seen as an important component of socialization as international students from Dalhousie further reiterate in this particular section.

There was mixed reviews about *International student services*. While international students at UBC had differing opinions on the services they received from International House, international students at Dal and York had positive comments with regard to the services they received.

The people here are very kind, you can say that. – Dal international

They have great programs. They have a language circle. We also have buddy systems, and numerous occasions, we have parties. And as an international student from the schools and universities that I know that they have less parties and less social events, but there are so many here it gives people the opportunity to come whenever they're free, and to stay back home whenever they're not. So I think it's a really good policy on cultures this university has. – UBC international

Well, I know stuff in International House is so great, but I just bother not going there because every time I got here, I saw mainly Hong Kong and Chinese people, so there is. . . I don't know, it's like a Chinese House rather than an International House. I don't know why. Every time I go there I feel like that. – UBC international

Other activities that were mentioned by both groups of York, Dal, and UBC students included watching movies, hanging out with friends and using the Internet. Some of the international students from McGill added that they also volunteer while domestic McGill students liked to go camping with their friends. A barrier to socialization mentioned by both international and domestic students at York was transportation. This is due to the geographic location of the campus. Some of the domestic students from McGill expressed an interest in participating in other types of social activities such as the arts or going to performances, however they commented that there was a limit of such activities and cost often hindered them.

Students were also asked whether they felt *lonely* since coming to their institutions. The response to this question varied at each institution and within each student group. All students from all institutions expressed their experience as “*transient*.” Residences played a big role in students not feeling lonely, as one student from McGill stated “in residence there’s always someone around. You’re never even sitting in the room by yourself.” Some domestic students felt that they were *too busy to be lonely*, while some domestic and international students said they used *MSN messenger* to talk to friends and family from home and that helped alleviate feelings of loneliness. Students from Dal, UBC, McGill and York, a mix of international and domestic students, said similar things about loneliness.

I think I was feeling lonely during the first two weeks here because as you said, friends are too many kinds. You have friends just saying hi and bye all over the year, and then some friends you will see when you talk to them to do things with them. You can start with a hi-bye friend and then they’ll ask “how do you do?” ...then you two will move onto things more in-depth. – UBC international

I thought I would be lonely, because I was really nervous to come all the way up here, but I’ve only been homesick once. – Dal domestic

I find there’s no time to miss home. I didn’t miss home until I was on the train in Toronto and I saw the CN Tower and I was like, “Yeah, I miss home.”- McGill domestic

First when I came here. . . the first day I came here, I feel a little bit lost and a little bit worried. . . want to go home. But in the last two months, I took every opportunity to participate in activities such as ESL, English as a Second Language, and English conversation group and such activities, and I have made lots of friends. And every Canadian festival, or on the weekend, I've got a lot of things to do. – Dal international

Domestic students from Dalhousie and York commented on that smoking actually helped them meet people; smoking was viewed as a social activity.

I think that in part it's like a social thing. "Oh, yeah. ...". I used to smoke. I recently quit and my friends were all like, "Let's go for a smoke." It is like attractive that you smoke. Every since I quit, I feel better about it, because I'm saving money. And I still met a lot of people who say, "It's not the only way to socialize and I think that a lot of people have to see that, because they're not only out there just smoking because other people are. – Dal domestic

Yeah, some people smoke socially, some people out of stress. I know a lot of people who just smoke out of stress...but some people just socially. Your friends smoke so you have no choice. - York domestic

This excerpt of conversation from the Dalhousie focus group were discussing how domestic students meet international students [6 participants smoked]

Smoking outside of residence...

Actually, that's probably how I met most of my friends here is having a smoke outside.

There's a good 20 of us. We have all the same nicotine cycle. We're all in the front there like every hour and a half.

That's seriously how I've made a lot of friends.

For some domestic students from UBC and McGill, parental loneliness was an issue. These students expressed that their parents were having a harder time adjusting to them being gone and were the ones feeling lonely.

I can't really miss home, because my mom has a bad tendency of stalking me on my cell phone. There's seven or eight messages from her on a good day, so it's more annoying than missing home. It's like "Stop calling, Mom. Get over it. I've left". – McGill domestic

For commuter students, feelings of loneliness were not that of missing family and friends but in that they felt like they were missing out on some of on-campus activities especially around meeting other people.

In terms of community experiences, most of the students across the country felt that they had positive experiences and no problems. This was particularly evident in statements made by international students from Dal, McGill, York and UBC. However, some students, particularly those Canadian or International students who were visible minorities claimed they had encountered racism in the community. One York student relayed a story where her landlord was blaming her for breaking the TV because the student used the cable to access the internet. Domestic students from Dalhousie mentioned dealing with the Halifax police; some students felt they were being "hassled" by the police. Some students felt they were entertainment for the police. One student commented it took time to adjust to "not being able to trust a cop". Another interesting discussion amongst Dalhousie's domestic students was the inter-provincial rivalry.

I find people here very friendly. Like, it's very easy...they're easy to talk to. I haven't yet found any individual problem, and people are very open. They're easy-going all the time. That's what I like. – UBC international

Definitely, like the Nova Scotians have kind of a grudge against people from Ontario. I guess we kind of invaded their homes and sometimes they'll say something like, "Oh, is that the teen guise? It's practically racist. They'll say something, they'll judge you because you are from Toronto or Ottawa or something. – Dal domestic

HEALTH ISSUES

Minor illnesses were experienced by all students across the country. Some students attributed their illnesses to unhealthy lifestyle which was related to the cost of food, bad habits, lack of exercise and busy schedules. Those living on campus noted that residence was a ground for illness as it “circles” around residence.

I got sick last week due to weather change. I'm playing soccer too, so we're still outside in shorts and everything. - Dal international

There's over 600 people in my res, and I've been noticing...like there's a flu going up and down the floor. If it starts in one side of the wing, I can predict how many days it will be on my side of the wing - McGill domestic

Several students noted that their health wavered due to changes in diet (particularly UBC international students) and adjusting to different meal schedules (i.e., residence meal plan) (e.g., Dal domestic students).

Because of the food and because of the sleep, my well-being wasn't doing that well, but then it gradually improved as I found different ways to substitute the food that I used to have at home. – UBC international

The hours in the dining room...doesn't fit my schedule. I don't eat at 6:00. I eat at 9:00. And then the Dal canteen isn't open and then...so I will go order pizza. And then at 12:00 I'm hungry. I'll go to the canteen. And then there's no vegetables. There's piles of grease. – Dal domestic

Some domestic students from Dal and McGill along with international students from UBC and York noted that they were actually healthier this year; this improvement was related to their new physical environment and increased physical activity such as walking.

Yeah, because when I was in my country they have all these diseases and all that, right, so you develop, your immune system is better. And when you come here, everything's clean and everything...- York international

THE COST OF UNIVERSITY STUDY

Participants in the focus group had indicated that they chose to attend a university in Canada due to the cost of tuition and living fees compared to the US. The theme that *tuition is a good deal* continued within the students' discussion around the cost of university. However, there was a difference in how international and domestic students viewed the "other" fees. Although some of the domestic students from UBC felt that these fees for extracurricular, student union and health as a good deal for the cost, many international students from UBC, McGill and York felt that these *fees were too high*. International students from UBC were very aware of the differential cost of university in that they had calculated how much an hour a course costs them compared to domestic students.

I think it's a lot of money but the money they tack onto it, the \$30 you end up [paying] if you pay it at all at one it's really a lot of money, but if you were just paying \$30 here and there it would seem like more, and you just don't have so many good programs. You have to pay like \$40 which doesn't seem like much but sooner or later it will count. – UBC domestic

Domestic students from York also felt that the fees were too high. For example, food costs were seen as too high. For some international and domestic students at UBC, Dal, McGill and York residence meal plans and campus food outlets were too costly. Both groups of students from the York focus groups felt that books and parking fees were too high as well. International students from UBC felt that the cost of residence was too much, while both international and domestic students from York felt that off-campus housing rates were high taking advantage of student-need for housing.

I think that the costs are just outrageous. The tuition costs is really, really bad. Where I come from students have power and you get costs down. Here, I don't know...I don't know just how much power the student body has. It just seems to me that that's high. – York domestic

Because I'm living in res and we have to take the meal plan, and it is so expensive..it's ridiculous. It's \$1,600 for a semester, and it's enough money to feed a whole family. I think. I don't even eat as much as I want to. I have to cut sometimes, if I want to take a big breakfast with orange juice, it will be \$5, so it's too expensive. I just don't take orange juice and buy my own. – McGill domestic

I think the fees that they are charging for residences are so high. Compared to outside the university, to living off-campus, it's cheaper but I don't know, I thought maybe they are not making a profit out of residences, but then I found out that living in a frat house is a cheaper price, so then I realized that these guys are still making money out of residences, and meal plans and whatever. So, I still think it's not a bad deal, but it's not the greatest. – UBC international

Some domestic students from UBC and Dal felt that paying for their own tuition was an act of independence and responsibility. Some domestic students from Dalhousie felt that they lacked budgeting skill to manage their finances while others worked part-time to help off-set the cost of university.

But at the same time, I'm learning about [budgeting]. Like frosh week in the first month was just...I dished [money] out like nothing. But now, I'm actually conserving it. That's why I'm here [at the focus group] to make bit and pieces of money every way I can. – Dal domestic

I'm at home, and that's definitely pays rent, and I go in to school. My parents are encouraging me to pay for me own education, make me more independent. All the other students live on res, and that's the whole independence themselves. And being able to pay for your own education, it's independence in a sense as well, because it is a whole lot of pressure, you have to pay for your courses.- UBC domestic

Scholarships were an issue for students attending UBC. Domestic students felt that scholarships were difficult to attain due to the fierce competition and limited availability of scholarships to first years. Others felt that the application process was time consuming and not

worth the effort. International students attending UBC also felt there was a lack of available money and it was difficult to get scholarship information. Some international students indicated that they were thinking of transferring to institutions that offered better scholarships.

I think that UBC should have more information about international student scholarships, because I've talked to the information desk in Brock Hall, they said, "We're not sure. There are those student loans, but you have to go check with International House." I mean, like, they just assume international students are rich. I think we should have more scholarships, and yeah, in that sense better scholarships. – UBC international

I applied to so many different scholarships... hours and hours of scholarship applications, and I ended up getting one scholarship BC Hydro, and it was \$1,000 a big help. And then the other one was Provincial exam you get \$1,000 if you do well, and that was also a huge help and bring up my average up. But other than that I don't think scholarships through UBC. You had to be really smart to get them, or you'd have to be poor to apply for bursary. It was kind of people that you can't really blame them because they can't give money to everyone, but it just kind of sucks. – UBC domestic

University Culture

All students across the country commented on the *appreciation* they had for the cultural diversity of their campuses. However, domestic students from McGill felt that their institution was not as diverse as it could be. It was acknowledged by these students that it depended on their *prior experience with cultural diversity*. For example, for some domestic McGill students moving from Toronto to attend McGill felt that McGill was not as culturally diverse as their home city.

It's not as racially diverse as I'm used to, because I came from a really diverse high school in Toronto, and it's kind of shocking to sit in a room and to notice when someone's of different ethnicity. But I feel like I'm surrounded by a lot of white people, and I'm not used to it at all. – McGill domestic.

While for another, coming from a rural community in Ontario felt that cultural diversity at McGill was “*huge, different people from all over the place, lots of international students.*”

Both international and domestic students at York university felt the cultural clubs present on campus had a positive influence on their understanding and awareness of cultural diversity. Domestic students from the UBC also commented of the influence of other cultural groups on their world view. For example, one student commented on the high concentration of Asian students at UBC was different from her experiences in Toronto, but she felt she was learning more about Asian culture as a result. These students also saw university as more accepting of difference than their high school experience.

I think there's diversity, you have something in common with more people, because there are more international students like you, so you have something in common with more people than you would in other universities- yeah, I like it. – York international

See, in my town, I can count black people, or different colored people, on my hand, so ...Two. So coming here, I've hung out in Toronto a lot and yeah, there's diversity, but coming here it was kind of...kind of reminded me of my old town, like, in a sense. But there's more diversity here than there is in my town. – Dal domestic

Both international and domestic students from UBC commented that there still tended to be socialization within group than mixing with other groups. This social group dynamic may be related to the previous discussion pertaining to English skill and comfort within one's own cultural group. Students from UBC also commented on the concentration of certain ethnic groups in certain programs. Domestic students from McGill also commented on the age diversity within their classrooms. Some commented on the number of older-than-average students in their first year classes. Others noted the feelings of community and social activities occurring within their faculty and not necessarily as part of the larger university community.

SUMMARY OF FIRST TERM FOCUS GROUPS

Overall, the experiences of first year students were relatively seen as positive while overcoming the challenges of adjustment to their new environment, physically, socially, culturally and academically. Residence life has a overwhelming impact on the student experience. Students valued residence for the social activity and supportive environment along with the opportunity to meet a diversity of students. Some students felt that residence, however, distracted them from their academics due to the social life but domestic students also articulated that this was part of their first-year experience. Academic problems seemed to be focused around the transition from a high school curriculum and academic year to that of a university time table and course work regime. For example, time management was an issue for many of the domestic students and international students.

A prevalent issue for international students was their ability to speak and write English. This had an impact on students' academic experiences (e.g., adjusting to different teaching and learning environments, writing essays) and more importantly, their social lives (e.g., confidence to establish friendships outside of their own cultural groups). The best academic experiences by both groups were related to the social aspects of being at university, particularly the role of residence. Small class size was also a valued experience by both students for learning and meeting fellow students. Professors and/or TAs who were supportive and took the time to acknowledge students by name was also a valued experience. Students also seemed to value the independence of being a university student although adjusting to doing one's own laundry, cooking or dealing with transportation to get back and forth to campus were stressors for students.

SECOND TERM FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Generally, the second term focus groups reported that their experiences were less stressful as most of the students had settled into the routine of university and were more acclimatized to the university culture. However, students were still facing many challenges seven months into their first-year, particularly academically and socially, as some of the first-term themes were still prevalent in second term.

MOST AND LEAST ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCES

There was quite a range of responses in what students identified as an enjoyable/positive or least enjoyable/negative experiences. Overall, most of the domestic and international students felt their *second semester was easier than their first*. This was attributed to having adjusted to the transition from high school to university, feeling more comfortable with their environment and being more aware of academic expectations.

For this term I am adjusted to university life. For assignments I prepare [two weeks before they are due] and my assignments I finish them before the deadline. If I need help, I go to my TA or my professor and that's what helps. For exams, I prepare a week or two, I don't leave it for the last day.- UBC international

However, some of the domestic students from McGill felt that the second term was in fact more difficult for them, there was more academic work and more general demands on their time (e.g., looking for an apartment, working part-time).

Getting work done is very difficult and it has not improved since the beginning of the year. I thought it would calm down after Christmas break but it didn't. I find it really hard just to sit down and work. Just having to study. – McGill domestic

All students from UBC and Dalhousie, along with international McGill students acknowledged that their *course work* was an enjoyable experience, indicating that some of their courses were better than their first-term courses. This also goes in hand with domestic UBC students and international students from McGill and Dalhousie recognizing that *good professors* were also an enjoyable part of their second term which is linked to students being more interested in and valuing certain courses. Students were also able to articulate what makes a class and/or professor not enjoyable. This issue will be further explored in the Classroom experiences section.

Well, some of the course work to be honest was my most enjoyable experience.. Some of it... not all of it but some of it. - Dalhousie domestic

I think one of the things that I find enjoyable is actually talking to the professors. We are in a big class and the actual interaction with the project is not very much. Usually you can go and talk to them after class or go to their office during office hours and ask questions. One of the reasons why I go to their office hours is that I do ask a lot of questions, sometimes I think too much, so I go to the profs, sometimes they say “how come you are coming every week”. They are really helpful, they try to explain to you in a way that they think is the best for you. – McGill international

Well, I haven't been very sociable... but I think my greatest experience here has been I think the first classes I went to because they fulfilled the expectations I have of education here. I was really passionate about that...the classes here. – Dalhousie international

For the most enjoyable experiences, regardless of location, most students still ranked *living in residence* as their most favorable experience. The social opportunities and sense of friendships developed within residence was valued by most students. It is important to also acknowledge that a few students felt that residence was not a positive experience due to not being a conducive place to study and/or an excluding space when they didn't “fit-in” to the social norms of the residences.

The most enjoyable experience I have to say is, I live in res and I get involved with the Council and I am on the inter-residence council. I like it because it was a way to get to meet all these wonderful people and obviously have the same interests and interested in the same ideas, you get to keep up to date with what's happening in University and in Montréal and the community in general which is nice because you feel you know what's going on and take advantage of great things that are offered, it's a great way to keeping informed. And it gives me a change to deal with things that I never had to deal with before, in a sense grown up things, you have to deal with, speak with bureaucracy and forms, organizing events and talking to contacts. So it's a way of preparing for, I guess different aspects of, soon, to be, more and more involved in my life. - McGill international

Living on res can be like living in a dark hole. As it sounds really formal, but it's like it is so hard even to get out of bed, I don't have energy to do things and I am not motivated. I don't know why, I was not like that before. I know a lot of people saying that every time I asked some "how are you doing?" They would say "tired". Everyday "I am tired, I am tired, I am tired". - UBC domestic

I think the experience is really good. You get more changes to know more people and you make friends. But I don't think we have enough communication with Canadians because usually on my flow, lots of them there are Canadians, but I don't get many chances to really know them, but just like hi-bye friends. - UBC international

Some of the domestic and international students from Dalhousie shared that the *social aspects* of university (e.g., parties, skiing) were positive experiences for them. Interestingly domestic students from UBC and Dalhousie noted that the *physical location* of their respective institutions along with *the weather* were enjoyable parts of their experiences. As we saw in the first term focus groups, location of the institution was an influencing factor on where students decided to study. It should be noted that the Dalhousie students' comments on the weather were made in reference to the number of days off they got due to the weather in Halifax.

The most enjoyable experience that seemed to be part of the international students discussion regardless of their institution was the *opportunity to interact with their domestic classmates* whether socially or academically. Domestic students from UBC also acknowledged that meeting international students was one of their most enjoyable experiences. Some of the

international students from York University indicated that they had also adjusted to the *food in Canada*. They shared they now were aware of more choices knowing more about the food and shopping options. These students also reported they were eating less junk as a result.

International students from UBC, York and Dalhousie commented that *Frosh Week events* were still an important experience to them. Frosh week was especially memorable for the friendships students established and still had seven months later.

My greatest experiences here I think comes from the orientation program, orientation programs held by my programs, I make a lot of friends from those meetings and barbeque party- It's a lot of fun. - Dalhousie international

Many of the least enjoyable experiences shared by students were related to *academic challenges* so it will be discussed in more detail in that section. The fact their *grades* had stayed the same or were better than their first term was important to international students from UBC, McGill and Dalhousie. A synopsis of the least enjoyable experiences related to students' academics would include writing papers, balancing the workload, negative interactions with professors/TAs, and developing study habits. For some international students although they acknowledged that their English had improved since first coming to university it was still a challenge for them. Other non-academic challenges or non-enjoyable experiences centered around the adjustment to university life.

There were several focus group participants at each institution who commuted back and forth to university; it seemed that commuters were not just domestic students but also international students. Adjusting to living off campus according to domestic students from UBC and Dalhousie along with international and domestic students from York included adapting to local transportation systems and the time it took to get back and forth to campus. For some UBC students, living off-campus was a resource issue; it was more convenient to stay with family

and/or rent was less expensive further away from campus. Domestic students from Dalhousie University also commented on the expensive nature of rent and tuition.

I home stay with my aunt. They are nice people, but most of my friends live on campus and it is very difficult and it is soon night to come to Richmond. I usually don't participate in partying and now I try, so I come, This term, I come to these gatherings more often than before because I have a car. - UBC international

Adjusting to living off-campus and I never did the residence things. So the social thing is completely different. - Dal domestic

Socializing was another non-academic challenge. For those Dalhousie, York and UBC students who commuted meeting people outside of class time or socializing after hours was difficult due to their reliance on transportation to get home whether personal or public. International students from Dalhousie and York university also expressed that making friends was a challenge due to the cultural differences and their self-perceived ability to socially converse in English. For some international York and Dalhousie students, along with domestic Dal participants who were living off-campus but not with their parents felt that cooking along with housework was a challenge.

I think it's like the culture? The culture class, they call it? Like because we don't know how the people here act to different situations...you know it can be difficult just to understand people. - Dal international

Oh man, I hate laundry. . . Basically cleaning up your room and this stuff. Because you have a lot of friends coming over, and when they're about to leave, when they leave, they leave a lot of mess, so you tend to feel lazy cleaning it up so you wait till the next day. Then after you just keep on waiting and it comes up to another week and all this study. – York international

International and domestic students from York and UBC also felt that food was expensive, the quality of the food in residence was poor, and healthy eating with residence food was a challenge.

Basically I feel we're getting ripped off for food. Especially in my res. Compared to other people's res where they give you a plateful of satisfaction. But in our res, basically people get ripped off, because say you want to order something like chicken or something like that, they give you so much fries on a plate, and they give you a tiny piece of chicken. . . and that's about 5.99 plus tax. It comes out to be 6.27 or something like that. York international

Those students who were living at home with their parents were expected to “pitch-in” in helping with housework and more importantly, with sibling care (e.g., homework help). Students living with their parents commented that their parents understood if they didn't help out due to school work.

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Although many students found that second term was easier than their first term, they were still dealing with many challenges that existed during their first term. A theme prevalent in the discussions regardless of the institution was issues around *time management, motivation and procrastination*. In alignment with this theme a few of the domestic students from Dalhousie and UBC felt that just attending classes was a struggle and challenge for them.

I have had just problems with getting everything in on the deadline. Coping with work from one class and another class and then all the deadlines are at the same month...that's a problem. – Dal international

Definitely hardest academic problem is knowing that I had to do something and that you have a midterm. Not going out and just studying hard, it was very hard for me to commit myself, there are so many distractions. – UBC domestic

Another cross-Canada theme that was seen as a challenge was the *writing of papers*, doing essays and generally adjusting to the academic workload. Writing papers with limited English proficiency was a prevalent issue with the international students from UBC, McGill and Dalhousie. Academic writing was also an issue for some domestic students from York and UBC.

But when it comes to writing, we have to write complete essays, we just cannot write in the way that foreigner writes. So, English is not my first language, right? You have people saying, "You have to improve your English in this way." I am trying to get used to it. It's very hard to pretend to be a Westerner.
– UBC international

Um, I think, even though I got this grade and also...I noticed my weakness is in paper writing. Yes, it's really hard and I felt somewhat unhappy to...enough to get A- and not A. – Dal international

I think procrastination is a big thing. I think essay writing for me. – York domestic

I think it's too many assignments. There's assignments every week and many days a week and we don't get time to study to read a book because we just have to do the assignments. - Dal International

The third theme common to all students across the country was the recognition of the *heavier work load and harder tests* in second term. Some students acknowledged that the content wasn't necessarily harder but adjusting to a *shorter learning period* was the challenge. Both international and domestic UBC students attributed this as an adjustment issue to the new expectations of university versus high school. A few of the domestic students from York university felt that their lack of high school science courses was a detriment since they now had to take university science courses for their degree requirements. Science markers were seen by these students as harder markers. Some of the international students from York, UBC and McGill shared that they were using a tutor to help them through tough courses. Some domestic students from McGill and York also commented on the fact that their courses while *getting more interesting* were also not getting any easier with the *increase in workload*. International students at UBC and McGill acknowledged that the standards in university were different from high school. Other international UBC students and some domestic York students found their courses were too similar and repetitive from high school.

The most difficult thing for me was adjusting from high school to university. I live in the Lower mainland, so transportation, living here is must of the difference, so jus how high school is so much easier for me, coming here you'll be more independent, you have to learn how to study on your own instead of someone telling you what to do. There are pluses for that and it's very easy to follow high, and it's the hardest part. – UBC domestic

I found that the tests, they were really really heavy. Like my Micro and Macro exams, it was two tests of 25% each, and the final tests are final. So I did bad on three tests, so I did bad on the whole things. I find that there were tests that were really heavy..prey much. York- international

I think one of the difficulties would be McGill's schedule is too tight... I found the materials here at McGill not as complicated as A level [in Hong Kong] but it is because McGill has like, really they squish all the materials together in three months which made me think oh gosh, out of breath. A lot but not in depth, materials are not as difficult as A level but because they chunk it in three months it's harder - McGill International

Some of the level is way up here, some the level is way down so you find all of the courses have huge workloads yet some of them you still have to do the reading even though the subject matter's really easy whereas other's you have to struggle to just keep up, do you know what I mean? – Dal domestic

Domestic students attending York University expressed that some of their courses were actually *too general and repetitive from high school*. This group of students also was disappointed that their courses *lacked hands-on experience* or were perceived as not relevant to their major. One York domestic student states “the first year is all electives, so it's really difficult. You're taking sciences and whatever. They are totally irrelevant to your major.” Some of the domestic students from McGill university shared they felt *stress* about their course work. A few of the UBC domestic students commented that a source of frustration in second term was the *lack of available courses* in terms of selection and seat-availability.

I wasn't sure last year. I applied for social work and I got accepted. I came here instead and now I really regret it. But I'm going to apply for college this year. I want social work, like social issues, like direct hands-on. I work with a case every day. In university it's like research and readings. It's different— York domestic

I think it's quite unfair sometimes because the tuition fee is going up and I think sometimes that I am not getting things that I want to and I have to take other courses to substitute that. It's really hard. – UBC domestic

The *challenges of studying in residence* were felt by both international and domestic students from UBC and York. Some international students from York University who were living in over-crowded off-campus accommodations also felt that studying was a challenge.

For me studying in res, I am finding very hard to do. I like to walk around and talk to everybody and just getting quiet time, it's a challenge. – UBC domestic

Residence can be distracting, because you've got all sorts of distractions. First of all, it's your computer and afterwards it's just CD systems, and then afterwards it's the neighbors around you and roommates. So maybe you have to drag yourself to library or something like that, and due to the cold, some people just don't even bother going to the library, to go to any other rooms. So they just. . . they had to, like, push themselves. I personally have to push myself sometimes. – York international

UBC, McGill and Dalhousie domestic students used the explanation of “*being first-year*” for not doing as well as they had hoped. Some other domestic students simply explained they knew that being a university student was going to be *harder than high school* so they lowered their expectations of performance.

I think I got pretty well. I got what I deserve. I came to university with the whole new standard of thinking about grades, I was not expecting to get As, I tried harder, but I am happy with how I did. I think what I did was average. – UBC domestic

You have to think to yourself, it is really hard, you know, so lowering your expectation actually makes you feel better. When you actually get a good mark, it's different. – UBC domestic

Below average for my own standards but average with other students. I find that the grades are lower but I expected them to fall from high school. – McGill domestic

Umm, pretty terrible...I don't know, I got like 50s 60s. I mean I'm used to like 80s 90s in high school, and my brain kind of shrunk...I'm just 19...Honestly.. kind of going through the transition from being underage. - Dal- domestic

However, international students seemed to have a different perspective on their academic performance. International students from UBC, McGill and Dalhousie indicated that they were *doing above average* compared to their peers, but getting marks that were *lower than their self-expectations*. Other international students from UBC also used being first year as justification for their lower than expected performance, although they were still doing relatively well compared to their domestic classmates.

Above average...I mean when I check my grades I have the opportunity to look at the other grades so I can see pretty much. – McGill international

My marks are higher than I expected. After I got my marks I was very happy with my marks, but still I think I can improve, but the most important is English. If I can improve my English, the mark will be different. English is the only problem for me. But I am happy with my marks. - UBC international

I'd say that I was average compared with others at McGill but below average where I'd like to be standards. It is one hard adjustment I think for anyone coming from a different school. The grading system is that it's not easy to get an A at McGill and it's very difficult. And that can be very hard for people to grasp when they first come here because they are used to getting As and it's possible just not done often, and it's not necessary to poor to get a B+ but for other people it means different things and so that's a hard adjustment to make. – McGill international

Um, well, I was surprised with my grades because I think it was gonna be..I had two A- and two B+, so I thought that was [good], I think it was going to be harder to get those grades, but I didn't expect them. I thought I was going to do worse. – Dal international

For international students across the country English was still a challenge. Although some students felt their English had improved over the last 7 months, a lack of mastery of English was still difficult for them regardless of the institution they attended. Some domestic students, whose first language was not English who were attending York University also expressed a lack of English skills was a challenge for them. In the quote below, the complexity of issues that first-year students must deal with is evident. While adjusting to academic life as university students, first-year students must also adjust to their social settings, negotiate their role within the family and deal with countless other stressors which impact how they do in their first-year.

I guess understanding the readings. English isn't my first language and it's kind of hard understanding what the essay's trying to tell you sometimes. And again, procrastination. I find meeting deadlines a challenge. But as before, I didn't have that problem, I don't know if its because the workload is heavier or if the course is actually getting harder, or if it's because of my family problems. Nonetheless, I find it pretty challenging now. – York domestic

Language is a challenge, although I have English in school and although it's the same language, different people have different accents and for one of my classes the prof was really hard to understand in the first month. I approached him and told him that I could not follow him, he suggested NTC (a service that takes notes for you and charges \$30 a semester) but paying for notes did not work because people take notes differently. – McGill international

A source of frustration for UBC international students was the LPI, a language proficiency exam that all international students whose first language is not English must take and pass to proceed through university.

I just want to say a few words about LPI. I am in Arts faculty and I have to write an essay every course and then I take one per year course and the mark would be quite harsh for just a first-year student. And then for an essay I got 80% in a third year course . . . and I have failed the LPI four or five times. Its ironic right? International UBC student

Students were unanimous in their feeling that this exam did not test English ability and the fact that some students had taken the test several times but still were getting 80% in their English courses or others who had initially passed the test and upon retaking the test failed was put forward as evidence that the LPI should be discontinued. From the student perspectives, the LPI was not an adequate predictor of their ability to perform well in written English.

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

Domestic and international students from all institutions had *positive comments* about their courses generally. However many students also felt that the first-year classes were *too large*. This was evident in the discussions by domestic UBC and Dalhousie students along with International students from York. Domestic McGill and UBC students further expressed that such class room environments made it difficult to learn as there were limited or no opportunities for interaction with the professor or other students. Domestic UBC and York students who did have small classes valued these classes for the interaction they had, they also reiterated that larger classes do not have such opportunities for such engagement.

Well, I like my Japanese course most, because not many people in the program. . . I'm in a small class. So, I know we have one lecture and the two tutorials a week, so we can meet people very frequently. We get to know each other pretty well, and we have presentations, four times, and also we have language learning. We have to practice in that class, so we have lots of fun. – York international

For me I have all kind of sizes of classes because there are nursing required classes which are only 50 of us anyway. . . I have had smaller classes like English with only 20 something people, and I had 200 people in lectures and everything. I think the variety is good, for some courses it is better to have large class and some it is better to have smaller classes. For me I rather enjoy the smaller ones because you are able to ask more questions, more talk and just discuss and don't feel intimidated to ask in front of everybody. Other than that, it really depends on a course. – UBC domestic

I like my French class, it's the small and you get to know people in class because it's a first year course. But some of my other classes, specially last term I took a lot of development classes and I realized that I don't like many of the people in development because of the questions they ask, they just have to talk, they are hippies, they have to talk about business, this is a big class 300 students and there is one person that just wants to argue against free trade and wants everyone to know about it. – McGill domestic

Many international students also commented on the differences in the classroom setting, particularly the relationship between students and professors where students actively engaged in debates and even questioned professors. This Westernized classroom challenged some students notion of the professor-student relationship, where in their home country students did not question such authority. The following quote from the Dalhousie international student illustrates how many international students feel that their success is dependent upon their own performance and not the professors. They saw academic performance as their responsibility and failure to do so was not the fault of the institution, instructors or courses.

Whenever I get much workload, I think that I am the master and I am expected to work to get those grades, to get things done, to improve my time management skills, so I'm not sorry about. . . I'm not bothered about that. I think I'm prepared to get changed. – Dal international

The international students from UBC, York and McGill also discussed the use of technology within the classroom such as WebCT, Power Point. These students expressed interest in having such technology being used in the classroom.

I rarely use [the internet] for school stuff. Just basically for renewing books. One of my professors- he uses this thing called WebCT, and you have to use everything online. It's easy to use, but I guess it's like any other internet services. - York domestic

I use WebCT a lot because I have chemistry lab. For like three labs in chemistry I always go online to techniques and teach you how to do stuff, equipment before you enter the lab. So it's pretty helpful because it is kind of know what you have to do in the lab. All you have to do is to find and go. It's pretty helpful. - UBC international

Something I find helpful is that some profs give the course notes, or class notes or PowerPoint slides you're able to access them, and what I like to do sometimes is to download them and take them to class so I have the notes before so I don't have to copy down what's on the board and can just pay attention to what they're saying and make notes. So it lets me focus more, sometimes there's a lot of information to write down, so instead of writing down everything letter by letter it's easier to focus on what they're saying. - McGill international

However, some students from UBC felt that the technology was more of a hindrance than helpful in their learning. They saw WebCT as being more time consuming. For those who were not technology literate or had limited access to computers, the use of WebCT was intimidating and did not facilitate their learning.

CONTACT WITH FACULTY

All students from across the country had the general comment that professors and teaching assistants (TAs) were understanding and helpful. Students from UBC shared that professors who knew their name and replied to their e-mail quickly was valued. One student shared that when a professor knows your name it is easier to talk to them.

Getting to know your TA, I find it really very good, to ask questions than e-mail them. They know that you are engaged and interested and then they learn your name by contacting them. And my TA in English was really awesome. Easy to talk to. - UBC domestic

I've also found that TAs and professors seem to be quite lenient, in the sense that they understand that you're first year it's a big adjustment. Whenever I've had an issue with an essay or whatever, I felt very comfortable going up to my TAs or professors just because they make you feel comfortable. It was fine. - York domestic

E-mail and office hours were also valued by students across all institutions. However, some domestic and international students from several of the universities (e.g., Dalhousie, York, and UBC) shared that they had not taken advantage of their professor's office hours or e-mail. E-mail in particular was seen as more convenient by international students from Dalhousie, McGill, UBC, and York since many of them expressed a hesitation to ask questions directly. Some students felt that office hours needed to be more flexible to student hours and be held beyond 9am-5pm.

With the subjects were I get good grades I have more contact with the teacher cause I'm more interested. And then I go to the office hours and I don't feel intimidated by the person. I feel like I can ask everything. I also have mail contact with some teachers but that's more in the bigger classes...yeah...where it's harder...where after class it's like a line-up to get to talk to the teacher. It's easier just to send them mail...when you are working about them. - Dal international

Only my humanities professor, and when I have computers, I used it to talk to them with that, because I have questions. But that's pretty much it. - York international

Contact with faculty was *varied* amongst international students from UBC, Dalhousie, McGill and York. International students from UBC, York and McGill further expressed that having confidence to ask their professors/TAs questions was also a challenge, while Dalhousie students felt at ease. *Cultural differences* in student-professor relationships can be difficult for international students to adjust to when the domestic classroom and professor-student interaction is markedly different from their home contexts.

For me, just because the school is so big, I am adjusting, I am a little overwhelmed. So to approach the TA during the lecture right away, I have to gain confidence to get to know things little more, then I could go and ask them. - UBC international

I would give them a 9/10 too because it's very open and you can talk with the teachers very [easily], with the professors without feeling intimidated at all. They're very open always for suggestions, comments, ideas, other points of view... You can disagree with them and they help you a lot when you go during office hours. – Dal international

My interaction with profs has been limited because I guess I am still timid, it's hard it is, you see them, especially when they are in front of a large classroom, you see them as sort of an authority figure and kind of like they are a public figure in some respects and you see them on campus and you recognize them but they don't recognize you, so it's kind of an intimidation factor in some sense and I understand every time I have approached them they are approachable but then you have sort of, I don't know I get nervous, you know I want to make a good impression I don't want to ask a silly questions, so it's a bit of intimidation, but I think I have a hierarchy when it comes to questions. It is first a friend who is in the class, then a complete stranger who is in the class and then the prof as the last resort. – McGill international

A few international students from UBC and York, along with some of the domestic UBC students shared that they felt professors were “*rude*” to them when students went to the professor’s office hours. The UBC international student below refers to an earlier experience where she and a friend were treated rudely by the professor causing her to choose e-mail over face-to-face contact with professors.

I usually ask my friend to go with me, I am a little bit scared, and so I am a little bit uncomfortable to talk in person. Other than that, I am not definitely scared to e-mail them at all. - UBC international

Good professors according to students made all the difference. Some professors were seen by international and domestic students from UBC and York as having *too high expectations* of first-year students. Other professors were seen as *too busy* and relying too much on TAs or other students in the class. The fact that some of the TAs were perceived to be inexperienced was questioned by some of the domestic students from McGill and both groups of students from York university.

Domestic UBC students felt lectures that were straight from the text book were “boring”, while international McGill students also commented that professors who do not use visual aids were also boring and perceived to be obsolete. Such teaching style according to these students made it difficult to learn.

I have this class, the prof is very charismatic, he relates well to the class, it is a class of 620 students and it's always packed and it is the only class I have that is online and I mean it's an option, you can not go to class and still be able to listen to the lecture online and some people do that. But many people go to the class because it is enjoyable learning and so it's a useful learning tool, and I understand why profs won't use it because otherwise students won't come to lectures and just to it at home and I understand but it's also a useful tool specially with big classes.- McGill- international

I really like WebCT also. It's helpful for profs to put their overheads on WebCT. Also the discussions were we can post questions and other students will answer them that are really good. Also online lectures are very helpful to just listen to it. – McGill domestic

Domestic UBC students did appreciate having faculty lectures as *handouts* as a benefit to their learning in the classroom. *WebCT* was favorably viewed by those students who had experience with it. The flexibility and accessibility of class lectures online was appreciated. Students did acknowledge that the use of *WebCT* can discourage attendance in class but as the student from McGill states below- it is up to the professor to make class interesting regardless if they use *WebCT* or not.

CONTACT WITH STAFF AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Students were asked about their contact with various staff people around their department and within the university (e.g., academic advisors, student support services). There were *mixed reviews* across all groups and all institutions. For example, some international and domestic

students felt that the staff they had interacted with were a *great help*, along with being supportive of their needs and concerns.

I would say pretty excellent. . . that I have used before. Because when I had to go in the summer, there was this lady that I need to settle my tuition with her, so, because I had to correspond with her, because it was why I transferred and everything. So it was always pretty quick. Every time I called her, she would call back real quickly. Even if I went to her office, I would go ahead of time and all that. So that was pretty good. – York international

I actually went to see an advisor and after first meeting, she knew me afterwards and then after that, I just drop in and she would be able to talk. . . It's really good and it's really good talking to her. It's kind of sense of feeling that someone recognize you and actually care for you . . . The secretaries are really helpful too with information when she is not there. – UBC domestic

What I find is that there is a lot [of bouncing around], I was bounced around a lot when I had to purchase these display boards for my council committee that I am working on. . . So it was hard with the administration especially if it is your first time because you don't know where to begin. And once you take the initial path it's hard to follow up on it as you get bounced around a lot. McGill-international

Others felt that the staff was *not supportive* or helpful. Domestic students from McGill indicated that they haven't used such services or interacted with staff very much and most of the domestic Dalhousie students hadn't personally used the services but shared anecdotal stories about their friends' experiences.

I'm having problems and my professor suggested that I go talk to counsel or guidance or something. I didn't find them helpful at all. It's like the matrix, I ask them a question and they reword it and ask the same questions back. They're not helping me at all. You know what I'm trying to say? – York domestic

I used to chat with a lot of advisors from different faculties very often because I was concerned about choosing my courses. I can chat very often; I can chat by e-mail, by phone and making an appointment. I think those advisors, especially one, she don't want to answer my questions. She don't like to make an appointment with me, she wants to speak with me only on the phone. I cannot make an appointment with you, I can only e-mail you. I don't like it. Other advisors are very helpful. – UBC international

I went to talk to the Bio lab instructor. It was not an exam, she was very nice. – McGill domestic

I'm thinking one thing I don't find that good is the advising, when we start when we came to get advice for signing up for classes and such, there was second year students giving advice and helping to sign up for classes. And we were lucky because we had a second year given to us, but some others didn't seem that, so I don't know. I think it would have been better to have more educated, or more experienced people. - Dal international

In terms of student support services students had varied interaction and use of these services. For example, many of the respondents (e.g., domestic UBC, international McGill, domestic-international York, and domestic-international Dalhousie) although they had expressed that they were having trouble writing papers and essays had not in fact gone to their institutions *Writing Center* for assistance. Some students shared that there was too long of a wait and therefore turned to their friends for assistance. Those students who did use the *Writing Center* services found that they were helpful.

I went to the Writing Centre. I thought it was really good, they were great. If you tell them, they go over your essay and they might tell you about structure, introduction and its free. - UBC international

I think, the international student services were very helpful for me. Because when I come here I not only because of the orientation course, International party night and everything that they organize, but also because the international service and academic team. – Dal international

The following excerpt from the York international transcripts highlights some of the challenges in using the *Writing Center* services.

It's usually too late at night, [you must book] maybe two or three days before. If you book a week before, you'll definitely get it, but two days before you don't get it. – York international

Orientation or Frosh Week was positively viewed by most students, international and domestic, from Dalhousie and York. *International student services* were also favored by international students from UBC and Dalhousie. There were *mixed reviews of the general services* provided at McGill from international students. Similar mixed reviews were given by domestic and international students attending UBC. For example, the lack of financial aid and support for international students was a source of frustration and concern from international students from UBC. Some of the domestic students from York University expressed a concern regarding *student workshops*. These students spoke of the need to have these workshops at more convenient times for students; they indicated that these workshops would have been useful but they couldn't attend due to class scheduling conflicts. Workshops provided to UBC students were valued by both international and domestic students.

I never went [to the workshop on procrastination]. They're in strange times. Usually I have a class during them or they'll be two hours long and you only have an hour break. You can't walk out. – York domestic

I went to workshops. Some of them were really helpful. Depends when I went to, one night I went to a workshop "how can I improve my grades". That was really helpful because we learned basically note taking skills they make suggestions how to make journals and stuff. For the time management I guess it was really good. Some of them were not really useful, but some of them were very useful. – UBC international

International students at McGill and Dalhousie who had used the *student health clinics* indicated that the lines and wait times were extremely long. Domestic students attending UBC felt that dealing with a "real person" was helpful aspect of student service provision.

And I find that the McGill health center is always packed, it's a disincentive to actually go there, they are understaffed and I understand that its got a lot of students and it's relatively free compared to anything else, but it's just if you hurt yourself and if you want to go or not and a friend convinces you to go, it's free, there is a giant line and you can't wait and you just go on with your life and that could be a bad or good thing cause you may not want to aggravate their overloaded clinic or bad cause you really need attention. So if McGill is going to provide a service it should provide it to all students that include advising as well, I know that there is a financial aspect of the university. – McGill international

In terms of *online services*, there were mostly positive views about the accessibility of online services such as the library, registration and the student-service websites from domestic and international students from Dalhousie, McGill and UBC along with domestic students from York.

I think for me, the on-line, the information is up there, it's really not good for me to access it because I am really not a computer person at all, it's really hard. I feel like going to someone and sit beside me and help me go through web pages, how to get to the page that has only the information I want. It's very frustrating. – UBC international

I think that WebCT is good but I think the Dalhousie homepage is really messy. – Dal international

For one of my course, he doesn't put notes on line, so it's very difficult because it's so much. Usually I copy only half of that because he goes really fast. . . , it was very hard to keep up. At the end of the course he just asked if it would be better to just print it out the booklet and sell to everybody. That was a lot better. You not wasting you time trying to figure out computer stuff. It was right there.- UBC domestic

Ease of use of online services and resources is dependent upon student's level of comfort with computers. Some students from UBC felt that when WebCT was used as a supplementary tool it was not effective and took up too much time. This was especially true if the student didn't have easy access to a computer or the required skills. It is also important for online services to be user-friendly and logically organized for ease of use, for example, some international students from Dalhousie found the Dalhousie website a little unorganized.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Students expressed a wide variety of social activities that they engaged in outside of their academics. Many of these events are probably part of all students' lives; however, this report is simply highlighting activities that students choose to share during the focus groups.

Residence was still seen as a core social component for those international and domestic students living on-campus at McGill and UBC. Some students felt that this was a positive aspect of their university experiences. Some other students felt that while they valued the social aspect of residences they felt it could be a little too much and distracting from their studies.

I just find it a place to stay and sleep and eat. I usually study at the library and I don't participate in the partying going on. Normally Friday nights they say "oh I'll just go and party" but I'm not that type. I prefer to study, I just shut my door because I have so much to do for my family business and I am doing a Radio host for a Montréal station. So I have so much to do and I'm not the party type. Honestly, I prefer the coffee shops more than clubs. So residence is pretty much a place, I do interact with my neighbors they are very nice but not in a way to say let's go party. - McGill-international

It's great. There are so many people, every faculty and everyone is very diverse. We live together and you we've got to know people very well, and diversity is really good. It's a big distraction sometimes, but it's really good network of people to have. UBC-domestic

I'm starting to get tired of it, there's only so much socialization you can do before you start to get exhausted and it's just constant 24/7, you can't close your room door, people just don't respect the fact that you want to study. It was really fun, I needed this one year but I would not be able to do it for another year. - McGill domestic

Commuter students, regardless if they were international or domestic also had difficulty in making friends. Many students, especially those from UBC and York felt that they were “*out-of-the-loop*” with on-campus social activities, especially if their friends lived on campus. Those students living on-campus found that it was easier to maintain friendships if they lived on-

campus, one international student from York felt that it was difficult to socialize with friends who had to commute due to transportation needs and length of time required to travel to different areas where they might live.

I live in an apartment. I live by myself. It's a real experience to be on your own and cook for yourself. I have a lot of friends living on campus and it's really good because I kind of experience a day on a day on campus and stay overnight with them. Now, I am kind of regretting not often to go on res because like as I stated before because you got the resources and right there you have more socialization with other people and it's kind of I am missing out on. Living on my own and kind of being away from everything. – UBC domestic

I stay with my aunt. They are nice people but most of my friends live on campus and it is very difficult and it is [a long commute] to Richmond. I usually don't participate in partying. – UBC international

Meeting people? It is good in a way, but then afterwards, it's... it always has the side of things in the way that other friends who live outside campus, they have to go on the subway or something like that, to meet them, or to chill with them, you can't meet again. And they're going somewhere else like, say, downtown, and they're coming back late at night. You try and take a bus, which... the bus doesn't operate at the same time. So it's usually most of the time you go around with your friends inside res or inside York University that you're familiar with. But you have a variety of different people. You have a mixed bag.- York International

Volunteering whether on-campus or off-campus was an activity in which many students from each institution participated. Many international and domestic students also participated in *student clubs/organizations* on their respective campuses of Dalhousie, McGill, York and UBC. Going out to the *local clubs/bars* was also a popular social event of students regardless of their institutional affiliation. International students from UBC and both international and domestic students from York shared they went to Karaoke bars with friends.

I am going out to clubs and eating occasionally and going shopping. – UBC domestic

We go out partying, clubbing, yeah, out with friends. We go to the movies. – Dal international

Some form of *physical activity*, whether through working out, organized sports, skiing, dancing, basketball or other outdoor activities, was also an important part of many students' social lives from UBC, McGill, York and Dalhousie. Going to movies was also mentioned by international students from Dalhousie, domestic students from McGill and both groups from York University. While watching TV and/or playing video games was a past time of international and domestic students from UBC and York along with domestic students from McGill. Other social activities mentioned by students were going to church, shopping, using the Internet to talk to friends, going to local concerts, social activism, and cooking.

Students were also asked to share what commitments they had off-campus. Domestic students from UBC, Dalhousie and York indicated they were working part-time off-campus. Since international students are not permitted to work outside of campus this question was not necessarily relevant to them. In fact, international students from Dalhousie along with international and domestic students from McGill shared they had no external or off-campus commitment. Both international and domestic students from Dalhousie felt that socializing with friends was their off-campus commitments. For some domestic students who worked part-time found that they had little "relaxation" time as they were either doing school work or working their part-time jobs.

It's basically, every night I'm not at school late, I have to work. Although I love my job and it's fun and the kids are great, it's stressful to have to come home late every night and just grab a bite to go to bed. It's like you never get time for yourself. – York domestic

Those students from York who lived off-campus with family also had family-household chores to assist which they considered off-campus commitments.

FRIENDS ON AND OFF CAMPUS

In their second term of their first-year, most students had a *mixed group of friends* consisting of international and domestic students whether they attended UBC, Dalhousie, York or McGill. Again, *residence* was seen as a place that helped facilitate the meeting of other students. Many of the domestic students shared that through their residence dorms they had meet students from all over the world and other parts of Canada. Domestic students from UBC and McGill were also able to differentiate in the types of friendships that they had met in residences. Some people were considered friends while others were just acquaintances. International students from UBC used the term “hi-bye friends” to describe the nature of their friendships with other students in residence. Residences as shared earlier for some domestic UBC students was a place of “exclusion”, where they did not feel they were part of the in-crowd or group due to their physical location in the residence (e.g., in the bottom floor away from other students), while others felt that residence was a “dark hole”.

I find that some people on my floor they are just acquaintances, some are different levels, some good friends, some just friends, and one girl on my floor is my best friend so there's different levels. – McGill domestic

I think that it's little bit different than I expected, but in a good way. In high school we hang out with the people that kind of like you and here I just picture friends that friends would invite you and to be like whole bunch of people. All my friends are so different, different from me and different from each other, totally different from each other, not quite like I expected. Also living in the basement first semester I felt awful, even though most people on my floor shut their doors and I kind of miss like girl floor bonded. Now I am on the second floor and join their group. I had lots of friends from another places, I didn't have that close bonding and hanging out friends. It's a different kind. – UBC domestic

Another thing is I was conscious not to hang out with only with Latin Americans, since I grew up and was surrounded by Latin Americans, I went to Latin American school so I was always very international and I was always surrounded by international friends, so I did not want to just hang out with Latin American friends when I got here, so I'd say that I have Latin American, International and domestic friends. I also have some friends off campus because having an older sister here who has graduated, so I made friends with her and from other people that I have met and now we're both in Montréal. – McGill international

Frosh week was also viewed as an important event in meeting people. Both domestic and international students from York and Dal university shared that they were still friends with people they had meet during orientation seven months ago.

Yeah I met a lot of people from Atkinson that I met from orientation. That was pretty weird, that I met everyone there who's in my classes. That was pretty good. – York international

The York people, I met in Frosh week definitely. In classes I have made friends but definitely not as much as I made in Frosh week. Frosh week was like the great thing. – York domestic

Whether students had off-campus friendships depended on whether they lived off- or on-campus. Those Dalhousie and York domestic students who lived off-campus, especially those staying with their parents seemed to maintain a closer connection with their high school friends as well as develop friendships with their on-campus peers.

I basically have a few people that I know well and I don't really interact that much with anyone else. Umm. It could be partially my personality also the workload I have..and just living off-campus. I mean, I have my roommates and I don't really know other people. – Dal domestic

Yes. I have a lot of friends from high school that I stayed in touch with. Just during frosh week I made a lot of friends and we have managed to just keep in touch. York domestic

Establishing friendships with classmates was seen as a *challenge*, especially if students were in large classes by all students across the country. Some students felt that tutorial sessions or labs were more conducive to meeting fellow classmates. However, domestic students from York felt that class size didn't matter in making friends since most people tended to sit in the same seat each week so students became familiar with their neighbors in the class.

When I go to class I sit in the same seat pretty much every time. Everyone else pretty much sits in the same seat. I talk to people around me. So it doesn't really matter if the class is big or small. Usually you sit in that area. That's the people that you talk to. That's what happened to me. – York domestic

It's really hard to meet people in big classes. You sit with different people every time. – UBC domestic

There are my friends but I can see that if I didn't have classes with them I probably would not hang out with them. It's immediate when we are in the same classes. – McGill domestic

Meeting people was perceived as being *easier in their second term than their first term* by international students from McGill and York Universities. International students from UBC and York felt that it *takes time to develop friendships with domestic students*. For some international students from York although they lived off-campus they had *mixed roommates* (e.g., country-of-origin or ethnicity). International students from all institutions also acknowledged that it was easier to *establish friendships with people from their own countries* due to the similar language and shared cultural understandings. Domestic students from Dalhousie also were aware that international students felt more comfortable with people from their own country or those who were of the same ethnicity.

Well, it takes time, but you usually make it, like the first three percent make the university itself. But it takes time or something like that. You can decide to make some good, close friends. But you can make some friends that live in residence, so while I personally have made. – York international

I was talking to Canadians and they were saying that international students, East Asians students are really exclusive and I think they get annoyed that they don't feel that they can enter their groups. But I mean I talked to other international students and they feel that about Canadians. It's kind of weird, there is a lot of internationalism, but there are also exclusive groups, not exclusive, but it sort of seems segmented. – UBC international

Well, I don't know, its just my own personal experience but on campus everybody interacts with their own groups but not with other groups. But socially, those groups are less defined. Do you know what I mean? – Dal domestic

Most of the friends I met are in the same social club, because usually I have most of my interests with and am closer to campus. Most of them are Asians and I think this is a cultural thing because we have similar culture. They don't go to pubs, so we do the same kinds of things, we have closer interests so that's why we are closer. I do have some other friends that I met in res. But I think that these are also friends that don't party much and they are friends that are closer to home, they don't go out. I think it depends on your character. – McGill international

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Parental influence was not as prevalent in the discussions of the second term focus groups. International and domestic students from McGill, UBC, and Dalhousie acknowledged that most of the support they were receiving from family was *financial*.

Financially, for tuition and rent, everything else I don't like asking for money. – McGill domestic

Well, my mother she's the one who's supporting me and everything financially. And with the telephone I use a service she contacted, I don't know it's a service where you call a 1-800 number to the United States and then it connects you. And it's a good price... a very good price. Yeah, I think it, ... well, it's lower than the calling cards and it had better service. – Dal international

Both groups of students from UBC and McGill also indicated that they received *advice and support* (especially emotional support) from their parents. Some domestic students from Dalhousie shared they received *packages from home* which meant a lot to them.

Surprisingly my mom ends up giving me advice a lot of times, I talk to her a lot, socially also. She doesn't think I have any organization in my life so she's always telling me how to structure time. – McGill domestic

For those students, regardless if domestic or international, living away from home the *telephone and internet* were important venues they received support from their families. One international student from Dalhousie shared she would like to have her family closer so they could provide more constant reinforcement of support.

PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR

Most of the international and domestic students from each institution indicated they were *planning to stay* at their respective institution for their second year. However, some of these students from UBC and York shared that while they were staying they were going to switch their programs.

Yeah, I'm staying but I don't know. I'm in Business Economic, but I'm thinking of switching to either Economy or Business administration. - York international

Other domestic students from Dalhousie, McGill and York shared that they were contemplating *switching institutions*. Some indicated they would switch if they didn't get into the program they wanted while others indicated they were returning to an institution located in their home province. One international student from UBC indicated he/she was going to a university located in Europe.

*I want to travel too but I'm going to finish my degree here for sure. -
Dalhousie-domestic*

I think it has to do with growing up. You have this belief that if you don't go to university, you won't get a career. At the end, it's what is right for you, no matter what it is, university, and college, whatever. That's what's right for you. But I grew up with the belief – university- if you want to have a career in life, you've got to go to university, this and that. I learned the hard way. It's what is best for you. That's why I'm leaving, I think out—apply to colleges now or whatever. – York domestic

There were a few international students from McGill who came to Canada to *study for one year only* and as a result were planning to return to their home countries. A domestic student from York shared he/she was leaving university altogether because he/she realized that university was not for him/her.

COMMITMENT TO THE INSTITUTION

Most of the domestic and international students attending UBC, Dalhousie, York and McGill felt that their respective institution was a *good school*, the academic standards were high and they were proud to be students there. In terms of buying institutional merchandise, some domestic and international students indicated they had *purchased* such items from their respective institutions, UBC, Dalhousie and York. Of these students, some had purchased items as gifts for family and friends back home. However, a common theme in their responses was that *this merchandise was expensive*. Some students said they don't buy such items because of the cost. One international student from McGill felt that they wouldn't wear such items as they saw it as advertising for McGill and they felt McGill should be paying them to do this.

I have a lot of things from York. I've got the keychain on the bag. – York international

I bought a t-shirt for my mom. – Dalhousie domestic

Some domestic students from York and UBC were aware that their institutions were *not as highly regarded in terms of public reputation* as the University of Toronto but still felt committed to their school choice. As one international student from McGill expressed:

I think its difficult, the quality of teaching is really nice. I don't know about the reputation [of McGill] in Hong Kong, University of Toronto is much better known. But I find McGill people really knowledgeable and I find Montréal a really good city and I admire that people are completely bilingual. – McGill international.

For domestic students at York university the culture of *well-dressed* was challenge due to the peer pressure to fit into the culture of the university. Some students felt that the recent ranking of the campus having the “hottest girls” gives a bad impression of the university to others. The following excerpt from the York domestic students illustrates how these students perceived their own institution in comparison to other universities.

York emphasizes on fashion like fitting in, whereas Ryerson and University of Toronto, they're more concentrated on their studies and they don't care what other people think. Whereas York is a party school, it's a fashion show and all this stuff. – York domestic

For international students from UBC and Dalhousie, as evident in the first-term focus groups, the difficulty in getting student visas to the USA along with USA tuition being higher than Canada helped them choose their studies in Canada. International students from McGill acknowledged that they respected the bilingual nature of their institution. Domestic UBC students and international students from McGill respectively saw being a “UBC” or “McGill” student as *part of their identity*. However, both international and domestic students from UBC questioned the institution's commitment to students with the introduction of the Student Housing Lottery.

This is a system where by students after first-year who wish to stay within residence have their names put in a lottery draw for the limited spaces held for students beyond their first-year.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Overall international and domestic students at each institution ranked their quality of life as very good to high. For example, domestic students from UBC gave a ranking between 6-9, while their international peers ranked their quality of life as 7-10. Both international and domestic students from Dalhousie gave a ranking between 7-9. Domestic McGill students ranged between 7-9 and international students gave a lower range of 5-9. International students commented on the cultural differences, particularly on food which impacted their quality of life.

SUMMARY OF SECOND TERM FOCUS GROUPS

Second term, in comparison to first term, was somewhat easier for students as the initial fear and anxiety of coming to university have subsided. Students were settled within their environment. However, it was evident in the second term focus groups that many of the issues raised in the first-term focus groups were still prevalent seven months later.

Academically, students felt that second term was also easier than the first term. Although they also acknowledged that the workload and tests were getting harder many students indicated that a positive experience for them was the course work. Good courses, as judged by students was highly influenced on whether or not the students perceived their professor to be good. For example, a motivated and charismatic instructor who got to know students names was seen as good instructor and from whom someone to take a course. Students, both international and domestic, had generally mixed views about their contact with staff and/or support services.

Although some students had positive experiences (e.g., a helpful staff person) others felt that the staff were not friendly were not helpful to them (e.g., advising). Many students shared they did not avail of many of these services (e.g., Writing Centre) due to inconvenient office hours. Other services such as Orientation were valued by most students, especially in terms of facilitating friendships. For international students, international student services (ISS) was positively rated by most students.

English proficiency was still an issue for many of the international and domestic students whose first language was not English. Many international students felt more comfortable using e-mail to contact professors to avoid feeling embarrassed about speaking English. In terms of grades, most of the domestic students ranked their performance lower than their peers, but attributed their performance as an expectation of “being first-year”. In comparison, many of the international students felt they were doing better than their domestic peers but felt that they could be doing better.

Socially, residence was still an influential factor on many student experiences. Residence was seen as home, a community of friends and social networks. Residence also helped establish friendships between international and domestic students. It should also be cautioned that residence was not always a positive experience for some students, especially those who did not “fit” into the residence culture (e.g., preferred to study, were shy or didn’t feel comfortable at alcohol-related social events). Most students indicated they had a mixed group of friends and that meeting people was easier in their second term than first. Parental support seemed to stay constant (but mentioned less) during the second term focus groups. Many of the students, especially international students, tended to stay at their institution, although some domestic and international students indicated they may be switching programs/majors. Most of the domestic

and international students felt their institution was a good school with high academic standards and felt proud to be students there.

DISCUSSION

The First Year Experience is a dynamic and complicated for many students, whether they are first-generation students (i.e., first person to go to university), high school graduates or mature students returning to school after a period of adjustment. Typically, much of the literature around the first-year experience deals with those high school graduates (~17-18 years of age) making their transition to university. Research into the first-year experience has identified some common first-year student issues to be academic adjustment, career planning, residence life or being a commuter student, making friends and general social adjustment issues and many others (Light, 2001; Upcraft et al., 2005). However, as discussed in the literature review, little research has done comparative work on the first year experience of domestic and international (or foreign) students.

This study not only attempts to provide this comparison but also add to the literature a domestic perspective which represents a selection of universities from east to west. To deal with the large amount of information provided in this report, the discussion addresses each theme academic, social, physical and cultural adjustment - - linking each back to literature where relevant. This discussion will also, where possible, highlight areas of difference between international and domestic students' experiences.

ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

The transition from high school to university study is not an easy for many students. In first term, students reported that they had to adapt to a university learning environment. International students in particular commented on the challenges of not only adjusting to the shift in learning but also new teaching styles along with their role as a student in a North American classroom. It is clear from this research that a positive experience within a university classroom is created by a *good professor*. From the discussion of positive and negative experiences with faculty, good professors are those excited about their work, respectful of students (e.g., knowing their names), engage with technology, respond to students e-mails and hold office hours.

Tompson & Tompson (1996) found that faculty perceived some behaviours of international students undermining their academic success (e.g., not participating fully in class discussions, and not asking for clarification of issues or assignments). In this study, it was evident that such “behaviours” were a result of lack of confidence many international students, whose first language was not English, had around their proficiency in the language. Many international students also commented on the differences in the classroom setting, particularly the relationship between students and professors where students actively engaged in debates and even questioned professors. It is important for faculty to be aware of the international student perspective before judging whether these students are actively undermining their academic success. Faculty need to become more internationalized in their teaching styles and classroom management techniques. Even the simple act of knowing your students’ names along with answering e-mails and holding office hours establishes relationships with international students (and domestic) that foster an environment in which students are comfortable to engage.

These relationships would also be fostered and more manageable with smaller classes for first-year students. Both groups felt that large classrooms were not helpful in their learning or

socialization to the university. Being able to engage with the classroom discussion or understand a lecture is difficult in a large classroom of over 200 students. This experience becomes more frustrating for international students. Abel (2002) commented that information processing and note taking are skills sets that many international students need to develop upon coming to North America. In her particular instance, note-taking workshops were held with students in attempt to prepare students in focusing on key points in their notes instead of attempting to capture every word. During both focus groups, many international students along with some domestic students commented upon the use of WebCT within their coursework. WebCT provided many students, especially those whose first language is not English. Note taking services are not likely to be helpful to some students because people take note differently.

Carefully choosing professors and carefully monitoring the time spent on students, recreation and downtime are perhaps the most important strategies advancing academic success (Abel, 2002). By the second term, many students, especially those in residence, seemed to be more cognizant about “shopping” around for professors and courses. Time management was still an issue for many students, regardless if they lived on or off campus or whether they were international or domestic students. In fact, some students living in residence commented that although the social aspects were amazing, actually finding quiet time and space to study was a challenge.

Computer skills varied amongst students – some felt very comfortable negotiating websites, online registrations, using word processing for assignments, communicating by e-mail, using MSN messenger and other resources. However, others did not have such comfort level which indicates that it is important that students be given opportunities to have hands-on practical tutorials within the classroom to help their computer-skill development.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Reciprocal learning between international and domestic students is an important part of internationalization (e.g., understanding, building relationships) (Bunz, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002). However, it is evident from this study that reciprocal learning is not occurring spontaneously just by the presence of international students. Residence helps facilitate developing social supports/networks (Spencer, 2003; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). There was overwhelming support of this in both focus groups. In fact, many international and domestic students felt that residence was key to them meeting and establishing friendships with domestic and other international students.

However, residence can be an isolating experience for those domestic and international students who do not “fit” within residence culture (especially the social aspects). Commuter students tended to be less involved with campus life (Grayson, 1997), unless they were living with other students. A few of the international students who lived off-campus shared their roommates were also international students from around the world. Therefore, this is more of an issue for those domestic students who live off-campus and do not have opportunities to associate with international students outside the classroom environment.

Meeting friends was an issue for many students, international and domestic during the first-term. Some students felt that socializing was easier by second-term, particularly if they were involved in residence. However, many international students still felt that it was difficult to make friendships with domestic students. From the student discussions around friendships, it is evident that there are different types of friendships established during their first year. For example, there are acquaintances or hi-bye friends, class mates who students just see in class, residence friends/acquaintances, “best friends” and those from one’s own cultural group, who tended to be closer friends than the others. It is interesting to acknowledge that international and domestic

students had similar perceptions about making friends with each other in that they perceived the other group as elusive or “staying together”. Both Zhao et al. (2005) and Hayes and Lin (1994) discuss the positive and negative aspects of international students having friendships within one’s own subgroup.

Commuter students typically have less campus involvement and lower retention rates than on-campus, therefore it is important they to develop sense of community (Grayson, 1997; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). It was evident from the focus groups across the country, those international and domestic students who lived off campus had less social interactions on-campus and more frequently talked about being “isolated” or “out-of-the-loop”. Although Grayson (1997) found that there were no academic disadvantages to commuter students, it was not possible from the focus group transcripts to relate grade performance and residence accommodations. It important to remember that in terms of retention, social integration for the first-year student is just as important (or perhaps more so) than academic performance (as long as they pass).

Social contact with domestic peers is important, contact can be limited and difficult to establish therefore some international students form strong in-group oriented ethnic community (Hayes & Lin, 1994). The international students from this study provided some insight into why forming such cross-cultural friendships was difficult. English proficiency was an obvious barrier for those students who did not understand English-slang or Canadian culture content. Having friendships within one’s own cultural or ethnic group provided international students with a common understanding, culturally and socially, from which strong support networks could be established.

PHYSICAL ADJUSTMENT

Whether studying abroad or in another province, adjusting to the physical environment is an important and often forgotten aspect of the first-year experience. However, many students within this project, particularly international students referenced adapting to Canada's climate and food as challenging. Finding housing, adjusting to cooking one's own food or adapting to residence food was difficult for many international students. In first term, most of the domestic and international students felt that they had minor illnesses (e.g., flu, headaches). Some students could equate their illness from not eating healthy or adjusting to a new environment. For others it was just a consequence of living in residence where illness tended to circulate.

Feelings of being a source of revenue discredits the potential advantages of cross-cultural contact at a diverse university (Asmar, 2005). Although international students in this study were aware of the high-cost of tuition and living, there was no evidence within the discussions that these students felt they were "extra-income", although some felt they should be getting a better deal for their costs (e.g., better teaching, improved food, cheaper institutional merchandise). Some students from UBC, in fact, acknowledged that their tuition should be higher because they do not pay taxes.

International students are not a homogenous group, especially with regard to social capital and economic capital, in our study it was evident that some international students had strong technological skills prior to arriving in Canada while others came from come form academic backgrounds where they lacked access to computers and scientific equipment (Schuh, 2005). Other research has found that high users of technology are more comfortable and confident using computer technology for preparing class assignments as well as for communicating with their instructors and other students (Zhao et al., 2005). Our findings parallel the fact that some international students in fact feel more comfortable using technology instead of talking directly to

peers or instructors to avoid embarrassing exchanges created by language barriers and unfamiliarity with cultural idioms (Zhao et al., 2005).

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

The cultural diversity of each campus was appreciated and valued by both international and domestic students. As the previous section on social adjustment highlighted, culturally adapting to a new country does not happen spontaneously. This is one area where universities, particularly student services and international student services, could be providing more year-long programs that engage domestic students and international students.

Cultural adjustment was a prevalent issue for international students. Perhaps it is better to contextualize it within the discussion of English-proficiency and how that impacts international students' interactions with English-speaking students. It was evident from the international students that adjusting to Canada's culture was a challenge in terms of their social relationships. Few students felt they had experienced racism or ill-treatment within the university or within the larger community in which they lived. Adapting to the food was also an issue for some. Internationalizing a campus needs to extend beyond the student body and courses. Having a variety of food options to international and domestic students is an important part of building understanding and making other cultures feel welcomed and respected.

Although the domestic-international comparison highlights issues that are unique to international students, it is important to remain cognizant of the differences among domestic students. For example, those students who study within their home province, especially those living in the same geographic area of their institution (e.g., rural-urban) have different experiences than those who move out-of-province to study. Out-of-province students are

adjusting to living in a new province, negotiating social relationships and dealing with all the other stressors of being a first-year student living away from home. It was evident in this work that some out-of-province domestic students felt as if they were not wanted by their host province (e.g., Ontario students feeling isolated in Nova Scotia). Inter-provincial rivalry is an important consideration for administrators, faculty and student services professionals to be aware of in assisting out-of-province students with their transition to university.

Similar to the findings of PAIR (2001) and Lyakhovetska (2004), international students in this study choose their prospective institutions based on many factors, such as location, weather, expenses, and whether or not relatives live close by. Many international students saw Canada as a safe country with friendly people. Both domestic and international students felt that their respective institutions had strong academic reputations. The opportunity to learn English (and French) for some students was a key reason they choose Canada as their place of study. In fact, many students indicated they had choose Canada over the United States or another country due to Canada's reputation, lower tuition and an easier visa process. Such findings are encouraging, however more must be done to facilitate the "internationalizing" of our institutions and the student experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations come from the students in the focus groups as ways institutions, faculty and future students can improve the first-year experience.

From First-Years to High School Students

- go to frosh week
- make informed choices talk to other students about courses, profs etc
- pick school based on program
- choose residence based on personality
- start studying earlier

From First-Years to University Administration

- university should have organized events throughout the year
- have more service people during first week to decrease line-ups
- make Orientation more useful
- Smaller class sizes
- Decrease tuition fees
- Decrease workload of first-years
- Post student comments on courses
- Provide food services past 7pm
- More gym facilities in residence
- More support services and general services after hours
- Get rid of LPI
- More housing with independent kitchens and bathrooms

From First-Years to Professors and TAs

- Give examples of good graded assignments
- Have better teaching and more interaction
- Get to know students names
- Hold office hours and answer e-mails

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