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# Adapting to cultural differences in Canada as an international student

Canada is known for its cultural diversity and, as an international student, classroom interactions may be your first experience with people from very different backgrounds and cultures. Many international students experience some degree of culture shock in their first few months in Canada. Even though most Canadians are warm and welcoming to newcomers, adapting to cultural differences may take time and effort.

We spoke to some former international students about the differences they observed in culture and personal interactions at university. Here are some of their tips to help you understand and adapt to cultural diversity in Canada.

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 arrive guides

## Succeeding as an international student in Canada

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# How international students can benefit from cultural diversity in Canada

As an international student stepping into a lecture hall at a Canadian university, your first impulse might be to find other students from your home community. While sticking with what is familiar seems easiest, there are many advantages to stepping out of your comfort zone.

Meeting other international and Canadian students can expose you to new perspectives you may not have considered. A free exchange of ideas in a diverse group can broaden your worldview and give you a better appreciation for others. Learning about different cultures, traditions, and religions can also foster cultural sensitivity, empathy, and acceptance of differences in others.

Interacting with people from various backgrounds will also help to prepare you for the diverse, multicultural workspaces you'll be a part of during your career in Canada.

## Cultural differences you can expect as an international student in Canada

While not all international students experience culture shock when they come to Canada, it can take time to get used to cultural differences in your city and classroom. Knowing what to expect can help you adapt faster. Here are some cultural differences you might notice during your first few months in Canada:

### Language as a cultural barrier

*"Language was one of the biggest cultural barriers for me when I arrived in Canada in 2017. International students who either didn't know English or are not confident about their language skills often had trouble communicating in class and felt excluded,"* says Lucas, a former international student from Brazil.

If your English skills need work, a diverse classroom is a great place to practice.

### Small talk and ice-breaker conversations

*"Unlike some cultures where people tend to get straight to the point, small talk is an essential skill in Canada,"* says Ke, an international student who came to Canada from China in 2019.

Small talk serves as an ice-breaker when you are speaking to someone new. It's also a great way to begin forming meaningful connections. Common small talk topics may include the weather, sports, hobbies, current events, and other impersonal subjects. So, don't be shy to initiate small talk – it's part of Canadian culture.

## Politeness is ingrained in Canadian culture

*"One of the first things I noticed was that people in Canada are very polite," says Ke. "Even strangers will smile at you and be willing to help you out."*

Canadians are known for their politeness and words like "thank you", "please", and "sorry" are used freely in conversations. Keep in mind that polite behaviour is a social standard and should not be confused with friendliness.

## Be respectful of everyone

In Canada, every individual is considered equal. Discrimination based on culture, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, and profession is unacceptable.

In Canada, the gender balance in your classroom might be different from back home and some of your classmates may identify with different genders. You may also meet people who have a different sexual orientation. Be sure to treat everyone with the same level of respect.

## Different modes of teaching and learning

While many cultures prioritize individual contribution in class, in Canadian universities and colleges, group work forms an important part of education. During group work, you will need to communicate effectively with a diverse group of students and take ownership of your work, without coming across as pushy. However, individual assignments and exams are your own work. Getting help on these will count as cheating and comes with severe consequences.

The student-teacher relationship may also be different in Canada than in your home country. *"In many eastern countries, teachers are viewed as figures of authority, and challenging their views is considered disrespectful. In Canada, however, debates with teachers are encouraged and counter-views from students often lead to healthy discussions,"* says Ke.

## Personal space and privacy

While hugging or kissing may be the acceptable way to greet people in some cultures, it could be considered offensive in others. Similarly, asking intrusive questions about people's personal lives is generally not appreciated in Canada. Canadians tend to value their personal space and privacy. Be respectful of boundaries, both physical and emotional. Don't behave in a way that may be perceived as disrespectful, such as asking questions about how much money someone makes or their religion.

# Friendship and relationships

Canadians have a different cultural perspective on friendship. For international students who leave behind long-standing friendships, it can be difficult to start building relationships from scratch in a new country.

Cultural differences also exist in romantic relationships. For many international students, the concepts of same-sex relationships and non-exclusive relationships might be new. The general understanding of consent may also be different in your culture. In Canada, it is important that you get explicit, enthusiastic consent from your partner before engaging in sexual activities. Remember, consent can be withdrawn at any time, so communicate with your partner to make sure that they are not feeling uncomfortable.

## Tips for adapting to cultural differences in Canada

### Keep an open mind

The culture in Canada and societal norms around polite behaviour may be different than they are in your home country. Respecting and learning from these differences will give you a chance to grow as a person and appreciate new perspectives. Keep an open mind, talk to people from different backgrounds, and view this as an opportunity to widen your horizons.

### Be sensitive to cultural differences

While all cultures may be different, it is important to recognize that none is better or worse than the other. Familiarize yourself with cultural differences, and learn about biases and behaviours that may not be accepted in other cultures. When in doubt, ask polite questions without being intrusive, and try not to form snap judgements about the people you meet.

### Work on your English language skills

A lack of confidence in your language skills can lead to feelings of exclusion and limit the social circle you keep. *"It is important that international students overcome their fear of English and hesitation about their accent. Work on improving your listening and speaking skills by practicing as much as you can,"* says Lucas.

Your university may offer language courses and workshops to help improve your English. Check with your local public library for ESL resources or spend time watching English movies and TV shows.

## Expand your friend circle

Make an effort to connect with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Student societies and clubs in your university are a good place to start. Participating in group activities, neighbourhood clubs, and hobby groups is also a great way to meet new people. While it may take some time to find people with similar interests or perspectives, don't lose hope.

## Give yourself time to adjust

*"It's natural to miss what is familiar. Many international students miss the people and cultural aspects of their home country and start feeling lonely and homesick,"* says Siang, who came to Canada as an international student from Malaysia in 2008.

Culture shock and feelings of homesickness are normal. There might be some cultural differences that leave you confused or lead you to question your own beliefs. Be patient and give yourself time to adapt to your new environment.

## Seek support, if needed

Adjusting to academic demands, cultural differences, and life as an international student in Canada can take a toll on your mental health. Many international students also struggle to balance their schedules, especially if they are working part-time while studying. Most universities provide access to on- and off-campus mental health resources and student support programs to help students cope with pressure, stress, and mental health challenges.

*"In Canada, people are more empathetic and open to having conversations about mental health and well-being,"* says Ke. Your mental health should be a priority, so don't hesitate to seek help, if needed.

# Finding a cultural balance as an international student in Canada

## Stay in touch with family and friends

With phones, video calls, and email, it has never been easier to keep in touch with people—no matter where they are. If you start feeling homesick, talk to your family and friends back home. Get updates on how things are at home, share your experiences, and get advice from people you trust.

## Connect with your home community in Canada

People from your home country in Canada may have navigated the same cultural challenges as you. Reach out to them for guidance and learn from their journey. Sign up for on- or off-campus community groups to meet people from similar backgrounds.

## Find comfort in things that are familiar

Miss your favourite food? Find restaurants that serve your home cuisine or look for grocery stores that carry the ingredients you need to cook familiar food. Ask people from your home community for recommendations on places of worship, places to shop, or other things that remind you of home.

## Don't feel pressured to change

It can be confusing to find yourself surrounded by people with different cultures, values, and beliefs. While it is important to be sensitive and accepting of cultural differences, it doesn't mean that you need to change your own behaviour or beliefs to fit in. Remember, diversity is what makes Canada great and your identity is your own.

Canada is a multicultural society that welcomes people of all backgrounds and beliefs. As an international student in Canada, you will learn to appreciate the cultural diversity your campus and city have to offer. While it is important to stay true to your culture, adapting to cultural differences and expanding your network during your academic years can help prepare you for a diverse workplace and successful life in Canada.

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