



# Student Global Experiences at the University of Toronto

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary  
Summer 2017



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# introduction

In the summer of 2017, the Innovation Hub sought the voices of students who have had global experiences, whether they were international students arriving at the university, domestic students going abroad, or students from small towns moving to Toronto. The goal of our project was to understand students' narratives about global experiences at U of T. More specifically, we wanted to understand the positive aspects of global experiences and bring them to the forefront. We found that **even though every student was confronted with challenges and difficulties at some point in their global experience, they still label that experience as 'positive'**. What follows is a summary of the three key themes, the insights within each theme, quotes that bring the insights to life, and questions that emerged out of the findings. Students' stories will be told through 'personas', which are used in the Design Thinking process to understand someone's needs and experiences. This helps guide the ideation process, and ensures that the end product meets students' needs. The personas included in this report are characters created based on the data we gathered. They allow us to share students' stories while maintaining anonymity.



## theme one: Connection and Community

Many students shared that a pivotal point in their global experience was finding community, even if this “community” included just one other person. Students mentioned that up until the point of finding a sense of connectivity or community, they had thought about their global experience as negative. Unfortunately, some students did not find community until weeks or months into their experience.

### Key Insights

- 1) Students need to feel like someone wants them to succeed.
- 2) Students need to feel seen and heard, even if just by one other person.

### Key Quotations

“She [captain of the soccer team] always encourages me to go out and meet new people in our college. **I get to know more and more people as I go to more events.** [...] She’s a third-year arts student, she helped me choose my courses. [...] **I feel it’s really lucky that I have [soccer] to share with people.**”

—*International Undergraduate Student*

“**Spending time with friends lets me feel less stressed** [...] When you meet those people you know **you aren’t the only person faced with this kind of problem.**”

—*International Undergraduate Student*

“When you go on exchange, **it’s so easy to make friends because everyone wants to meet new people that you’d never meet at your own university.** It puts people in a mood where they’re super open and friendly and they want to get to know everybody. Even if you are typically introverted and shy, you aren’t so much on exchange.”

—*Domestic Masters Student*

## theme two:

# Language and Resilience

Although students have to prove their English proficiency in order to attend the university, many international students see language as an academic and personal barrier. Language is a way in which international students step out of their comfort zone. Strong curiosity and a deep will to learn more and persevere seem pervasive among the students we spoke with.

## Key Insights

- 1) Students need people to be patient with them in order to not feel isolated—this can be displayed through tone of voice, facial expression, etc.
- 2) Students need help accessing environments and opportunities that will allow them to step out of their comfort zones.

## Key Quotations

**“The trip (to Fudan) definitely changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do** in regards to studying Chinese history—I took more courses on China and history courses on China, courses on Chinese relations, I also took courses to work on my Mandarin. On that trip, I also learned a lot more about American culture as well, that prompted me to try to study in America, to study at Columbia in New York. This trip to Columbia was entirely motivated by the Americans that I met on the trip so **it changed a lot of decisions that I made.**”

—*Domestic Undergraduate Student*

“When I think about what a resume should show **I think it’s important to project international experiences that aid my competencies** for the company who I want to work for, like cross-cultural competencies. **Having the international pieces is huge for the brand I’m trying to cultivate.**”

—*Domestic Undergraduate Student*

**“I realized that going in as a minority, I would have to learn how to react to others if they treated me differently [...]** I learned to be more welcoming and accepting of others. I also learned to back off in certain situations **so I could address it from a different perspective** rather than jumping right into it.”

—*Domestic Undergraduate Student*

## persona one:

### Social Su

International Student  
Graduate Student  
Immigrated from China



*“Spending time with friends lets me feel less stressed. When you meet those people you know you aren’t the only person faced with this kind of problem. I realized it just takes some time to get used to people always speaking English.”*

I’m doing my Master’s in Applied Science. I was really nervous when I came here last September, because I thought I was going to be alone, and I’m insecure about my English. In lectures I rely on the slides/textbooks, which I can look at when the class is over, but it’s really hard to keep up in group discussions with native English speakers because they speak so quickly. I feel insecure about messing up what I’m going to say, so most of the time I don’t say anything.

I dreamed about going abroad to study since my first year in undergrad—I realized that I couldn’t just give it up because of the change in language. Before coming to U of T, I would watch TV shows to try to improve my English and pick up on cultural norms, but it’s much different at UofT than in a casual setting like in F.R.I.E.N.D.S. Luckily, I’m not alone. There’s a big Chinese student population here and I’ve made some really great friends. It’s kind of the best part of being here because we spend a lot of time together. Whenever I get too lazy to study, they encourage me to give up watching TV. Instead, we like to explore the city, so after studying during the weekdays I usually hang out with them and explore different restaurants and spots in Toronto. It’s my motivation to work hard—every Monday I start planning where we should go on the weekend.

I was really close with my parents before I came here, but last semester I spent less time talking with them over the phone. They have never been abroad before so they don’t really understand why I’m not doing incredibly well already .... I don’t tell them the negative things that happen, only the positives. I want them to know that they made the right decision by sending me here. That’s why my friends are so important because I can be honest with them and they understand what I’m going through.



## persona two: Exchange Evan

International Student  
Graduate Student  
Went on exchange in Mexico



*“I was excited because it wasn't something that I'd done before, so that newness was accompanied by excitement.”*

I'm actually new to UofT; I just started my Master's program at OISE. I had a really wild international experience two summers ago, when I went to Mexico to work for a non-profit. I was really excited to improve my Spanish and I had never been to Mexico before—it's always super cool to go somewhere for the first time.

There were seven of us in a cohort: three of us were international and the other four were domestic. There was this one day when we decided to go to a cleansing ritual. And I still remember thinking that we were really lucky to be on this land and camp on it. There was absolutely nothing man-made on the horizon and all our attention was on the fire and the water. There was a small cave, big enough so that you could go in it. We would go one by one around the bonfire, while the person in charge would be chanting the words for the cleansing. Every time someone went into the cave, we would take a really hot rock from the fire and put it into a small hole in the ground and eventually that would steam up the cave, because it was a small cave, and we would say something about feeding mother earth. We were all sweating tremendously by the end and then ran into the ocean. And I just remember feeling so much energy that night, and that was one of the most magical things I've ever experienced. The people I was with really helped me open up. Seeing them be so open and free almost gave me the permission to act similarly.

Another great thing about that trip was that I felt like it was OK to explore who I was when I was learning Spanish. Like the environment, and immersing myself in that culture encouraged me to express myself and be vulnerable. I remember thinking that learning the language was kind of life-changing. I had been learning Spanish in classrooms for ages and I didn't feel like I had grasped it at all, but when I was there and I had to speak Spanish in the community I felt like I was creating another me.

## persona three: Linguistic Laksha

Domestic Student  
Undergraduate Student  
First girl to go abroad in her family



*“U of T has abroad seminars for parents so that helped both my mom and dad to be more confident in letting me go.”*

I’m a fourth-year undergraduate at UTSC, studying English and Linguistics. Ever since I was young and saw the movie Atlantis, I’ve wanted to become a linguist—that’s why I’m so fascinated with travelling. My family immigrated to Canada from Bangladesh when I was very young, but I’m actually packing for China, which will be my first international trip since moving to Toronto as a child.

In Grade 12, I went on a five-week trip to Quebec to learn French. It was my first time away from home, and five weeks is a long time! I was homesick in the first week and I didn’t know how to cope. I told my mom I wanted to go home, but she said that if I started something, I had to finish it. So now that I was basically stuck in rural Quebec, I had to find a way to cope. Before Explore I would have never thought that my way of coping was to do work and learn new things, basically keep busy. By the time the second week rolled around I was getting more involved and realized that I LOVED it, everyone was so nice. If I didn’t have a plan of something to do at night or during the day there was always a group of people around that would invite me to go do different things with them. Looking back it was life-changing.

In my family it’s religion over culture, whereas with a lot of my friends it’s culture over religion. In my religion, I’m allowed to learn wherever I want as long as it’s in the search of knowledge. To convince my dad to let me go abroad, I had to reason that the only way I could learn Chinese *really* well is if I was actually in China. I knew he would need a lot of convincing, and if there was a way to tear the idea down, he would. So I just didn’t tell him until I had already applied and my visa had been accepted. I’m actually waiting to hear back from another exchange to Singapore and haven’t told him about it ... yet. I’m going to be the first girl to go abroad in my family; although my uncles/cousins have gone abroad, none of the girls have. I find it *really* empowering, and I tell my sister that although I’m the first, I won’t be the last. I’m really trying to encourage her to seek out international opportunities. My friends’ parents are also very strict, but they want to have international experiences too, so they use me as an example of why they should be able to go. I found that U of T’s abroad seminars for parents really helped my parents be confident that letting me go was the right decision. Aside from learning Chinese, I’m looking forward to the different cuisines. I was really interested by Peking Duck and I always thought that I wouldn’t be able to taste it because it wasn’t Halal, but I was looking at travel blogs for Hong Kong and was surprised at how many Halal restaurants were across Asia. So I’m really excited to try out Peking Duck!

## persona four: Global Gabe

Domestic Student  
Undergraduate Student  
Has been on a lot of trips



*“This trip was very influential for me. It changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do”*

I’m a fourth-year undergraduate, studying Law. I’ve had quite a number of global experiences. The first one always stands out—I think I was the most nervous for it because I wasn’t sure what to expect, especially because China is so far away.

I remember going on a day trip to Yellow Mountain. On the bus ride there, I was with my friend Kelly, and we started talking to a guy next to us from Belgium and he spoke French, Spanish, and Mandarin, and I happened to speak French and Spanish while Kelly spoke Mandarin. The fact that we could switch languages made me feel very worldly! It’s easier to talk to people on exchange than at U of T, because you can kind of just assume that everyone is there to have an experience and that experience is always better if you have people to talk to.

This trip was very influential for me. It changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do in regard to studying Chinese history, I took more courses on China, like Chinese history and Chinese relations, and I also took courses to work on my Mandarin.

It’s funny because going on the China trip was such a fluke. I was checking my email one day and my college said that there was a scholarship—I think it was due the next day. I was tired of being a camp counsellor so I sent in my application and got it.

Some of the best parts about these trips are the reunions that happen afterward. I’ve gone to New York, Lausanne in Switzerland, Houston, and Toronto to reconnect with friends I’ve made on these trips. I’ve really learned how to see people for who they are as people, and not make snap judgements, really hear people out even if I don’t agree with them. On a trip to Japan there were Americans who were Trump supporters from the Bible Belt. Elections only come once a year and the rest of the time they are just normal people, so I just try to be as accepting as I can in the moment with them. It’s started to come more naturally to me.



# conclusion and next steps

Through this study, we “learn[ed] about our audience” by listening to the real experiences of students with international experience, and we “construct[ed] a point of view” based on their needs.<sup>1</sup>

After identifying these needs and generating the student personas, we are better equipped to think about three core questions:

- 1) How might we ensure that all students find community early on in their global experiences?**
- 2) How might we better support students in stepping outside of their comfort zones?**
- 3) How might we ensure that every global experience offers valuable learning opportunities?**

Now that we have framed the challenge through these three questions, next steps involve moving into the remaining phases of the Design Thinking process by generating, prototyping, and testing solutions through user feedback.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://think360studio.com/what-is-design-thinking-and-design-thinking-process/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

# Student Contributors

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