



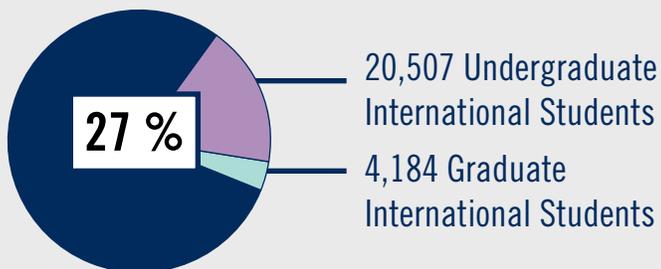
NOVEMBER 2021

Celebrating International Students

Being Brave Away From Home

WHAT IS THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE?

In 2020, UofT enrolled¹:



UofT international students come from 164 countries and regions. The top five are: 1) China 2) India 3) U.S. 4) South Korea 5) Hong Kong.²

Canada is a “powerhouse for international education”³ and UofT has plans to grow international student enrolment.⁴

COLLECTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT STORIES



The international student experience at UofT is neither homogeneous nor easily captured in just numbers. All students in this complex group have unique stories and experiences, which we set out to explore. We took a human-centred, qualitative approach to studying international student experiences. While all of their stories are unique, they share commonalities in the challenges they face and in the way that they brave these challenges.

We consulted: The Innovation Hub Archive of 600+ interviews, many of which have been with international students.

We conducted: 16 in-depth, longform interviews with international students and the University staff who facilitate their learning.

WE FOUND:

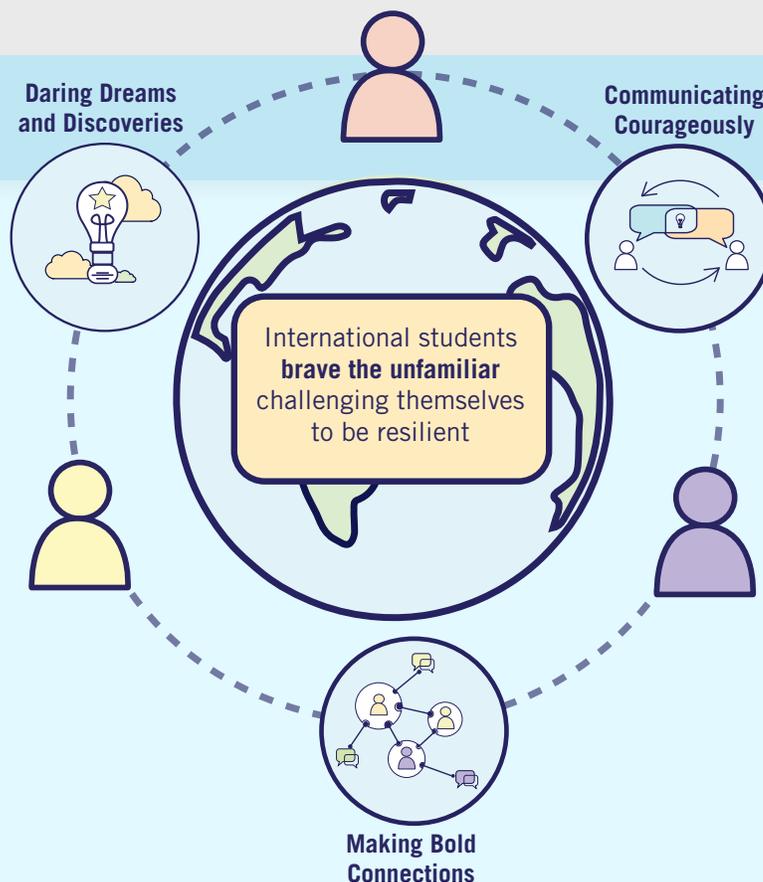
International students brave the unfamiliar, challenging themselves to be resilient.

The overall findings play out in three themes:

- 1) Daring Dreams and Discoveries,
- 2) Communicating Courageously
- 3) Making Bold Connections

Special section: Exceptional Times outlines how international students braved the pandemic with incredible resilience.

We developed: Building Bravery design principles that guide how to honour the courage and resilience of international students at UofT.





DARING DREAMS AND DISCOVERIES

New beginnings prompt excitement, but also bring challenges that international students must face and adapt to along the way. Students explained that the newness sometimes transformed into feelings of loneliness and homesickness. Their unfamiliarity with the education system and the overwhelming amount of information they encountered as they adjusted to their new environment also proved difficult. To combat this, international students described taking the initiative to build communities and networks of support among one another to share support as they familiarized themselves with their new home.

Adventuring Toward Unfamiliar Horizons

Many international students described a sense of euphoria in the first moment they arrived on campus. Their orientation weeks offered many possible activities and programs to become involved in. However, students explained that all the newness could be overwhelming, transforming into disorientation and loneliness. These feelings are further compounded by homesickness and culture shock. International students are especially courageous on their arrival and during this period of initial navigation.

“I always go back to when I was in my first week of UofT. You were excited about a new country and new program and really vibrant community, but you also felt loneliness for a while.”

“I think international students can be some of the bravest and most courageous students across the world. It takes a lot of courage to move from [...] everything that is familiar to the unfamiliar, and navigating that process is a phenomenal achievement.” (Staff)

Navigating Educational Newness

Dreaming of a high-quality education, some students mentioned feeling lost in an unfamiliar education system. Feeling overwhelmed with navigating UofT, some international students felt that they floundered in search of information. Disorienting setbacks can have big impacts; international students often face tight deadlines with crucial documents — such as visas and study permits — which, if missed, create cycles of compounding stress, doubt, and isolation.

“It was kind of a mess from the start — I came late, I had some delays with visa, so I had to start a little bit late. So I missed all the opportunities to integrate into both the education system and also the people. On top of that, with me being late and [with] the difficulty with UofT curriculum, I was [...] in a position of having to catch up.”

“Some people just don't know that's how the system works here. They don't expect those [regulations and policies]. So they just come here [and] they're completely isolated socially [...] they don't have peers to keep updated with the rules. They're completely alone.”

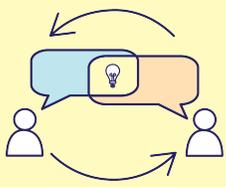
Not Alone in the New

The University offers many options for support, but international students reported that the amount of information they received could be a lot and confusing. International students explained that they tend to seek help from people they know and whom they trust. They reported often trusting information from acquaintances and friends. However, informal networks can also hold the risk of misinformation, including recommendations that are detrimental to international students. International students adapt to their new environment by building networks that they can trust and reach out to for help.

“Word of mouth becomes very key. Students are phenomenal at communicating with each other and getting information to each other quickly, so that's not a resource to be underestimated. On the flip side, they also want to know about authenticity, so, ‘is this information legit? Is this something that is true? Is this something that I can rely on?’” (Staff)

“Yeah, I use the social media in China called WeChat. Yeah, there's housing information posted in the group. We just reach out to them.”

“I don't really much use the support systems, because [...] I had heard from people that the waiting time [is] so long. It is so hard to navigate.”



COMMUNICATING COURAGEOUSLY



Many, though not all, international students expressed that learning and communicating in an unfamiliar language was more challenging than they expected. International students choose UofT for its quality of education, but some students explained that they felt unsure of communicating and working in advanced academic settings. Moreover, cultural differences make it even more difficult for them to be understood by their peers, instructors, and staff. However, with time, practice, and support, international students gain confidence in these areas throughout their studies.

The Courage to Speak Up

International students who identified as multilingual speakers or felt that they had accents felt that sometimes they were underestimated in their contributions. This caused them to lose confidence. It can take courage and time for international students who are multilingual speakers to speak up using an unfamiliar language, but, when encouraged, they explained that they gain the confidence to speak up and generate excellent input into discussions.

"In terms of language level, [domestic students] are definitely more fluent to speak English. [...] But for international students, it's difficult for us to read a paper, and at the same time make friends, and at the same time take care of yourself."

"I don't know how to say that, maybe because of my language. I'm quiet, I'm not confident with my expression, because I always cannot talk English fluently."

"When you just accumulate your courage and just, [for the] first time speak about your thoughts, and you got encouragement or positive feedback [...] that would be the largest encouragement for you to continue to share your good thoughts."

Ambitious Academic Challenges

International students come to UofT to receive a challenging education and encounter cutting edge research from some of the leading professors in their fields. The specialized academic language used in classrooms can become an additional barrier. To adapt to this challenge, students reported seeking help from professors, reading independently, and learning to build their comprehension of academic language as they progressed in their studies.

"When I first came here and heard the professor speak, [...] I was really shocked because none of these terms I heard before. I just felt like it was hard when I heard it, and I thought I was never going to be able to understand, but with time it definitely grew on me. So I feel like, right now, I can never walk into a lecture and not understand it."

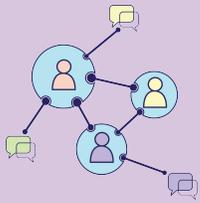
"But the way we construct our English is kind of different. So, it's a bit difficult constructing good sentences that the professors find excellent when we're writing assignments and stuff like that. Yeah, I feel that you kind of need to know what they want."

Understanding Cultural Matters

Understanding cultural differences is crucial to international students' interaction with the broader UofT community. They explained that they often have to spend extra time explaining their cultural context to those unfamiliar with their background. The misunderstanding can go both ways. Sometimes, unfamiliarity with Canadian culture, prevents international student from feeling like they can participate fully. When dealing with cultural differences, international students bravely self-advocated and explained that they feel supported when cultural diversity is taken into account.

"I think every student should be sensitive and understanding that people are from different countries. So, they should know how to communicate with everybody."

"I've never before been to a foreign country [or an] environment with people from all around the world. It's just completely different. So, I couldn't relate to people. I couldn't really understand the social environment, the values, what brings people together, and other things."



MAKING BOLD CONNECTIONS



Being in a new culture and community can make building friendships difficult for international students. They reported occasional difficulties in making friends outside of peers of their own culture or those on a similar walk of life. Their sense of lack of belonging and related struggles (e.g., financial burdens, distance from home, and family expectations) can create additional strains on international students, including relationships with their families. In this process, hearing their voices with empathy is essential to helping them forge strong relationships at UofT.

Finding Friends

International students arrive at UofT with many different backgrounds, ages, and financial situations. Some students explained that they found community through class, clubs, or programs and were able to foster friendships throughout their time. However, their experience was certainly more challenging than those who had pre-existing close connections nearby. Students also explained that the challenge of isolation could be overwhelming at times. Being heard and understood is essential for international students.

“I participated when I first came here in a program called Step Up — it’s for international students. [...] I definitely met so many of my friends that I know now from that program.”

“I got here after working for a couple years, so I felt so much pressure to find a job that can support me to stay here. At class, the classmates from [my] same country with me are younger, so I never felt [that] I can share my struggle with them as they won’t understand my situation.”

Navigating Cultural Familiarity

Some international students who were unfamiliar with Canadian culture reportedly found it difficult to get involved in local social groups. This difficulty stemmed from differences in areas like upbringing, language preferences, and cultural background. As a result, they reported becoming distanced from local students and preferring groups with similar cultural backgrounds when fostering connections.

“Because we share a similar language, similar upbringings, and also ethnicity, I think we just gravitated towards each other. We just hang out more [...] That’s how we cluster.”

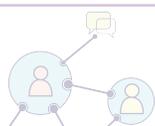
“I feel like in UofT I haven’t spoken English for a long time other than in class, because I only hang out with Chinese people outside of class.”

Family Connections and Challenges

International students often reported that their families are one of their main support systems. But for some, being miles away from family can result in feelings of homesickness. In addition, geographical distance, financial burdens, tuition costs, and family expectations can create additional strain in international students’ relationships with their family. At times, especially in situations where they might have failed or not done as well as they feel their family expected, students spoke about contending with feelings of disappointment, disconnection, and isolation from their family.

“[Failure] was extremely financially difficult for my family and it was also a shock. It did have a significant impact on my relationship with my parents. Since then, it also changed and shaped the way I saw myself [...] Because it wasn’t just about me — whatever happened because of my actions would impact my entire family.”

“It was stressful. [...] I was kind of living with my extended family and family friends, and I did not want to put much pressure on them, so I had to find a housing and everything very soon.”



EXCEPTIONAL TIMES



The COVID-19 pandemic produced unprecedented challenges for everyone, and international students weathered the new normal in exceptional ways. Social distancing created even more barriers to building friendships and remote learning added even more technical difficulties to sustaining their learning progress. Still, international students overcame the additional obstacles of social isolation and remote learning. Their bravery is fully represented by their efforts to seek support and build community. Despite isolation, they created new communities and innovative ways of learning.

International Social Distances



When the pandemic hit, many international students returned home and were forced to stay put due to travel restrictions. Being beyond local borders added extra ‘social’ distance for them. Many had to attend remote classes from different time zones, which made it even more difficult to socialize with their classmates in Toronto and abroad. Students explained that the isolation, screen-fatigue, and time difference took away their capacity and energy to build friendships. Nevertheless, other students adapted to this online environment by employing technology and maintaining connections beyond borders.

“I created a kind of group chat for people who are in similar time zones within my program. And so, it's kind of nice to sometimes complain about the time difference and things like that.”

“My current batchmates play ‘Among Us’ through using Discord. But because of the time difference, I'm always just too tired to keep up. And there's already too much screen time for classes. So, I just don't join.”

Learning over Long Distances



Remote learning brought on many new challenges, such as learning from home, dealing with connectivity issues, and time zone differences. International students reported that these challenges were further compounded with constantly updating COVID-19 policies that they had to stay tuned to. Despite these difficulties, international students found innovative ways to stay engaged with their learning. Most remarkably, many students reported shifting their entire time schedule to suit Eastern Standard Time, with many students tuning into class in the middle of the night in their time zone, showcasing their incredible resilience and determination during these exceptional times.

“We're talking about a quarter of UofT students. That's a significant number, so it's not a handful. This is a significant number of our student population that may have been navigating pretty significant time zone differences.” (Staff)

“The information was changing almost from day to day, I just think the stress of students, having to navigate that on top of [...] — you know what it's like: you're trying to register for courses, there's hiccups at the best of times with getting your academic year started and making deadlines, etc. And then you layer on top of that, well, ‘when should I book my flight? Because we don't know if the ban will be lifted on the state, and if it does, will my classes be offered online until that date.’” (Staff)

BUILDING BRAVERY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Here we offer some guiding ideas to consider when designing for the international student experience, celebrating their success and recognizing the risks they take and the resilience they build in doing so.



CELEBRATE THE COURAGE FOR NEWNESS

Transitioning to a new living space, a new education system, and a new community takes a lot of bravery. Validating international students' courage affirms their accomplishments and helps them understand what they are capable of.

For example, use affirming language that validates international students.



WELCOME BRAVING THE UNFAMILIAR

International students need to juggle unfamiliar governmental, educational, cultural, and social systems. Communicating expectations clearly and unambiguously counteracts any uncertainty or misinformation they encounter.

For example, employ nontechnical terminology when giving written or verbal instructions to better accommodate different levels of familiarity with English.



ENCOURAGE SPEAKING UP

International students can be more intimidated to self-advocate and may face more barriers to speaking up for themselves, such as such as uncertainty about how to problem solve or speak on their own behalf in Canada. Being aware of bias and stereotypes that international students contend with and ensuring that students feel unconditionally supported is critical in fostering international student confidence.

For example, be patient and encouraging when students have difficulty expressing themselves or explaining their issues.



LEAVING THE NEST

The international learning experience doesn't only impact the student, but their family and friends as well. Being cognizant of the unique emotional, psychological, and financial strain that international students experience with their home-based support systems is crucial to appreciating their unique position.

For example, validate students in their relationship-building to affirm their efforts in fostering meaningful connections, communities, and support networks



HONOUR COMPOUNDED CONCERNS

International students face many of the same difficulties and challenges that their domestic peers face, and with their severity compounded by cultural differences, geographic distances, and unfamiliarity. Responses to even common University problems should always be considered with a student's international background in mind.

For example, build cultural diversity training and/or considerations into all programming, services, etc.



NOT A MONOLITH

UofT has international students from 164 different countries and regions, and their needs and fears can vary drastically. Recognizing that each international student brings a different lived experience – cultural, social and familial – is crucial to assisting their navigation of their life at UofT.

For example, as the UofT student population is constantly changing and complex, offer learning opportunities to explore who your 'typical' students are.

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