



## **Confronting and Reimagining the Orientation of International Graduate Students: A Collaborative Autoethnography Approach**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses lived experiences to critically examine the orientation of international graduate students at research-intensive Canadian universities. We, five co-authors, embody diverse ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, national, and gender identities, yet are all (or have been) international graduate students in Canada. Through collaborative autoethnography, we destabilize the notion of “orientation.” We argue that international student orientation should be understood as a fluid, ongoing process rather than one with rigid boundaries and timelines. Furthermore, orientation programming should more deeply consider the intersecting identities and positionalities of international students as multifaceted individuals, as well as the implicit expectations of one-way “integration” into settler-colonial Canadian society. We suggest a different approach to orientation and offer a conceptual framework to guide future practice, highlighting the role



universities play in not only supporting students academically but also in (im)migrant settlement.

## **Welcome...**

*Welcome* is a word we, the five co-authors of this paper, often heard from our respective universities during our early days as international graduate students in Canada. It is also a word connected to our individual research projects in the social sciences. Even though we grew up on different continents, inhabit different social positions, and live in different provinces, we share one formative experience: researching migrant newcomers' experiences *while being welcomed* as newcomers to Canada ourselves.

The word *welcome* originates from the Old English *wil* (desire, pleasure) and *cuma* (guest) or *cuman* (come). This implies a projected desirability onto a temporary outsider. On one level, our university admission letters and study permit approvals rendered us desirable in the eyes of our schools and the Canadian state. Yet all five of us felt, to varying degrees, *unwelcomed* by our so-called host universities, communities, and country—the latter of which is now, also to varying degrees, our home.

This interplay of inclusion and exclusion in which international students are simultaneously and paradoxically both wanted *and* distained is well documented (Indelicato, 2018; King & Raghuram, 2013; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). As we continue to “settle” in this settler-colonial state and increasingly participate in the university’s extension of welcome to others, we feel compelled to interrogate both the university’s role and our role in that extension. This paper thus answers calls to position the socio-political atmosphere as a key area for scholarship by examining (1) the environment created by institutions and (2) the perception of that environment by international students (Friday, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). We do so by analyzing our experiences of international graduate student orientation using a collaborative autoethnographic approach.

Researchers’ positionality and critical self-reflexivity shape both their research questions and content (Karki, 2016). Here, we explicitly acknowledge the influence of our social locations and identities while reframing and theorizing the concept of “orientation.” Although our findings are not necessarily representative, we hope others will benefit from the unearthing of our diverse, typically obscured stories. So. Welcome.

**Takhmina:** Ассалому Алейкум! I came to Canada from Tajikistan as an international PhD student with my family. My thirst for knowledge and dream to follow the footsteps of my educator father and ancestors motivated me to explore other lands and academic opportunities. Because I previously lived abroad as an international student, I thought I was well-prepared for our new journey in Canada. However, while arriving brought excitement and novelty, it simultaneously brought a plethora of challenges and obstacles to overcome.

**Lisa:** Hello! Growing up as a U.S. citizen, I never imagined the category “international student” would apply to me. Although I “studied abroad” during my U.S. undergraduate degree, transferring English-medium courses back to my institution did not fit the Eurocentric narrative of “international” I understood at the time. When researching MA programs, however, Canada stood out as an alluring alternative. Many Canadian programs offered MA funding packages, and, during a time when same-sex marriage was largely illegal in the U.S., Canada seemed like a good place to be queer. Thrilled to earn a degree

in Vancouver without going into debt, I excitedly moved somewhere I (didn't know I) knew little about.

**Karun:** नमस्ते! I am originally from Nepal. The moment I arrived in Canada to pursue a doctoral degree, I realized a set of new assigned identities would define me: international student, visible minority, South Asian, and racialized immigrant. These identities were profoundly dislocating as I transitioned within academic settings and the settlement processes. This dislocation was both traumatizing and transformative, producing a sense of regret and gains, triumphs and failures, and guilt and righteousness. In other words, using Homi Bhabha's term, I found myself in the space of "in-betweenness."

**Capucine:** Bonjour! When I arrived in Quebec from France with my partner to start a PhD, I felt anxious. After years out of school and working professionally, would I be good enough? What did not worry me, though, was settling in and understanding this new country. I spent years studying and working abroad; moreover, I was in a French-speaking environment, and everything seemed easier for French nationals in Quebec. Compared to many other international students, I had it easy and did not consider orientation necessary. The story was different for my partner. While he was excited to accompany me, he did not speak French, and his orientation felt more uncertain.

**Negar:** سلام! I come from Iran. Gaining admission to a highly ranked university in North America was a major accomplishment for me, allowing me to embark on a PhD journey on the northern side of the globe. After applying for a visa and waiting two months for approval, I finally landed in Canada with my spouse. My feelings were mixed; I was thrilled with the opportunity yet concerned about my settlement in an unfamiliar environment.

## **Orienting the Study**

### ***International graduate students in the Canadian context***

Although international student mobility rationales are varied and complex, the Canadian government has, like many countries, historically stressed one: the economic benefits international students contribute to Canada, both during study and after graduation as workers and "ideal" immigrants (McCartney, 2021). Due to intense post-secondary recruitment and internationalization efforts, the number of international students in Canada increased significantly over the past decade. In 2019, 16% of Canadian university enrollments were international (Statistics Canada, 2020), one of the highest proportions in the world (Institute of International Education, 2019). While only 10% of international students studied at the master's level and 2% at the doctorate (Crossman et al., 2021), international students were more likely to enroll at the graduate level than Canadians (Frenette et al., 2019), and international student enrolment in master's programs has risen particularly rapidly (Crossman et al., 2021). Continued international student growth and their retention as immigrants is now positioned as key to Canada's pandemic economic recovery plan (Brunner, 2022b).

Despite the well-publicized benefits to Global North economies, international student mobility remains politicized (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Marginson, 2013). There is dissonance between policies and international students' actual lived experiences, particularly around issues of

discrimination, racism, and marginalization (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Guo & Guo, 2017; Lee & Rice, 2007). Stein and Andreotti describe how a dominant global imaginary based in Western supremacy frames international student recruitment and reception, resulting in racist views of international students as “cash,” “competition,” or “charity” (2016, p. 226).

That said, the unique ways international *graduate* students fit into this global imaginary has not been well-articulated. Research on their experiences is limited (Carson, 2008), especially in the Canadian context (Gopal, 2016). We know that, like international undergraduates, they experience social isolation and culture shock in Canada (Huxur et al., 1996), but the way international graduate students are positioned—e.g., as “cash” or “competition”—is more nuanced. They are a heterogeneous subpopulation, enrolled in programs ranging from expensive MBAs to fully funded PhDs. Yet overall, compared to undergraduates, they are more often recruited and valued for their knowledge production and academic labour (e.g., as research and teaching assistants). Several Canadian provinces administer immigration pathways designed specifically to retain international graduate students, who are among the most sought-after immigrants (Brunner, 2017). They are also more likely to work during studies (Frenette et al., 2019), be older, and have accompanying family members. While further research is needed, their unique orientation needs likely fall somewhere between those associated with international undergraduate students and economic immigrants.

### ***International graduate student university orientation and settlement***

Academic institutions have long oriented students to both local and academic cultures, typically through segregated, in-person group programming. This appears to be valued by international students in Canada, particularly for fostering social connections (Pidgeon & Andres, 2005). However, critical research on international student orientation, particularly for graduate students, is limited. Among that which exists, four main critiques emerge: (1) logistical mismatching, (2) depoliticization, (3) tensions between settlement and scope, and (4) diversity management techniques.

(1) *Logistical mismatching*: While most formal orientation programming occurs only at the start of studies, Mehra (2004) suggested that international graduate students experience *eight* non-hierarchical phases of orientation, necessitating support over an extended period of time. In addition, many orientations problematically rely on the broad administrative classification of “international student,” taking a “one size fits all” approach while ignoring significant differences within the population (Kenyon et al., 2012). These critiques point to a mismatch between student experiences and institutional practices.

(2) *Depoliticization*: In part due to the lack of critical perspectives among practitioners (Castro et al., 2016), international student service programming often takes a “race-blind approach” (Nikoi, 2019, p. 403), ignoring issues of racism and colonialism. As a result, universities do not sufficiently handle “the historical, cultural, and epistemic heritage [international students] bring with them, negotiate, and grapple with during their studies” (Ploner & Nada, 2020, p. 386). Chen (2021) found that “without critical and ethical intervention, international students/scholars in Canadian universities ... can face significant barriers to developing nuanced understandings of the ongoing violence [of settler colonialism], let alone reflecting on their own complicity and responsibility” (p. 745). Because international students’ challenges are “shaped by the racialized regimes they must live through to learn” (Nikoi, 2019, p. 404), institutions need to go beyond “cultural adjustment and transitional issues” to help students “face the reality of a changing

landscape of social and political stability” (Friday, 2018, p. 79). These critiques urge a re-evaluation of an orientation’s purpose and what is included in, and excluded from, its curriculum.

(3) *Tensions between settlement and scope*: Many locate universities’ imperative to provide international student orientation within ethics of duty and care (Coate & Rathnayake, 2013). However, another imperative in the Canadian context relates to (1) a neoliberal shift from government-funded to privatized immigration settlement services and (2) an increasing dependence on international students as future immigrants, both of which refashion universities as *de facto* settlement service providers (Brunner 2022a; Flynn & Bauder, 2014; Karki et al., 2018; Walton-Roberts, 2011). Universities are not explicitly funded, trained, or prepared for this role, yet settlement services agencies are typically not funded to serve temporary residents such as international students,<sup>1</sup> resulting in a significant gap in services (Goh, 2019; Johnstone & Lee, 2014).

Consequently, international graduate students lack adequate services in areas more commonly associated with immigrant settlement (and thus not prioritized by universities). Among adjustment challenges such as language, academics, and social connections, for example, navigating financial/legal systems (Calder et al., 2016) and finding housing are difficult due to lack of access to credit or guarantors (Preston et al., 2006; Womujuni, 2007) and rental discrimination (Godley, 2018). Accompanying partners of international students also face issues, e.g., lack of appropriate services and programs and parenting demands (Cui et al., 2017; Lei et al., 2015). Some have called for universities to reflect these settlement needs in orientations (e.g., Rains, 2015). Yet administrative efficiencies encouraged by the commercialization of internationalization leave university international student support offices chronically underfunded (Reisberg & Rumbley, 2014). This raises questions regarding the scope of university orientation and the broader societal responsibility for temporary residents’—increasingly future immigrants—settlement.

(4) *Diversity management techniques*: Critiques of newcomer adjustment expectations, or “diversity management” (Houtkamp, 2015), are also informative to critiques of orientation. These attempt to differentiate between forms of acculturation, such as “assimilation” (in which minority groups are expected to conform to the majority culture of their “host” society) (Gordon, 1964) and “integration” (implying a reciprocal, mutual adjustment between both cultures) (Berry, 1980). Because assimilation and integration are now often used interchangeably, “inclusion” (Houtkamp, 2015) and “two-way integration” are sometimes employed to (i) emphasize a *relational* approach occurring “between insiders and outsiders” and (ii) call attention to questions of power and legitimization (Klarenbeek, 2021, p. 914).

While this paper cannot fully attend to diversity management’s complexities, we raise them here because universities have been criticized for *assimilating* international graduate students (Kwok, 2016, p. 25). In addition, research tends to focus on the student acculturation process rather than the institutional structures governing them (Gopal, 2016). Despite calls to conceptualize orientation as a two-way learning process (Mehra, 2004), this is not the norm.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Building upon the existing critical research on international student orientation, our analysis is primarily informed by intersectionality, one of the central ways feminist research understands the experiences of individuals positioned within the web of systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989;

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<sup>1</sup> This is slowly changing; see Goh (2019).

Davis, 2008; Hill Collins & Birge, 2016). In this study, we use intersectionality as a “starting point” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 5) to analyze the experiences of international students within the interlocking systems of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality stresses that structures of domination cannot be reduced to one cause, as no one is unidimensional (Goodkind et al., 2021). Hill Collins and Birge (2016) argue that “people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not only by a single axis of social division, be it race, or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (p.11).

Hence, this theoretical lens—coupled with critical reflection (Mattsson, 2014)—offers an opportunity to understand the complex experiences of international students and how they are affected by social systems and discourses. Engagement with critical reflection and intersectionality also offers us an opportunity to move away from binary assumptions and frameworks. Intersectionality avoids creating knowledge colonized by a specific positionality, rather presenting an opportunity to hear excluded or marginalized voices (Gregson et al., 2013). Epistemologically, intersectionality reveals unexpected things and allows researchers to be more open to findings contrasting with our viewpoints; this, in turn, helps to produce partial, embodied, and situated knowledge (England, 2006).

## **Methodology**

Coming from the social constructionist position arguing that reality, meaning, and knowledge are socially constructed (Wahyuni, 2012), we engaged with an autoethnographic approach using researchers’ personal experiences as primary data. Autoethnographic research has produced rich accounts of international student experiences (e.g., Chen, 2021; Kim, 2020; Samanhudi, 2021). However, a specifically *collaborative* autoethnographic (CAE) practice considers multidimensional (e.g., disciplinary and experiential) perspectives through a “more rigorous, polyvocal analysis” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 598; Toyosaki et al., 2009). CAE is a qualitative method, assisting researchers to probe their lived experiences and reflect on their socio-cultural meanings through analysis and interpretation (Vellanki & Prince, 2018). The collaboration of multiple researchers gives voice to social and cultural concerns by pooling autobiographical materials together (Kim & Reichmuth, 2021); thus, as a process of group meaning-making, CAE enriches the exploration of our experiences and identities (Choi et al., 2021).

CAE has been used to explore the nuanced, everyday complexities of identity and mobility in higher education by PhD students (Choi et al., 2021; Seniuk Cicek et al., 2020), international students (Roy et al., 2021; Vellanki & Prince, 2018), and foreign-born faculty (Cruz et al., 2020; Hernandez et al., 2015; Kim & Reichmuth, 2021; Muller & Adamson, 2018). Still, the method remains underutilized in understanding (1) international graduate student experiences, especially in Canada, and (2) their orientation more specifically.

By utilizing CAE, we engaged in the collective study of the self in telling and analyzing the lived stories emerging from our autoethnographic processes. To establish a creative analytic process, each co-author contributed a narrative focusing on the question: *What was your lived experience of university orientation as an international graduate student in Canada?* We then collectively crafted the following questions for self-reflection:

- 1) What is my story of orientation?
- 2) How did the orientation process make me feel?
- 3) What were the strengths and weaknesses of my orientation?
- 4) How would I re-imagine the orientation?

These questions helped us craft our autoethnographic stories, which we then analyzed.

We began the analysis process individually, then discussed our stories and self-analyses collectively. Through weekly virtual meetings over the course of three months, we systematically discussed each story. As we developed trust, these ongoing conversations became helpful not only as a way to deepen and complexify our findings but also as a form of self-empowerment. The CAE approach was liberating in its ability to shed light on experiences of marginalization, white supremacy, oppression, and coloniality in the context of orientation (Chen, 2021). The structured, repeated nature of the task provoked conversations we might not otherwise have had, with colleagues we might not otherwise have connected with.

Through inductive coding, several themes emerged representing our main insights. In the next section, we present these findings, within which we weave our stories.

## **Findings**

We organized our stories using themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An overarching commonality was the ongoing nature of orientation and our desire to frame the process not through the dominant frame of temporality but through a frame of continuous relationality. Because our universities offered orientation primarily during the first weeks after our arrival, we recalled feeling an unsaid expectation to quickly adapt to many sudden, simultaneous changes. However, based on our findings, this expectation was not only unrealistic but damaging in its impact on our self-esteem and willingness to remain open to slower, more transformative (re)orientations.

We expand on our experience of orientation and its connection to ongoing continuity through the following themes: 1) a search for inclusion and belonging, 2) the invisibility of families, and 3) reproducing colonial legacies.

### ***Theme 1: A search for inclusion and belonging***

This theme focuses on our collective struggles while seeking to meet both material (e.g., study permits, housing) and social (e.g., sense of belonging) needs. We explore this theme through three sub-themes presented below: a) immigration struggles, b) settlement challenges, and c) seeking a sense of belonging.

*Immigration struggles.* In this sub-theme, we discuss our experiences with Canada's migration regime during the initial phase of our graduate student journey. The strict entry requirements of Global North countries require international students to negotiate a complex administrative immigration system (Beech, 2017; Madge et al., 2014), and several of us faced immigration challenges at the start of our journey. Our inclusion into the university and country was thus conditional and contingent on issues seemingly unrelated to our studies, such as funding, potential job opportunities, or strong ties with family members in our countries of origin. One co-author described their difficulty obtaining a study permit:

My visa was rejected twice. The rejection letter stated that I did not have sufficient (1) funds to support my study, (2) travel history, and (3) strong social, economic, and/or family ties in my home country. These reasons did not make any sense because (1) I had a full four-year scholarship from my university and an additional bank balance to cover my entire expenses for at least one year, even without the scholarship, (2) my passport contained stamps from six countries, including the U.S., and (3) my family, including my wife,

parents, siblings—not to mention my home, property, and everything else—remained in my home country. Only after the third attempt was my permit issued.

Because minimum requirements were met in all three of the co-author's applications, the actual rejections rationales remain unclear. However, immigration officers hold significant discretionary powers and are influenced by racial biases (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2021), and applications from the Global South are disproportionately refused (Champagne, 2021; Tao, 2021). IRCC's operational guidelines for assessing temporary resident applications note that "even if the person's ties to the home country seem to be strong, there may be other factors in the general economic or political environment which make the long-term prospects for the person or their family unstable" (IRCC, 2019, sec. 4). It can thus be difficult for applicants to overcome officer's concerns, over which they may have no control.

Another co-author faced less, but still meaningful, entry difficulties, which she did not expect as a U.S. citizen:

Getting into graduate school was the hard part, I thought; immigration paperwork for Canada seemed like a mere formality. To my surprise, the border officer was unsatisfied with my application's proof of funds, which relied on teaching assistantships "contingent on enrolment." The officer wanted to see proof of liquid funds to ensure I would not burden the Canadian welfare system, but I had none.

Although these administrative refusals had uneven impacts, our self-esteem and impression of Canada were impacted. We felt embarrassed, and sometimes frustrated and angry, for not succeeding despite being selected in competitive processes to contribute to Canadian higher education. The mixed messaging of a conditional inclusion influenced our life in Canada from the start.

We also struggled to obtain permanent residency (PR) within an immigration system that felt unfair. A co-author shared,

International PhD students can usually only apply for PR after graduating and then working for a year or more. International students who complete shorter programs, like a one-year college program, can earn PR more quickly. Not being able to gain PR for so many years put me in a tough situation, making it difficult to overcome the hardships of my PhD journey and be able to reach my goals.

Since a federal skilled worker PR program for PhD students ended in the mid-2010s, it is now impossible for most PhD students to obtain PR until after graduating. Even some programs targeting graduates are becoming more selective (e.g., as seen during the recent reform of the Programme de l'expérience Québécoise [Quebec Experience Program], in which work experience requirements were increased for international students).

PhD programs can take four to six years or more to complete, resulting in a particularly long period of precarious temporary residence status during a stage in life when immigration status uncertainties can have significant impacts on family and career decisions. For many of us, immigration-related difficulties began with the initial study permit application and continued for years, exacerbating a sense of exclusion and marginalization.

*Settlement challenges.* Another common theme connects to our settlement experiences. For example, those who were racialized and not native speakers of the dominant language had



particular difficulties navigating the housing market, while all of us struggled with a lack of credit. Even though we expected our schools to help, the first weeks of orientation did not address our most immediate needs. Student housing was not consistently available for international students with accompanying families and/or graduate students, as one co-author shared:

Where am I going to live? This was my top concern. Because I arrived with my husband, I was excluded from campus residences. I had no choice other than to search off-campus. The necessity of credit history or guarantor in all the housing applications was the greatest barrier. I recall being ignored, even when I offered to pay six months' rent in advance. This was a really challenging time, since I also had to handle my school responsibilities. After looking for housing for weeks without any luck, I was at the end of my rope. I wondered if my efforts to reach Canada were in fact to reach somewhere with nowhere for me to settle. Could I follow my dreams?

In addition, navigating systems to access services was a challenging endeavor. One of us, for example, felt like a "soccer ball":

After orientation, I asked different departments how to access education, immunizations, and other services my family members needed. The answer was always the same—the repetition of a memorized text which did not answer my questions. I was not referred to other places where I could receive services for my family members. I did not know where to seek this information. What institution should I approach? Where are they located? I felt like a soccer ball pushed from one corner to another. No one could sit down with me and explain the process, besides either saying, "Sorry, but no," or providing links to systems I had no clue about.

Similarly, another co-author shared the complexities navigating services in university:

Due to my study permit challenges, I arrived in Canada a few weeks after classes started. I visited the international student office for support, expecting to get some sort of orientation related to housing, health and wellness, academic support. Sadly, I was only given vague information such as "visit this website, read this handbook, go to that office." Maybe student advisors didn't have adequate knowledge about how to provide information for international students. I found their approach to orientation guided by a problematic "one size fits all" approach.

The author shared that, even though international students were promised many exciting opportunities during their university years, the reality was different. Accessing services was challenging:

Although the university's website has colorful pictures and descriptions of programs and services (networking, social and cultural events, etc.) for international students, I personally found those services just a display. On the ground level, I found it less practical. I found the navigation system was a complex, lengthy process and inadequate. I realized that these services were designed and positioned to international students, not for them.

Thus far, we discussed the complexities of navigating the immigration system and settlement process. The complex roads to meeting our needs were not only frustrating and stressful—they

also contributed to our sense of estrangement and lack of belonging, which we explore in the next section.

*Seeking a sense of belonging.* A sense of alienation and unfamiliarity with a new environment and culture can isolate international students and have major impacts on their mental health (Friday, 2018; Womujuni, 2007). Several of us found this to be true. Our stories contained feelings of isolation and estrangement, which led to a lack of sense of belonging. For example, one of us shared:

Orientation was busy and isolating. I did not know anyone, while others did not know me. I felt like a “stranger among strangers.” I felt bombarded with the information that was pouring into me as if I was an “empty vessel.” We heard presenter after presenter telling us about graduate university life, but I felt lost because of the lack of guidance and connection. It would be erroneous to say I did not get an understanding about university life, because I did take some lessons with me. Yet, equally, I never saw anything offered to international students who came to Canada with their families.

Similarly, another co-author did not feel represented and included within the university. They shared:

From the very first day in the university, I did not see any diversity among the employees; they were relatively homogenous, with a majority being white and Canadian-born. I wondered how international students would be served if the institution did not have a single person with an international background?

Furthermore, a number of us came from what we consider to be more communal societies where we embody the values of community. We realized student orientation in Canada was a highly individualized process that lacked a community-building component. While the feelings of separation and estrangement started beforehand, the formal orientation process intensified these feelings.

The exclusion was, of course, experienced unevenly. Again, those of us who were racialized and not native speakers of the dominant language experienced a more acute lack of belonging. However, we all had experiences of alienation, including our co-author who came from the U.S.:

When facing the Canadian border officer and telling her about my lack of funds, the pride I felt in becoming a graduate student was deflated by shame, forcing me to acknowledge that I was, indeed, an international student and could be refused entry for financial reasons. The academic validation I had relied on for my upward class mobility—alongside unearned privileges as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, native English speaker—had gotten me far. Yet it was not, I learned that day, unassailable.

In this overall theme, we showed how the challenges we encountered related to immigration and settlement exacerbated our sense of separation and non-belonging. We now turn to the next theme of families.

## ***Theme 2: Invisibility of families***

The invisibility of families in our orientation processes emerged as our second theme. Our findings indicate that students and their families are inseparable. However, this recognition was absent in orientation. We probe this main theme through two sub-themes: a) interconnectedness between students and families and b) juggling multiple responsibilities.

*Interconnectedness between students and families.* Through our stories, we discussed the inseparable interconnectedness between students and their accompanying families. We stressed that our school life could not be separated from our personal life, and our wellbeing could not be separated from our academic progress. They are tightly interconnected, as are our experiences with people we meet during our life journey and the overall environment. However, we did not see this understanding within university programs supporting international graduate students. For example, one of us shared,

My emotional wellbeing was highly dependent on the emotional and physical wellbeing of my family, as we are parts of one interconnected unit. I wanted to ensure that my family felt that they belonged and had access to adequate education, healthcare, job opportunities, and our new community as a whole.

Our family members were also interconnected with our legal status, as their Canadian status depended on ours. However, universities did not appear to see students' families as their concern. For example, another co-author shared,

The university services do not seem to include accompanying family members. It is surprising because my partner, like many others, came with an open work permit attached to my student permit. It means that my partner's stay is linked to mine. However, the university did not consider that international students may come with the family.

Later, one of us also shared challenges in obtaining required documentation for their partner:

I contacted the student office a few times before applying for my partner's open work permit. Delays were stressful, as we cannot risk being on maintained status during processing because I would lose my healthcare and scholarship. Some information was especially hard to find, including the documents we needed to gather. The information eventually provided by the international student office was nothing I could not find myself. They directed me to their website, which did not provide any information on documents for partners. I was taken aback. Again, it appeared clear that accompanying families are mostly invisible, or not considered in-scope, for universities.

Similarly, another co-author shared the difficulties accessing a twelve-month maternity leave as an international student. The lack of information from the university and other services, and fear of jeopardizing their student permit and spouse's work permit, forced the co-author to continue studies with a newborn in her hands.

*Juggling multiple responsibilities.* Here, we highlight the multiple responsibilities we juggled to ensure the wellbeing of our accompanying families, for whom we were the main reason for relocation. We either embodied the responsibility for our families, or we supported their adjustment process due to language (or other) barriers. We had to enroll children in school and

help partners in job searches or language training. We had a lot on our plates yet did not feel it was acknowledged. One co-author discussed the feeling of continuous responsibility they felt towards their family:

Because my academic journey was the main reason we came to Canada, I felt full responsibility for urging my family to move to an entirely new continent. Besides the worries about my new long-term educational milestone in life, I was equally worried about my family and how they would settle. As soon as we arrived, I looked for a school and extracurricular activities for my daughter, as I wanted her to feel happy in a new place so far from her friends and grandparents.

The co-author also shared the constant feeling of guilt for “stealing” time from their children as they juggled time spent studying and navigating the complex systems. The orientation process did not acknowledge the multiple responsibilities those with families juggle. Another co-author also shared their difficulty finding language courses for their partner while navigating school:

My partner did not speak French. I dealt with all our administrative procedures and supported him when necessary. It was not supposed to be a problem for much longer, as I knew he was eligible for free French courses provided by the Government of Québec. A few days after landing in Canada, he applied for the courses. However, the organisation informed us that his migration status did not allow him to access this service. It was a stressful time.

As seen from another co-author’s experience, neither universities nor social services were well-equipped to support students’ partners. International graduate students who brought family members thus faced extra difficulties during the initial period of studies.

### ***Theme 3: Reproducing colonial legacies***

The third major theme that emerged from the analysis of our stories was our perspective of orientation as the reproduction of colonial legacies. Here, we explore this theme through three sub-themes: the a) depoliticization of orientation, b) heterogeneity of international students, and c) mythical binary between international and domestic students.

*Depoliticization of orientation.* Here we discuss how orientation was problematically depoliticized. This was reflected in the number of salient topics omitted in the programming. Even though international graduate students *do* require logistical information related to settlement, they equally need to be included in conversations related to racism, colonialism, anti-immigrant sentiments, relationships between indigenous peoples and settler-migrants, and their complicity and responsibilities within such systems. One of us shared:

Some helpful topics were covered during orientation sessions; navigating Canadian immigration, health insurance, and banking did prove to be more complex than I anticipated. But some were missing. What did “unceded territory” mean? Reconciliation? Settler-migrant? And what would it really feel like to spend years building a career while waiting, precariously, for permanent residence?

The co-author stressed the importance of conversations about colonialism, power, and privilege in the Canadian context:

Orientations relying on an overly simplistic domestic/international binary and avoiding conversations around colonialism, racism, and other systems of discrimination tied up in internationalized higher education miss a unique opportunity to deliver potentially transformative programming.

Issues of racism were not included in our orientation events, even though three of us experienced significant racism within the larger community. Emotionally, we were not prepared for these experiences, and we were not equipped with skills to cope with, challenge, or deconstruct them. Another co-author shared,

I am a visible minority international student. This makes me vulnerable to experience discriminatory practices in the housing market, the labor market, and generally the public. This is what I sometimes experience because of my visible characteristics and my English accent, even when simply saying hello to my apartment manager or asking a secretary for an appointment.

Even one of us who is a non-racialized student shared the emotional experience of encountering a challenge, while recognizing privilege at the same time:

What should have been obvious was, I am now ashamed to admit, genuinely unsettling. I was not new to exclusionary experiences; for example, I had felt negative impacts of homophobia, but I had also internalized messaging that my queerness was undesirable. I had not grown up with the message that U.S. citizens would be anything less than welcomed at a foreign border. I had also not recognized my intellectual “contributions” as possible threats in the context of protectionist labor market competition. I may have known these things, in some abstract way, but had never felt them.

In our weekly analysis meetings, we discussed many microaggressions that we experienced and (unintentionally) contributed towards. Our stories demonstrated our wish to be included into important conversations around racism and colonialism in Canada and to explore and unsettle our own settlerhood (Elkchirid et al., 2020), prepare for difficult experiences, and more deeply question our place in such systems.

*Heterogeneity of international students.* In this sub-theme, we focus on the subject of “international student” as constructed through a prism of homogeneity. While universities often perceive international students as one homogeneous, monolithic group in orientations, our stories demonstrate that this is a mythical perspective. A pool of university students is very diverse; international students represent different social positionalities, experiences, and nationalities. Our experiences of privilege and marginalization in Canada intersected with our unique social and personal identities. One of us indicated,

Many of my questions arose after the “orientation” event. However, it felt like once we finished the “orientation,” that was the end. My various positionalities were not fully recognized within the university structure. Yes, I was an international graduate student, but that was just one tiny part of my identity. The other intersecting identities were not recognized as a woman, mother, wife, racialized person, etc.

Because international students have varying needs, orientations that do not attend to such nuances and adequately communicate their purpose may inadvertently exclude certain students. Another co-author from the U.S. mentioned,

My university organized “regular” and “international” orientation events, but I questioned which were for me. Because most “international” programming discussed things like cultural adjustment and English language resources, I assumed they were not relevant for me.

One of us, a student from France in Quebec, also talked about certain privileged identities we can encompass as international students and how they can interplay with other experiences. She shared,

French students coming to Quebec are privileged as they have a right to provincial healthcare and pay the same fees as domestic students from Quebec. The certain agreements reflect the privileged relationship between France and Quebec, stemming from its colonial past, and the fact that French migrants are seen as particularly desirable.

Comparatively, French students in Quebec face less barriers than most international students in Canada, a point that significantly impacted this co-author’s experience. However, they were impacted in other ways due to additional aspects of their positionality. In this and many other instances, we felt that we were not seen holistically by the university as a heterogeneous group with significantly varying and intersecting identities that can never be separated.

*Mythical binary between international and domestic students.* In our final sub-theme, we explore the constructed binary between international and domestic students. Even though we ourselves pointed out particular international graduate student needs, we (perhaps paradoxically) challenge the overuse of that distinction and question this mythical binary.

One of the co-authors, for example, talked about the segregation of international and domestic students. His desire to connect with a range of domestic and international students was not reflected in his orientation programming:

I attended a few events called “student networking,” organized for international students. 99% of the attendees were international students. I think such events further segregate and divide international and domestic students.

In another example, another co-author shared the seemingly arbitrary difference between a domestic and international student in terms of service provision:

I volunteered to work with students who recently arrived in Canada as permanent residents. They were considered “domestic” students by the university, but their needs were similar to those of “international” students. I later observed the same thing with students who had Canadian citizenship by birth but had never lived here. They paid domestic tuition rates yet had more settlement challenges than some students who had spent years in Canada as temporary residents.

This experience demonstrates the complexity around international students in the Canadian context. It is not easy to separate international and domestic students in a country like Canada, as

there are new immigrants and citizen students alike who have never lived in Canada (Jones, 2017). Should we really create a rigid boundary between domestic and international students, especially in relation to the services provided and the tuition fees charged? This question emerged in our stories.

## **Discussion**

Our stories emphasize the foundational interweaving of (1) our position as graduate students and (2) the temporary migrant experience. This resulted in many commonalities. However, as expected, the stories also highlight how the interconnectedness between age, race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of difference construct our experiences. Taken together, our stories draw attention to the significance of intersectionality as key to understanding the complexity of experience within the monolithic term “international student.”

Our findings demonstrate the tensions between the temporally bound nature of traditional international graduate student orientation and the lack of connections that emerged due to the rigidity of the process. They point to a need for thoughtfully designed orientations, practiced as a continuous, relational process that recognizes the unique settlement needs of, and amongst, international graduate students in all their manifestations. They also discourage (1) artificially imposed boundaries where they do not need to exist and (2) shying away from difficult conversations about power, race, and colonialism. In essence, this paper supports Gopal’s (2016) call for more institutional accountability to “welcome” students—yet that welcome can no longer be conditional.

In many ways, our findings support existing literature suggesting incremental ways to improve international graduate student orientation, including logistical changes universities can easily take. Virtual pre-arrival orientations might help set realistic expectations and alleviate the stress of the first few weeks in Canada (Huxur et al., 1996; Kwok, 2016). More “refresher” sessions and scheduled check-ins would better attend to long-term wellbeing needs (Friday, 2018; Pidgeon & Andres, 2005; Womujuni, 2007). A more cohesive support network between governments, education institutions, settlement service organizations, and local immigration partnerships may also fill gaps (Goh, 2019).

On a more conceptual level, our paper contributes in two additional ways. First, our findings indicate that international graduate students’ broader settlement issues *are* orientation issues and should be fully considered as such by universities. Many students, regardless of their immigration status, may face similar issues such as off-campus housing or experiences of racism; however, international students’ challenges are uniquely compounded due to their status as temporary residents, and international *graduate* students in particular face long-term precarious status. This status interweaves with the larger education experience.

And yet, our findings indicate that many Canadian universities do not provide sufficient settlement support for international graduate students. Most have offices dedicated to supporting international students, but the resources and expertise available vary greatly (Calder et al., 2016; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Reichert, 2020). Because international graduate students are recruited by universities under study permits and provide significant benefits to their academic communities, we suggest that universities have an ethical responsibility to at least partially address these specific challenges. We concur with Arthur that the “recruitment of international students to higher education must be matched with preparation and resources that foster supportive academic and interpersonal experiences” (2017, p. 892). Even if universities do not ultimately provide the settlement services themselves, we contend that they should take more active responsibility in

facilitating partnerships with governments to ensure their recruitment does not cause undue harm. In Canada's three-step education-migration immigration system (Brunner, 2022a), international students are positioned as future Canadians, and universities should ensure their settlement is prioritized beyond rhetoric.

Secondly, institutions should revisit their epistemological approach to orientation and (re)-center student identities, recognizing that international graduate student mobility presents an inherently colonial process to navigate for all involved. Although Canadian universities are structurally dependent on international graduate students, they also wield incredible institutional power due to the aforementioned global imaginary (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). The epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) of Global North superiority continues to reproduce "prevailing 'deficit' and 'assimilationist' approaches" that are based "in the postcolonial epistemic heritage of European [higher education] and rarely consider the emotional impacts this discrimination may have on students' confidence and sense of belonging" (Ploner & Nada, 2020, p. 384). These "deficit" approaches are problematic and should be reconstructed by applying strength-based and empowerment approaches to programming.

By omitting crucially important topics and refusing to see us as complex individuals, orientation as we experienced was an example of university processes "in which postcolonial heritage is being constantly (and often tacitly) constructed, reinvented, and performed through everyday social practices and cultural encounters" (Ploner & Nada, 2020, p. 375). Although well-intentioned, it felt transactional and superficial, without genuine attention to our needs. Universities need to rethink the current one-way integration emphasis "on '*them*' joining '*us*,'" and shift to learning "*with and from* the diversity of international student learners" (Arthur, 2017, p. 892). Indeed, it is only by mastering the Western academic norms of journal article publication that we are in a position to speak back to our universities in a meaningful way.

## **Possible Reorientations**

We hesitate to prescribe what a "better" orientation would look like. There are no easy solutions to what is, necessarily, a complex topic. Instead, based on our collective analysis, we offer a conceptual framework highlighting key considerations for those wishing to re-conceptualize orientation programming. Although our study focused on international graduate student experiences in Canada specifically, we suspect this framework will be useful in guiding orientation programming for international students at all levels and in many contexts.

We place continuity at the center of a model shaped like a flower, representing its centrality to the process. The surrounding petals represent six interconnected principles:

1. Embrace all students as whole, complex beings with attention to different positionalities;
2. Recognize the inseparable interconnectedness between international students, their families, the broader (university) community, and all our global entanglements;
3. Facilitate sober conversations about historical/ongoing (settler) colonialism, racism, and other forms of violence and discrimination, including our complicity and responsibility;
4. Foster and model values of empathy, care, and mutuality, without paternalistic or salvationist motives;
5. Prioritize a cohesive sense of belonging through two-way/mutual orientation opportunities;
6. Make space for critique, self-reflexivity, and honest conversations about inequities and power imbalance within institutional structures.





Figure 1: International student orientation re-imagined: A conceptual framework for orientation programming.

Orientation can be so much more than a slide deck presented in a lecture hall. We might learn from educators such as Rogers (2019), who shares their journey towards a pedagogy seeking to enact cognitive justice by valuing a plurality of knowledges and inviting international students to join as co-investigators of knowledge. We can also learn from the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective, which designs pedagogical interventions to uncoercively rearrange colonial desires (Spivak, 2004). Their *Letter to prospective immigrants to what is known as Canada*, for example, extends “an invitation to make space” for difficult “conversations about relationships at the interface between Indigenous and immigrant communities” (2021, para. 2). By reconsidering orientation and notions of integration, we might move away from *welcoming* desired guests towards *relating* and *learning* with each other in a shared world, and all the complexities, power imbalances, and violence that relating and learning entails.

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and Pathways to Prosperity for its facilitation of the Standing Committee of Students and Junior Scholar Engagement, which brought us co-authors together. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pathways to Prosperity National Conference in November 2021.

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