Five ways to better build community with international students in Canada

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It's no exaggeration to say every academic and professional involved in recruiting, teaching or supporting international students in Canada is now concerned about institutions' plans following [the federal government's two-year cap on international student permits](#).

Beyond [financial consequences](#), many believe this cap will potentially [jeopardize the diversity of](#) university life. This is of concern in a country that has been known for multicultural and multilingual learning and working environments.

["Internationalization" policies or strategic priorities](#) [of governments and universities alike](#) have had stated goals of integrating international dimensions into higher education teaching, research, services and goals.

[For example, internationalization](#) of the curriculum is about building a globally-focused curriculum, which helps students develop competencies like intercultural communication and [international collaboration](#). It could also mean, for example, studying international cases in course topics, inviting international speakers or conducting project-based assignments in collaboration with international peers.

Such policies should inform [research funding](#), academic exchange programs and international partnerships. Yet [research shows](#) a growing gap between policies and strategic priorities affirming the value of cultural exchange and intercultural learning and the experiences of undergraduate international students across Canada.

This gap includes slowness in designing international curricula, and treating internationalization simply as a way to [increase international student enrollment](#). This approach ignores how both campus and broader community members can benefit from innovative activities that engage

international students.

How students experience belonging

It's important to think about [students' sense of belonging, as well as their aspirations and dedication](#) to their learning communities on campus and elsewhere as newcomers in Canada.

But "engagement" should also be about how post-secondary communities can make space for international students' knowledges, skills, life experiences and cultures as part of creating more inclusive and equitable environments.

In 2022, I conducted my doctoral study focused on virtual student exchange. Participants in the study were international university students enrolled in a credited English as a Second Language course in Toronto, and students in an English-language communication course in Jordan.

I was surprised to learn that almost all international student participants in Canada said the virtual exchange was their first "real" intercultural exchange in their university study. Such a reflection perhaps indicates that we are too confident about assuming that learning in a multicultural environment facilitates intercultural learning while in reality they can be more alienating for local and international students alike.

It is important to reflect on activating internationalization policies to support international students' learning and mobility. The following initiatives enable local and international students to exchange worldviews and experiences. They also can potentially help institutions live out internationalization in more inclusive ways.

1. Building translation communities

The diversity of languages spoken by international students in Canada is visible. With the support of peers and educators, international students could use their language abilities to serve as volunteer translators in their programs or other organizations in need of translation services in the local community.

For example, the Language Bank Program at the University of Michigan fulfills the translation needs of non-profit organizations and other local community parties.

By co-ordinating frequent cycles of translation marathons on campus known as Translate-A-Thon, student and faculty volunteer translators, and even professional translators, join to collaborate and complete translation projects.

By joining such projects, international students develop professional skills and gain confidence through serving the community they live in.

2. Podcasts

Podcasts manage to create an intimate environment where the host, guests and listeners connect through real-life experiences.

International students in Canada are still subject to racism and stereotypes. Co-producing podcasts about shared interests with student peers is an opportunity for students to break misconceptions about one another.

Such collaboration also challenges arbitrary dichotomies like "native speaker/non-native speaker" and "expert-learner."

Podcasts can educate all students about global issues and inspire them to know more about the local and global communities they are part of.

Universities or instructors can use a range of [podcasting approaches](#) to suit them and their student population.

3. Curriculum design labs

There have been many calls for [involving students in co-designing curricular materials](#). This can be a way to integrate their learning needs and global perspectives in teaching.

Under faculty members' supervision, former international and local students could serve as content co-creators by designing classroom activities, assignments and project-based learning opportunities for future students in university courses.

The [Content Creation Lab](#) of Global Nomads Group, a not-for-profit organization that supports virtual youth exchange, allows youth to design courses that address important issues including Sustainable Development Goals.

This example can be adopted in higher education contexts. Curriculum design labs can enrich international knowledges and skills of faculty and students. Such labs can also foster a sense of empathy and compassion towards local and global struggles.

4. Mentorship programs

Mentorship programs empower students with confidence and leadership skills, and support both mentors and mentees in feeling valued and appreciated.

Senior international students can provide guidance, academic and emotional support for their newcomer peers. Through mutual exchange,

all have the opportunity to learn about and appreciate diversity.

Student or teacher mentorship programs to support academic and professional development goals are common. More innovative mentorship programs, however, aim for students to mentor faculty or staff members to learn about students' experiences.

The Student Experience [Mentorship Program at the University of Toronto](#) connects staff and faculty with a student mentor.

When adopted to include international students, such mentorship opportunities could challenge perspectives on life-long learning, authority, and collaboration between students and faculty or staff. More importantly, they can elicit meaningful and critical engagement with what internationalization means and how it is practiced.

5. International students' views

In academic institutions, students are usually expected to complete course evaluations to help improve course design and implementation.

Current research and institutional practices [have mainly focused on international student performance and graduation rates as indicators of success or effectiveness of internationalization strategies](#) and frameworks.

Surveying international students' needs and challenges—and how they understand "internationalization"—[are still overlooked when setting and revising policies relevant to their lives](#).

University administrations should conduct frequent questionnaires and focus groups. These can address strategy gaps and revise approaches to professional development, building international partnerships and

developing relevant resources to support [international students](#).

Higher education institutions need to revisit the meaning of internationalization as a complex and dynamic concept. International students should be perceived as collaborators rather than sources of university income to make their studies and larger journeys valuable for all members of the university community.

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