

**Embracing Growth in the International Student Population:
a Transformative Process for both University and Community**

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Professional staff, faculty members and administrators in universities in Canada are increasingly involved in the process of internationalizing our universities. In this paper, I wish to explore some of the issues and challenges associated with the current trend to recruit increasing numbers of international students to our campuses. I aim to consider how by addressing these issues and challenges through reviewing and revising our policies and practices, through ensuring the quality of our academic programs and support services, and through intercultural education, we can embrace this growth in the international student population and in doing so enable optimal results in their integration and healthy adjustment to Canadian and local cultures. At the same time this commitment to embrace the new flows of international students can transform the ethos of our campuses and communities and our personal world views so that we become more culturally sensitive and internationally-minded.

When we consider the overall international dimension of higher education, key items such as international research, internationalization of the curriculum, international bilateral exchange agreements, internationalization at home and the increasing numbers of international students are topics to include in any discussion. In the best of all worlds we would not be talking about these various aspects of “internationalizing” a university. Universities from their inception would be international in all aspects of their teaching and learning. Their policies, practices and procedures would accommodate the world of difference that both our domestic and international students would bring to our campuses. Of course in the real world we do not begin there and as a result our job is to press forward to ensure that as members of institutions of learning we facilitate rather than hinder the growth of the international dimension in our teaching and practice. Therefore we will need to be proactive if we are to embrace the world both abroad through research projects, exchange programs and field trips, and in our communities through increased numbers of international students and growing populations of newcomers from across Canada with diverse backgrounds.

I would suggest however that the one aspect of the internationalization process that dominates much of our institutional discourse is the topic of international students. Initiatives that focus on international student recruitment have been or are becoming the priority of provincial governments, the federal government and institutions alike across this country. Indeed we have just heard that our federal government has set a national goal to double the number of international students coming to our Canadian campuses by 2022. When one sets out to review the impacts of an increased international student presence on our campuses and in the community it is only natural to ask questions about the kind of presence we are talking about. Why do we wish to attract them to Canada? What will they contribute to our campuses and communities socio-economically and culturally?

Generally speaking Canada as a nation has been a late comer to the field of international student recruitment. We are what one might call “an attractive alternative” to the leading countries in this field. Consider the statistics on this:

- Canada’s ranking in the field of nations as destinations of study is 6th following USA, UK, Australia, Germany, and France.¹
- The numbers of international students in Canada (2012) are:

Total:	265,377 ²
University:	145,107 ³
The growth rate:	3.3% to 12.2% (2005-2012) ⁴

In some of our institutions we have 10-20% international students in certain programs and in some cases the international student enrolment is 50% plus.

If we take all of these statistics and trends into consideration, what does this mean for our universities?

¹ Education at a Glance. OECD. 2011. p. 322.

² *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.10.

³ *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.12.

⁴ *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.17.

First and possibly foremost it means a new or augmented source of revenue for our programs and institutions. This source has the potential of changing how we do business. In one western university income from international student registration finances a significant number of faculty positions. Needless to say, without this income some programs would cease to function.

Second, we are now able to channel a diverse population of new professional workers to jobs in the provinces and across Canada. Of the OECD countries, Canada has the highest percentage, over 30%, of international students changing status and staying on to work⁵.

Third, a concerted effort to recruit increased numbers of international students on campus as part of our internationalization process has as one of its aims to increase international awareness and intercultural sensitivity through the mixing of domestic and international students. This notion might be termed “internationalization by proximity” i.e. if we have enough diversity on our campus, the two groups will mix and the outcome will be better understanding and communication between cultural groups.

It should be noted that while this notion potentially suggests one of the elements of what has become known as “Internationalization at Home (I@H)”, it falls short of the overall intention of I@H because it is very much a passive concept. ‘Internationalization at Home’ is

a concept that constitutes the base for the international work at the university. Our ambition is that all our students shall get an international and intercultural dimension during their studies, i.e. broadmindedness, maturity, understanding and respect for other people and their cultures etc. By starting the process “at home” we also hope to encourage our students to spend a part of their study time at a foreign partner university. ... Internationalisation at Home is a strategy that accommodates all [the needs of modern society] and facilitates opportunities for everybody to get involved in the internationalisation process.⁶

Given these potential impacts of increased international student numbers on our campuses, it is no surprise that governments and institutions are forging ahead with their efforts in international recruitment. However, this new initiative and its potential benefits do not come without costs i.e.

⁵ *Education at a Glance*. OECD. 2011. p. 329.

⁶ Malmö University <http://www.mah.se/english/About-Malmo-University/International/IaH---Internationalisation-at-Home/>

the requirement to invest resources in supporting the new student flows so that they do not overtax our existing support systems and our commitment to delivering high quality educational programs. It may be that we have been less attentive to these costs and the outcomes that we wish to attain, than we have been to striving to achieve targeted numbers of recruited students.

Indeed there are a number of international experts who are saying that the internationalization effort has missed its initial goal by focusing too much on outputs such as increased numbers of international students or bilateral exchange programs and it has neglected learning outcomes. Others say that the flood of students is lowering education standards.⁷

Hans de Wit one of the pre-eminent European academics studying the internationalization process and Director of the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation at Italy's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart has said that

too often universities measure whether they are succeeding at internationalization by "outputs" — what percentage of the student body are from outside the country, how many students study abroad, and for those in continental Europe, how many classes are taught in English. Yet those measures don't answer whether the graduates universities are producing are really prepared to live and work in international settings.⁸

Darla Deardorff, a leading academic and interculturalist from the United States, echoes this concern. Institutions of higher education rely heavily on numbers to demonstrate success in internationalization— numbers such as how many of their students study abroad, how many international students study on their campus, how many foreign faculty teach courses, how many courses are included in the internationalized curriculum, and so on. While such numbers are certainly an important element to evaluation, what do they indicate about the meaningful outcomes of internationalization, such as developing interculturally competent graduates who can compete successfully in the global workforce?⁹

In addition the ethics of our approach to internationalization are also being questioned by our partners from the global South. At a meeting for the Network of International Education Associations (NIEA) at an International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) meeting at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in January 2014 the members agreed that

⁷ Crowley, Brian. "In foreign-student gold rush, standards get left behind". *Globe and Mail* January 24, 2014.

⁸ "Treatment of International Students Is a Hot Topic at European Conference". Ian Wilhelm. *The Chronicle of higher Education*. 2012. <http://chronicle.com/article/Treatment-of-International/134394/>

⁹ "Internationalization: in Search of Intercultural Competence" Darla Deardorff. *International Educator*. Spring, 2007. p. 14.

A feature of the past 25 years of Higher Education Internationalisation was that it was mainly conceptualised and driven by the education systems of North-America, Europe, the UK and Australia. Other Higher Education systems, mostly from the emerging and third world, were largely excluded from the serious debates.¹⁰

The report goes on to say that

The question about the future agenda of Higher Education Internationalisation should at the same time discuss the fundamental questions around what role the Internationalisation of Higher Education should play in order to create a more just society in a world that is so unevenly developed. Discussions about Internationalisation of Higher Education in the future cannot ignore an in-depth discussion about the power relationships that currently drive the world of Higher Education Internationalisation.

The dialogue should enhance the debate relating to distributive justice. Without this, a double impoverishment occurs: Those in advantaged Higher Education systems with refined Internationalisation practices will merely reflect the negative aspect of global capitalism and affirm the widening economic gap instead of providing a constructive remedy. Where knowledge systems remain closed to outsiders, everybody is impoverished and ignorance sets in despite the guise of the information age.¹¹

I quote this report because it raises many questions about the current movement toward a largely fiscal approach to internationalization and the attraction of international students to our campuses. I might add that institutions which up until a few years ago focused essentially on attracting international students to their campuses to enhance diversity have developed recruitment plans with specific countries and numbers targeted.

This leaves us in the middle of a conundrum. On the one hand we have the very concrete benefits of the growth in international student numbers and yet there is growing evidence that there are significant short comings in our approach to internationalization.

How can we successfully address the negative impacts and unexpected outcomes concerning policy, programs and practice when we initiate strategies to increase the flows of international students to our campuses and communities? I believe that we have the opportunity to engage in this process such that it transforms us, our universities and our communities. When I say, “transform” I mean that

¹⁰ *Global Dialogue: A Global Dialogue on the Future of Higher Education Internationalisation*. IEASA. 2014. Retrieved from http://www.cbie-bcei.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Global_Dialogue_2014_Rationale_Document_Web.pdf

¹¹ *Global Dialogue: A Global Dialogue on the Future of Higher Education Internationalisation*. IEASA. 2014. Retrieved from http://www.cbie-bcei.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Global_Dialogue_2014_Rationale_Document_Web.pdf

we not only experience but also initiate new ways of engaging our personal world with the world at large.

To this end if we are to be successful we will need to turn our attention to a number of critical items:

- The capacity of our institutions to receive and educate increased flows of international students;
- The appropriateness of our academic policies and administrative practices in light of the academic experience of international students;
- The quality of the support programs and services that we are offering to assist international students to cope with the transition and acculturation process; and,
- The role that culture and intercultural competence play in how we personally perceive our interactions with students and how we behave in our programs and classrooms to make their participation a success.

What can go wrong with the plan to open the gates to increased international student flows?

First, let's begin by taking a look at concerns about institutional capacity. Increased flows of students to our universities and communities can become problematic if we do not consider such questions as:

- Will the flows of international students require us to make adjustments to our academic procedures and administrative policies to accommodate them appropriately?
- If so what will these changes require both inside and outside of the classroom?
- How many international students are too many for our institution?
- When does it become impossible to accommodate their particular needs?
- How stressful will these increased numbers be on the larger community?
- How will we accommodate their various cultural differences?

The process of addressing questions like these plays a key role in preparing our universities for additional international students. It calls us to reflect on our present campus and community ethos to see what may need to change in order to enhance the diversity of the population.

Second, the new revenues generated by increased numbers of international students may lead to dependency on a source of funds that can fluctuate significantly depending on market conditions. It is generally accepted that significant revenues that can be generated by increasing international student flows; however, there have also been examples of financial vulnerability because of institutional dependency on these new revenues. If we build our new programs and research on these flows and for some reason there is significant fluctuation in numbers and they falter, what then? What if China becomes a key destination for study and in the not too distant future moves from being a net exporter of students to becoming a net receiver of students? If this is the case student flows at the global level may shift dramatically and our success in attracting students to Canada may be short lived.

Similarly there was a downturn in flows of students to Australia about 4 years ago. Some universities saw a 30% drop in their international student flows. This may have been due in part to a decline in standards in Australian institutional academic programs because of the overwhelming percentage of international students in some of their programs. In part it may also have been because of Australian community backlash in the form of discrimination. If preparation for the increased numbers of international students does not penetrate both the academic programs and the support service dimensions of an institution, in time the difficulties experienced by the students can affect not only their performance but also the academic reputation of the institution. This may also lead to a decline in the very population that generates the revenues and that inspired the new initiative in the first place.

Third, with the increased numbers of international students can come the loss of program and institutional reputation. In short we must live up to our good reputation. International students pay attention to the quality of the program at institutions before they decide to come to Canada.

Canada's academic reputation and the quality of the education at an institution ranked as the top considerations for students. The availability of a particular program, as well as safety, affordability and the opportunity for obtaining work and permanent residence rounded out their key reasons for choosing a Canadian education.¹²

Generally speaking we have honoured the students' choices in that over 90% of students are satisfied or very satisfied with their Canadian educational experience¹³. However, as the Australians found out, as the numbers increase it becomes harder to keep the standards high. Additional resources must be dedicated to support the international students with their specific needs. These demands for customized academic programs and support services will compete for the new flows of revenue that were originally to be directed to maintain the traditional departments and research in the institution. This competition for required resources to support international students will be felt on the ground – in the classroom. As one faculty member said to me, “with the increased numbers of international students in my classes I am seeing a drop in the quality of work that I have hitherto not experienced. It is their language capability.” It becomes a day-to-day challenge for students and faculty in the classroom which can result in international students being labeled as “deficient” and “less capable” than other students. While this view is not necessarily born out in current research which in a recent survey notes that “findings suggest that only a minority of ... international undergraduates struggle in their university classes even though a majority of them struggle with English”, it does reinforce the need to provide enhanced support services for international students.¹⁴

Please note that in order to accommodate the organizational and administrative impacts of these increased flows of international students on our institutions, we must anticipate that there will be a need to review our policies and practices. These policies and practices were generally created for a domestic constituency of students who are rooted in local and provincial academic traditions by administrative and academic members who have emerged from that very same constituency.

¹² *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.25.

¹³ *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.27.

¹⁴ Fass-Holmes, B. and Vaughn, Allison. “Are International Undergraduates Struggling Academically?” *Journal of International Students*. 2014. p. 60.

Fourth, proponents of the “internationalization by proximity” notion note that if we recruit enough international students to our campus, students will experience a greater sense of the international dimension of life in their midst. Ironically academic research in intergroup contact theory has indicated that several conditions must be in place in order for interaction between groups with different cultural backgrounds to bear positive results. As Milton Bennett notes “increasing evidence shows that simple cross-cultural contact is not particularly valuable in itself. For the contact to acquire educational value, it must be prepared for, facilitated, and debriefed in particular ways.”¹⁵

This observation is not new. The basic work around the positive integration of domestic and international students was carried out by Allport in 1954 (and later by Pettigrew). His work noted that contact and communication under certain circumstances is the best way to reduce prejudice between minority groups and a dominant majority group. That speaks to our situation since for most of our Canadian campuses, the local white population forms the dominant culture and the incoming international students fill the minority role. Typically stereotypes and predetermined ideas about the cultures of newcomers may be held by the local population. If we simply introduce flows of international students to our classrooms, campus and community without adequate preparation it will only be a matter of time until faculty members and Deans are presented with significant challenges.

Allport says that for positive results to come out of contact between groups from different cultures, they must be appropriately prepared to interact. Be clear – both groups must be prepared – domestic and international. To me this evokes a strong case for promoting programs to enhance I@H. The conditions that Allport identified for making integration a success are:

- there must be an equal status relationship among all groups
- the groups must work on a task with a common goal(s) sharing their efforts and resources
- there must be intergroup cooperation rather than competition
- there must be some recognized authority that supports the interaction among the groups¹⁶
- The interaction between individuals within the groups must be personal and informal.¹⁷

¹⁵ Milton Bennett, 2012. http://www.idrinstitute.org/allegati/IDRI_t_Pubblicazioni/50/FILE_Documento_Universidad_2012_paper.pdf

¹⁶ Allport, G. W., 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*

¹⁷ Pettigrew T. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 49, 65-85.

If these conditions are in place at an institution, it would indicate that institution-wide reception and orientation programs are already in evidence that prepare ways for international students to adjust within a welcoming environment on campus in which domestic students, staff and faculty are prepared to support their integration. This would denote an optimal international ethos on the campus.¹⁸

Allport noted that if these conditions are not in place, then a reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudice is likely to occur. Just how likely is that to happen here in Canada? Results from a recent survey by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) indicate that:

- 45% of international students indicated that they had some Canadian friends
- The remainder had friends from their home country or other international students
- 60% of students said that staff and students showed interest in their culture and country
- Over 50% said that they would like more opportunities to experience Canadian culture and family life
- Over 30% said that they preferred to mix with people from their own culture.¹⁹

The desire for more contact with local students in some cases requires defined intervention through programs designed to help with the integration process and prevent international students from retreating into their own cultural grouping.

More challenging is the significant number of students who indicated that they had experienced some form of discrimination while interacting with

- Faculty members: Racial (15%); Culture/religion (13%)
- Staff: Racial (17%); Culture/religion (15%)
- Students: Racial (23%); Culture/religion (21%)
- Community: Racial (25%); Culture/religion (21%)²⁰

¹⁸ Knight, J. (1994). *Internationalization: Elements and checkpoints*. p.4.

¹⁹ *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.29.

²⁰ *A World of Learning*. CBIE. 2013. p.33.

It becomes apparent that most universities are faced with a challenge if we are to build an ethos on our campuses and in our communities that welcomes and serves all students regardless of where they arrive from. To have about one in five of our students experience discrimination during their time on our campuses is a clear sign that we need to have programs that address intercultural communication and anti-racist education.

The basic premise that we can internationalize our campuses through the flows of international students may not be as straight forward as we would hope and therefore there is some imperative for allocating adequate resources to create the context that Allport notes as being critical to our success in making international student integration on our campuses a success.

There are other challenges regarding Internationalization at Home. For example, the mixing of students as part of the internationalization strategy is generally witnessed in student festivals, international days, community support, and internationalization of the curriculum. However, the feedback is less than inspiring. Most international students indicate that they would like to have more interaction with Canadians and/or to have their diverse points of view considered seriously in the classroom. Stories of classroom groups relegating international students to their own working groups because Canadians did not want to work with them are commonplace. These comments raise questions about the efficacy of our strategy.

- How well do we manage the intercultural classroom or extra-curricular environment?
- Are our faculty members trained to not only understand intercultural communication but also to know how to manage it in the classroom?
- How do we bring the diverse worlds of the international students into the traditional world of our home town or home campus?
- If we are not able to provide an ethos on our campuses that stimulates a mutual exchange between cultures, then will we find worlds divided and at times in conflict?

It becomes clear that if we are to meet the needs of the students it will not be enough to observe the status quo with regard to services and programs. More diversity means not only more service provision but also acquisition of different skills and knowledge by staff and faculty.

With so many challenges before us, how can I call this a transformative experience? At this point perhaps we should stand back to gain some perspective on the challenges ahead of us. I have spent over 40 years in the field of international education and I believe that my present experience of international life and intercultural communication is by far the most exciting. I say this because we are being challenged to move from our traditional ways of doing things to new and more dynamic ones. In a way the very things that challenge us around the increasing numbers of international students arriving on our campuses also offer us new approaches to see the world and to renew and refresh our ways of teaching and learning.

For those of us involved in international education, as individuals and as communities of learning, we are being challenged to develop the ability to perceive how we deal with difference and how we knowingly choose to change our behaviour to enable others to integrate and acculturate effectively. In this way “intercultural education” supersedes “international education” and is a more *inclusive* formulation, in that interculturality includes both international and domestic students.²¹

When I say ‘we’, I mean each of us. When we engage cultural difference, our years of schooling and research, or our years of administrative experience, or our years of international travel are not necessarily tickets to success. Neither is a PhD necessarily an advantage in this quest. Intercultural communication knowledge and skills have not normally been a part of the agenda as we have begun to internationalize our curriculum and our campuses. Because we generally grow up learning that the way we have been raised is the best way to go about living, in some ways, we must all go back to the beginning as we learn about how we can adapt to new cultural experiences and gradually acquire intercultural competence.

²¹ Crichton, J. A.; Paige, M.; Papademetre, L.; Scarino, A. 2004. *Integrated resources for intercultural teaching and learning in the context of internationalisation in higher education*. University of South Australia: Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education. p. 11. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.116.5500&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

What I mean by ‘intercultural competence’ is the ability to think and act in appropriate ways that support the achievement of goals in culturally diverse contexts.²² Through conscious comparison between how I see the world and what I am experiencing to be different from that, I learn to pause a moment and withhold my judgment of the situation, and ask myself “is something intercultural happening here?” Through this process we can increase our sensitivity to cultural differences. In this way we learn and build our ability to communicate, shift perspective and appreciate different perspectives and experiences.

Even those of us who have grown up managing multiple cultures and languages and who deal well with intercultural situations may not know why we are successful in those cases. In short, we not only need to know how to be able to work with differences but also we need to know how we know how to do that. Through knowing why we do the things that we do that make life meaningful for us, we can appreciate how others know and live with the values and customs that make their world meaningful.

Being able to move from my particular personal perspective to another person’s perspective has been termed ‘cognitive frame-shifting’. Of course, an intended outcome of having this skill is the ability to adjust our behaviour (behaviour frame-shifting)²³ so that we are able to function well in another’s cultural and social environment, and/or to enable the other person to function well within our community and learning context. Milton Bennett called this the ‘platinum rule’. You may recall that the golden rule is “do unto others as you would have done unto you”. The platinum rule however is “do unto others as they would have done unto them.”²⁴

²² Darla Deardorff. How will we know? Assessing Students’ Intercultural Learning in Education Abroad Programs. 2013.
<http://cis.wfu.edu/files/2013/02/WISE-2013-deardorff-session-handouts.pdf>

²³ Paige, R. M. (2009). *Reflections on Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum: Transforming On-Campus Teaching and Learning*. Study Abroad Integration Conference.
[https://www.google.ca/#q=Paige%2C+R.+M.++\(2009\).+Reflections+on+Integrating+Study+Abroad+into+the+Undergraduate+Curriculum%3A+Transforming+On-Campus+Teaching+and+Learning.+Study+Abroad+Integration+Conference.+](https://www.google.ca/#q=Paige%2C+R.+M.++(2009).+Reflections+on+Integrating+Study+Abroad+into+the+Undergraduate+Curriculum%3A+Transforming+On-Campus+Teaching+and+Learning.+Study+Abroad+Integration+Conference.+)

²⁴ Bennett, M. (1998). “Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy”. *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*. p. 213.
http://books.google.ca/books?id=l_ePPDfW8CgC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

Let me give some concrete examples of how intercultural competence can positively impact the daily lives of international students in our universities and communities. It will be no surprise to folks in the student service area and to faculty members with large numbers of international students in their classes that increasing the numbers of international students will bring with it an increase in challenges at the most basic levels. Let's name a few – immigration, finances, academic language competence, relationship building, and housing. These challenges are however very often accompanied by more significant and more complex ones – adaptation, integration, mental health issues, religious and human rights complaints, laboratory and classroom friction, negative social activity in the community. What makes both the basic and the complex challenges difficult to address is the additional dimension of cultural difference. How do newcomers see how we do things on our campuses, as opposed to how we see how we do those same things?

What we have set as ground rules for “our” students (that is the students who come from and are part of the dominant culture) is not necessarily understood and/or valued by international students especially upon arrival and during the adjustment period. As we discuss any challenges that arise with these students it is very helpful to know from the outset that something intercultural may be at the heart of the problem. If our staff and faculty are equipped to start with that assumption in mind, the outcomes can be positive.

How do we get to the place where our campus faculty, staff and students are equipped to respond with intercultural competence rather than by exercising the implicit values of our traditional way of doing things (i.e. we have always done it this way and you will do it this way too)? Achieving an “internationally-minded and cross-culturally sensitive university” is not a simple task²⁵. However, there are post-secondary institutions in Canada that are moving in this direction. Some campuses are making intercultural training part of the orientation for new professionals on staff. Others like Thompson Rivers University in BC are using human resources or the Centre for Teaching and Learning to train faculty and staff on site. The Nova Scotia Community College international team aims to introduce all staff on their 11 campuses to intercultural competence through a set of professional

²⁵ Queen's University International Centre (QUIC) Mission Statement

development workshops. Queen's University is focusing training on co-curricular certificate programs for students and staff who are interested in developing intercultural competence.

How do we develop intercultural competence? Where do we begin? This I believe is where it gets exciting! I would say that we all begin with actually *experiencing* difference. These situations – experiences of difference - are ones that take us out of our usual way of doing things. They may be experiences while travelling but that does not need to be the case. One example would be that of a right handed person having to use their left hand for all activities. This shift makes us aware of each action that we take. Our mental comparison between the two situations is a result of us knowing how we do things normally and how we are managing with our new situation. This process helps us to recognize difference. Doing so is in a small way representative of how persons in transition feel when faced with new ways of doing things.

Our interpersonal skills in these situations may leave us feeling quite incompetent such as when we visit an unfamiliar religious celebration and do not know the proper customs, or walking into a room and realizing that “I am the only white person in the room!”. These disorienting situations are ones that we do not feel are in our control. We are outside of the mainstream of our experience and away from our home base of reference. As we open ourselves to entering into such an experience even if it is unfamiliar, we may become aware of our being “able bodied”, being “straight”, being “male” and/or being “white”. This realization that things may not be as they seem, or have always seemed, can mark the beginning of the process of coming to know our cultural identity.

When we wish to build intercultural competence, it is helpful to approach the process by working on our cultural identity because if we do not know who we are, how can we know what “difference” is? Where are our roots? What is the meaning of our name? How are we linked with family through our name? Who make up our family? Where do we fit into our community? What are the values of our community? We can use various tools to begin the discussion with participants so that disclosure of our diverse backgrounds and values are offered in a safe setting. These discussions often result in participants saying that they now know why they did or felt things in certain situations. Similarly, a

Canadian student returning from a sojourn abroad may say that they have a better sense of their Canadian identity; or, students who live in blended homes with two different cultures and several languages may come to recognize why they feel comfortable moving between these different worlds. Faculty and staff, when they hear international student stories of how their cultures work and compare those stories to their own within the world of the university and local community, can understand how these two worlds can clash. They can empathize with the students as they confront social, cultural and structural difference. This recognition may lead to a faculty member changing the way things are approached within the classroom.

When working on these aspects of our identity in conjunction with others from different backgrounds we can see the differences in how we are raised, in our assumptions about life, and in the way we see the world. While this can develop tension in the group, it can also be a creative process that when debriefed sets out the alternative worlds that most of us do not recognize in our daily lives.

From identity work we proceed to working on recognizing that our assumptions and judgements may precede our actually understanding of the realities that others know and experience. We introduce skills that assist participants to hold back on making assumptions immediately and to ask themselves “Is something cultural up?” This reflective process offers us the potential for questioning our own way of seeing things and open up other ways of seeing the world. Of course we cannot do this without the skills and more so without some knowledge of how culture can construct ways of knowing. At this point we introduce some background to culture and how we experience it. The work carried out over the past 60 years by researchers such as E. Hall, J. Mestenhauser, J. Bennett, M. Bennett, J. Berry, D. Kealey and D. Deardorff offers literature and models that can help us understand how cultures differ and how we can become interculturally competent. The knowledge and skills included in this body of work are usually referred to as ‘culture general’, as opposed to ‘culture specific’ knowledge and skills about a particular group or country.

For example, Edward Hall one of the pioneers in the intercultural field talks about cultures being either “high context” or “low context”. That is some cultures in their communication patterns fill in

the details for understanding what is going on in a particular situation (low context); while others assume that the meaning and circumstance are known to the group and the details need not be addressed (high context). Various cultures would be seen to be placed on a continuum between the two end points. For example the Japanese culture would be placed more toward a “high context” culture; whereas Canada would be more “low context”. The culture general knowledge and skills that the various interculturalists have documented enable us to reposition ourselves in an intercultural situation so that our behaviour can be effective and appropriate in bringing about a satisfactory solution for all involved.

Finally we encourage participants to continue entering into intercultural experiences so that they can become more competent in working with newcomers. This process can be depicted as a cycle of “What’s up? – Discovering identity – Reflecting on our assumptions– Acquiring skills and knowledge – Continuing experimentation – What’s up?” This cycle can be used to guide our intercultural programming. As you can see culture and intercultural competence play a significant role in how we personally perceive our interactions with students and how we behave in our programs and classrooms to make their participation a success. It is up to you and I to acquire the skills and knowledge that will help us to unravel the complexities that will inevitably arise as we welcome a growing number of diverse and differing perspectives into our lives.

As an aside, for those of you who know of the work that I do around risk management in the field of international education you may recall that the three points that I touched on regarding managing risk are very similar to the three points mentioned above regarding policies and practice, resources and programs, and learning about culture and intercultural competence. We manage risk in order to show institutional due diligence through our attention to good policy and practice. We put in place the resources and programs to meet the need of our students especially in times of challenge. We educate to increase the possibility of good judgement when critical decisions must be made. Hence proactive and considered preparation for the changes that our universities will experience as our student complexion changes may indeed be good practice in managing risk.

In closing, it is important to reaffirm the importance for all members of our campus community – professional staff, faculty members, administrators and students – to develop intercultural competence for embracing the growth in numbers of international students successfully. Each one of us is very likely to encounter concrete experiences in which we are challenged by the different ways of seeing and knowing the world that international students bring to their daily interactions on our campuses. It is helpful if we can understand and engage where they are coming from in order to assist them in being successful in their academic and social endeavours.

We began with questions surrounding the initiative to increase international students at our institutions and in the community. With appropriate preparation and training, the question changes from one of “how many do we admit?”; to “how do we welcome and support those we do admit?”. Importantly, support means not only having the services and programs for assisting the students in their adjustment and integration to campus, but also, having an open and accepting community that knows about cultural transition and is willing to work with the changes that may have to come about at the personal, classroom and administrative levels. If we do a good job in these matters, then we will see a change not only in the ethos of our universities but also in the larger community.

In order to move forward and embrace the challenges that are present through the arrival of increasing numbers of international students on our campuses, let us adopt a global mindset.

Our emphasis is on the learning process (ways of constructing knowledge) as opposed to the product (the knowledge base itself). Our orientation is metacognitive and epistemological in nature; it focuses on the ways in which individuals organize their thinking, construe their experiences, and make sense out of their world.”²⁶

In this way we will not only be able to host the growing number of international students but also we may be transformed in the process.

²⁶ Paige, R. M. & Mestenhauser, J. A. (1999). Internationalizing educational administration. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 35 (4), 500-517. p. 504

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