

September 2016

## Building Rapport Between International Graduate Students and Their Faculty Advisors: Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationships at the University of Guelph

Faiza Omar

*University of Guelph*, [fyza2@yahoo.com](mailto:fyza2@yahoo.com)

James P. Mahone

*University of Guelph*, [jmahone@uoguelph.ca](mailto:jmahone@uoguelph.ca)


Jane Ngobia

*University of Guelph*, [jngobia@uoguelph.ca](mailto:jngobia@uoguelph.ca)

John FitzSimons

*University of Guelph*, [jfitz@uoguelph.ca](mailto:jfitz@uoguelph.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl\\_rcacea](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea)

 Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2016.2.8>

---

### Recommended Citation

Omar, F., Mahone, J. P., Ngobia, J., & FitzSimons, J. (2016). Building Rapport Between International Graduate Students and Their Faculty Advisors: Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationships at the University of Guelph. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2016.2.8>

---

# Building Rapport Between International Graduate Students and Their Faculty Advisors: Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationships at the University of Guelph

## **Abstract**

Mentoring graduate students is very challenging, even when both the student and faculty have similar cultural values. Many international students have a different culture from that of Canadian. Their challenge is adapting to their new environment, and for their faculty advisors to understand and work well with them. This research explored the relationships, experience, and challenges of international graduate students and their faculty advisors at the University of Guelph, through focus group discussions, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and online surveys. Language barriers and financial difficulties were among the major challenges international students face adapting to their academic and social environment and working with their faculty advisors. We found that building good student-advisor relationship requires understanding graduate student and advisor formal responsibilities and expectations.

Le mentorat des étudiants de cycles supérieurs pose tout un défi, même dans les cas où l'étudiant et le professeur ont tous deux des valeurs culturelles semblables. De nombreux étudiants internationaux viennent d'une culture différente de ce que nous connaissons au Canada. Leur défi est de s'adapter à leur nouvel environnement et pour leurs conseillers pédagogiques, de les comprendre et de collaborer avec eux. Cette recherche explore les relations de travail, l'expérience et les défis auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants internationaux de cycles supérieurs et leurs conseillers pédagogiques à l'Université de Guelph par le biais de discussions de groupes de consultation, d'entrevues face à face semi-structurées et d'un sondage en ligne. Les barrières linguistiques et les difficultés financières s'avèrent comme étant les défis principaux auxquels font face les étudiants internationaux lors de leur adaptation à leur environnement académique et social et dans leurs interactions avec leurs conseillers pédagogiques. Nous avons constaté que pour établir de bonnes relations étudiant-conseiller pédagogique, il est essentiel de comprendre les responsabilités et les attentes formelles des étudiants et des conseillers pédagogiques.

## **Keywords**

graduate school, faculty advisor /international student relationship, academic and social transitions, language barriers, financial challenges

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to thank the Diversity and Human Rights Office (DHR) at the University of Guelph, for initiating and supporting this research project. The DHR is committed to creating an inclusive campus where all people are treated with respect and can reach their full potential irrespective of their different characteristics and cultural backgrounds. The Office contributes to the accessible learning and work environments at the University.

International graduate students (IGS) may experience challenges and cultural differences at their host institutions. This research describes the experiences and challenges of IGS and their faculty advisors at the University of Guelph (U of G). The research findings are not representative of all IGS and faculty advisors in Canada.

According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) (as cited in Humphries, Rauh & McDine, 2013), “the number of international students in post-secondary institutions in Canada has increased by 94% since 2001 to 265,377 in 2012” (p. 10). The CBIE reported that, in 2012, the top five countries of origin of international students in Canada were China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and the US (Humphries et al., 2013, p. 10).

According to the Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA), there were 952 international students at the University of Guelph as of January 2014, of which 341 were graduate students with the greatest number coming from China, United States, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Brazil (OIA, 2014).

Graduate programs contribute to the strength of multicultural democratic society by producing high quality researchers and professionals who advance economic and innovative agendas of their institutions and countries (Council of Ontario Universities, 2012). The faculty advisor/ student relationship is very crucial for graduate studies; it is therefore important to help students and advisors in building rapport and effective working relationships irrespective of cultural differences.

The advising relationships between faculty and graduate students are major contributors that foster graduate student educational success (Lechuga, 2011). Graduate students’ academic success and professional development for the most part are dependent on the kind of relationship and interaction they have with their faculty advisors. Faculty/graduate student relationships may be more crucial for international students because they are dealing with higher levels of language barriers, and academic and cultural adjustment (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008). With less social support, IGS tend to have difficulties managing the many challenges they may face in their host institution and country during their graduate studies and may value and rely more on advisor support (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010).

New faculty members in Canada from other countries, for instance, may also experience difficulties working with their domestic graduate students. A faculty advisor from a society with high power distance may have challenges working with his/her independent low power distant student (Dimitrov, 2009). In high power distance cultures, for example, children are expected to respect individuals older than them and are not encouraged to be independent. This translates to deference to authority in the classroom where students cannot participate in critique of ideas or the teacher’s views. The opposite is true in low power distance relationships (G.H. Hofstede, G.J. Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

Differences may exist between international students and their faculty advisors, between international students from the same country, and among faculty and domestic and international students (Trice, 2003). Therefore, generalization of international or domestic students and faculty may not be ideal. “Every individual carries within him/herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person’s lifetime which most of it was acquired in early childhood” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 4).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Of the 341 IGS attending the University of Guelph during the 2013/2014 academic year, about 20% participated in this study, and about 18% of the 790 faculty members participated. Faculty participants included college deans, departmental heads, chairs, and regular faculty. Both student and faculty participants were from across all seven colleges of the university: College of Arts, College of Biological Science, College of Business and Economics, College of Physical & Engineering Science, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, Ontario Agricultural College, and Ontario Veterinary College. All student participants were in either a master's or doctoral program and studying fulltime. Student participants were from 23 countries: China, United States, India, Iran, Mexico, Thailand, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, Argentina, Bangladesh, Japan, Germany, Jamaica, Botswana, Iraq, Egypt, Kenya, Jordan, Chile, Israel, Costa Rica, Ghana and Mali.

### **Methodology**

The descriptive and exploratory nature of this research is appropriate for understanding and describing the experiences and perspectives of IGS and their faculty advisors at the University of Guelph and determining specific areas for further research. Descriptive research uses methods that aim at determining and describing the characteristics of particular individuals and / or groups in a particular social context (Palys & Atchison, 2008). Exploratory research involves direct interaction with a particular population to gain new insights into events, happenings, or phenomena, often to develop more precise research questions and serve as basis for further research (Palys & Atchison, 2008).

Qualitative and quantitative methods of research were used to collect data from a total of 147 faculty advisors and 72 IGS at the University of Guelph. Prior to data collection, one-on-one key informant interviews were held with three faculty members, six IGS, and six staff members who worked directly with faculty and international students in various capacities, to identify key issues to advisory relations. The purpose of these interviews was to ensure that the research was based on the realities of the target population (IGS and faculty advisors). The key issues with the research objectives guided the review of literature and the questions for the data collection process.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The participants of this study were recruited using purposeful sampling technique. Purposive sampling is when “people and locations are intentionally sought because they meet some criterion for inclusion in the study” (Palys & Atchison, 2008). Prior to collecting data, ethics approval was received on February 19, 2014 from the University's Research Ethics Board.

We sent out email invitations to all IGS and faculty members at the university in March 2014 to participate in focus group discussions. We received positive responses from 21 students pursuing their master's or doctoral programs and 20 faculty advisors. These formed the participants for focus groups. Six focus group discussions, three for students and three for faculty advisors, were conducted; each person participated in only one of the discussions. Each

participant signed a consent form at the beginning of each focus group. All focus group participants were asked three questions. The first question was about the experiences of IGS working with their faculty advisors and vice versa. The second question focused on the challenges IGS and faculty advisors face working with each and the challenges IGS face adapting to U of G. The last question was on the measures participants took or best practices to address the challenges mentioned in question two. With the varying opinions gathered from faculty and students in the focus groups, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were scheduled with focus group participants and with other faculty and IGS who did not participate in the focus groups.

The interviews were an opportunity to further understand and explore the issues raised during the focus group discussions. A total of 13 IGS (12 of whom participated in the focus group discussions) and 26 faculty advisors (16 of whom participated in the focus group discussions) participated in one-on-one interviews from March to May 2014. Each participant was asked 10 to 20 open- and closed-ended questions; these questions gathered information about: what students and faculty expected from each other, their experiences and challenges, participants' awareness of formal responsibilities, programs and services available at the university, perceived cultural differences, the measures used to address challenges, and recommendations to improve student/advisor relationships and student experience. The same researcher interviewed all participants. The interviewer typed responses from participants, and after each interview, the interviewer read the recorded responses to participants to receive clarification and to prevent any misinterpretations.

Finally, two similar but separate survey questionnaires were designed for IGS and faculty advisors based on the information gathered in the focus group discussions and interviews. These online surveys were conducted to gather additional information about the topics that were already discussed in the focus groups and interviews. In June 2014, we sent out email invitations to all IGS and faculty advisors (including focus group and interview participants) with a link to complete the survey online. Approximately 120 faculty advisors and 48 IGS responded to the online surveys. The online survey was completely anonymous. Participants were asked six main questions with sub questions. Questions were designed to gather information about faculty advisor/student relationships and experiences, challenges and perceived cultural differences, and how differences affect advisor/student relationships. Students were asked if they perceived academic integrity as a major challenge. IGS and faculty were also asked whether they knew and understood their formal responsibilities and expectations of their students and faculty advisors.

## **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data for this research, the focus group discussions, and the semi-structured face-to-face interviews were manually analyzed using a coding strategy. Using line-by-line coding, we highlighted relevant areas from each sentence and paragraph to develop categories. We then consolidated the coded data into three major categories: (a) academic transition, (b) social transition, and (c) financial challenges. Sub categories were developed for each of the major categories (Saldana, 2009). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize experiences and challenges of IGS and their faculty advisors based on the quantitative data for this research (Palys & Atchison, 2008) using SPSS quantitative analysis software. The frequency distribution tables and figures created for each variable, and the numeric code assigned to each

comment and string variables helped in visualizing how the data described are distributed (Palys & Atchison, 2008).

## **Results**

The study identified three major themes: (a) academic transition, (b) social transition, and (c) financial challenges. Academic transition refers to how IGS adapt to working and building academic relationships with their faculty advisors, and how they understand and adapt to their teaching and learning environment at U of G. Social transition examines how IGS adapt to living in and understanding their new social environment at U of G. Financial challenges refer to how IGS adjust to the generally greater costs of tuition and living expenses of their new environment, their challenges accessing scholarship and job opportunities.

### **Academic Transition**

**Advisor/student relationships.** The findings of this research indicate that building an effective faculty advisor/IGS relationship at the University of Guelph is of great importance. IGS rely more on their advisors to meet their academic and professional needs.

A majority of students who were interviewed reported that they were not aware of the formal responsibilities required of them or of their faculty advisors. Only 23% of students said they became aware of these formal roles through their departments, faculty advisors, and the university website. These students, however, also reported not completely understanding the described roles and responsibilities and suggested a more specific description.

I got guidelines, policies and responsibilities from my department. When I came I didn't know about these responsibilities until after 1 year when my department sent the guidelines. It will be useful to introduce students to these roles and responsibilities during orientation. (IGS)

On the other hand, all 26 faculty advisors interviewed were aware of their responsibilities and roles; about 50% of advisors reported discussing these responsibilities and expectations with their graduate students. Few faculty advisors also reported not consciously discussing roles and responsibilities because they expect students to find information on their own and ask for help if they need to. One faculty member stated, "Graduate students should be immersed in their graduate experience, they have to be self-directed, seek information, work hard and seek for help, advisors offer guidance when needed."

Students who responded to the online survey were more aware of formal responsibilities than those interviewed. Tables 1 and 2 show faculty and student participants' awareness of the formal responsibilities required of them by the university. In addition to the defined formal responsibilities of faculty advisors, 75% of IGS surveyed perceived assisting students in the development and execution of research as responsibilities of their advisors. About 56% of IGS reported assisting students in securing scholarships and awards as their advisor's roles, and 50% perceived connecting students with industry and helping with student professional development as their advisor's roles. About 46% of IGS reported assisting students with personal challenges that may affect their academic success as their advisor's roles as well. A majority of students expressed the need for non-academic guidance from their advisors, especially in areas that affect

student academic success. Other students thought that faculty should be open to advising students in different areas even if that does not form a component their formal responsibilities.

Table 1

*Faculty Awareness of Formal Responsibilities Required of Them, and IGS Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of their Faculty Advisor at U of G (Data from Online Surveys)*

Formal responsibilities and roles of faculty members	Faculty awareness of their roles (n=120)		IGS' perceptions of their advisors' roles (n=48)	
	N	%	N	%
Being reasonably accessible to students	110	92	38	79
Examining student written material	108	90	35	73
Assisting students in understanding/ learning about appropriate deadline dates	104	87	26	54
Chairing advisory committee	101	84	24	50
Giving students notice of absence and making advising alternatives	100	83	27	56
Alerting student to any personal risks during research and providing guidance to manage risks	99	82.5	28	58
Facilitating student growth	98	82	28	58
Advising students of safety and workplace regulations and policies	95	79	27	56

Though 42% of IGS surveyed reported that they were aware of and understood their responsibility of changing advisors if a positive relationship could not be maintained as a result of conflict, only 3% reported being comfortable changing their advisors. IGS who were not aware of this responsibility did not report being comfortable changing their advisors either. Both IGS and faculty envisioned a long-term relationship with each other even after graduation, and some students felt changing their advisor would destroy the relationship they have built over time. Other students assumed changing advisors would create some level of conflict, and any misunderstanding with their previous advisor may affect the relationship they build with their new advisor.

Table 2

*IGS' Awareness of Formal Responsibilities Required of Them by the U of G (Data from Online Surveys)*

Formal responsibilities of graduate students	IGS' awareness of their roles (n=48)	
	N	%
Fulfill all course requirements	38	79
Meet and communicate regularly with advisor	38	79
Consider and respond to advises and criticism by advisor/advisory committee	37	77
Receive progress evaluation every semester by advisor/advisory committee	36	75
Recognize that thesis must be within the scope of approved graduate program	34	71
Be prepared to communicate first with advisor, then graduate coordinator or chair about any perceived problem to research or graduate studies	32	67
Choose research topics with adequate available resources, including finance and advisor expertise	31	65
Responsibility for changing advisors: I must submit the specified reasons for replacement of my advisor/advisory committee to my department graduate coordinator should any personal or professional conflict arise and in cases where an appropriate academic relationship cannot be maintained.	20	42

Clearly and well-defined advisor and student expectations from the onset of students' program was also found to go a long way to positively impact the relationship students and faculty build and contribute to academic success of students. Students may have different expectations for advisor's role depending on their needs. Students who received full scholarships from their home countries and had guaranteed jobs in their home countries upon their return after graduate study in Canada did not expect professional guidance from their advisors; in addition, these students did not perceive professional guidance as a formal responsibility of their advisors. One student interviewed indicated that he was being sponsored by his home organization and was required to return home and work after his graduate work. He acknowledged, however, that students who do not have this opportunity have different expectations and usually expect to receive professional guidance from their advisors. Faculty advisors indicated that IGS require a greater degree of structure in terms of laying out their program and expectations, because they are less familiar with how things work at Canadian universities. About 75% of faculty interviewed, and 53% of faculty surveyed, reported having the same expectations for all their graduate students. They recognized, however, that international students may have additional transition challenges, so they are more accommodative in terms of timelines, language competences, and technical skills. Other faculty advisors said their expectations change almost every semester depending on student's academic and research progress. One faculty advisor noted that she used to expect less from international students until she realized they are as capable as domestic students because they usually work very hard to succeed academically.



Cultural differences such as students' deference to authority and religious beliefs were shown to exist between IGS and their faculty advisors. A common concern among students interviewed and those in the focus group was calling their advisors and professors by their first names. Faculty advisors felt that being on a first name basis helps make their students more comfortable and creates an open environment where students learn and share. Most faculty advisors described their IGS as respectful and formal. One student stated, "I am accustomed to saying Sir or Mr. in Jamaica, here it is OK to refer to professors on a first name basis." Another student reported, "I could not call a professor who was so older than me by his first name. In my Chinese culture, the youth not only respect the elderly but also those who are more educated."

IGS did not perceive cultural differences as negatively impacting the relationship they build with their faculty advisors. Both students and faculty participants related their relationship to individual personalities. Faculty members indicated that the level of interaction one can have with his/her student depends largely on the personality of the individual, their relationship with some students is formal and for others it is more informal. One student noted,

Comparing my relationship with Mexican and Canadian advisors, the experience is not culture-based, it is more of individual attitudes. I had a good experience with one Mexican advisor and am currently having a good experience with my Canadian advisor, but I also had a bad experience with another Mexican faculty.

**Academic challenges.** A majority of the staff and faculty participants were reluctant to generalize the specific challenges they face working with IGS. They indicated that each student was different and they had encountered different challenges with different students. They noted that the challenges of graduate students (both international and domestic) might vary across disciplines and programs regardless of their country of origin. One faculty member said, "Every case is different depending on personalities; you can never treat international graduate students as homogenous, treat them as individuals and recognize that every country and every individual has different set of cultures and values." A staff member noted, "It is important **not** to see international graduate students as a homogeneous group, but rather as individuals from varying cultures with different challenges, and develop strategies and provide supports that suit individual needs."

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the academic challenges reported by student and faculty participants on the survey.

Table 3  
*Challenges Faculty Advisors Face Working with Students*

Challenges	Faculty (n=120)	
	N	%
Academic writing	77	64
Oral communication	36	30
Students' confidence to express themselves openly	36	30
Critical reasoning skills & level of creativity	32	27
Understanding Canadian academic culture	30	25
Ability to express themselves and ask questions	29	24
Not knowing whether they understand you or not	28	23
Student deference to authority	24	20
Students' knowledge of their rights, roles & responsibilities	21	18
Different academic expectations	17	14
Academic integrity	16	13
Adapting to and understanding international students' cultures	9	8
Student time management	7	6
Availability of time for students	3	3

Table 4  
*IGS' major challenges working with faculty advisor*

Challenges	IGS' responses (n=48)		IGS who would be comfortable discussing their challenges with advisor	
	N	%	N	%
Advisor very busy	14	29	4	8
Getting professional guidance	9	19	6	13
Different research interests and expectations	7	15	10	21
Language barriers (oral and written communication)	6	13	6	13
Difficulty communicating and interacting	6	13	6	13
Unclear expectations on research project / undefined student and advisor expectation	5	10	7	15
Inadequate follow up and timely feedback	3	6	3	6

Academic writing and language barriers were perceived as major academic challenges for IGS. Faculty participants reported that domestic students also have problems with academic writing; however, their major challenge working with international students is also academic writing. One faculty advisor said, "Some international graduate students write very poorly, the same can be said about domestic students; however, writing is a common challenge among international students." More than 50% of student participants noted academic writing, specifically grammar,

vocabulary, and writing styles as their major academic challenges, particularly because English is their second language. Students said,

Academic writing has been a challenge for me because English is not my (first) language; English has certain grammars that I can't understand well, such as when to use 'a' and 'the'. My advisor suggested I take workshops provided by GSLI, and also pay extra attention on my grammar when reading my papers. (IGS)

Writing is a challenge for me, in terms of grammar and wordiness, I spoke to advisor once about it but can't always get help because my advisor is busy. I paid for an online tool to check my grammar and that is expensive, this is because I couldn't get help from the library. (IGS)

Another student reported, "My advisor expects the same inputs from me just as his domestic students, but my reading and writing is very slow and hard to catch up."

Language barriers, such as the ability to clearly communicate orally and interact with others, were also revealed to be common problems among IGS. Students also perceived having different academic backgrounds as part of their language challenges; some said they recognized that there are differences, but the differences in academic background did not have a great impact on their academic adjustment. Others, on the other hand, experienced difficulties interacting in the classroom and adjusting to their new academic culture. One IGS said, "I am more passive, and less active in group discussions, I agree with what everyone says and I talk less like I am in China." Another stated, "Learning environment here is different, too much information at one time and it is hard to keep up. It is hard to get involved and interact with Canadian students; they talk too fast and hard to follow." Another student reported,

My learning background from my program was different from here and the transition is hard, switching from international stream to Canadian stream. I am afraid to ask questions, if others understand, I feel shy I don't and can't ask questions. In China, is more like teacher speaks, student listens, the teaching module is different, I am used to just accepting what the professor tells me and no judgment or challenging professors (IGS).

Finally, a student said, "In Canada, every student has the opportunity to develop creativity and critical thinking skills. I really like the Canadian education system, I noticed that Canadian students always have many ideas to contribute because of this critical/creativity skills."

Only a few IGS found academic integrity to be a challenge. The U of G defines AI as

a code of ethics for teachers, students, researchers, and writers". This includes; "not claiming credit for the work of another, not falsifying documents, not obstructing another person's ability to perform academic tasks in order to gain an unfair advantage, and not disobeying the rules of ethical research, or improperly obtain access to privileged information or disseminate that information. (University of Guelph, 2016)

Two students noted that academic integrity at U of G is the same as what they were familiar with in Germany and Mexico and there are also systems available to check plagiarized work. Another student said he transferred from China to Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada to complete the final two years of his undergraduate degree and he learned about academic integrity before starting his graduate studies at U of G. One other student indicated that she learned about academic integrity during her undergrad at a transnational university in China that is affiliated with a Western university and this was not different from the academic integrity rules at U of G. A student from Thailand said even though academic integrity is not a challenge for him, what he experienced in Thailand is much different; he reported, “there is so much emphasis on intellectual property, plagiarism, copyright here.” Some faculty and staff members noted that academic misconduct is more common among international students even though domestic students also plagiarize. Some related it to culture and others to language difficulties. One faculty advisor said, “There is an acceptable culture of plagiarism in some cultures and they are not so concerned about copyrights. Domestic students also practice plagiarism, but probably more common among international students because of varying cultural values.”

Faculty members noted with proper guidance and support, international students learn to understand the academic integrity system at the University, they also indicated using “turnitin” and other tools to detect plagiarized papers. Students find the academic integrity course at U of G very helpful in making them understand the academic integrity at the university. One student noted,

I like (it) that (the) U of G has (an) academic integrity course to guide me, I never had specific instructions on plagiarism in Argentina. With language issue and academic writing a challenge for international students, it is likely that they plagiarize without noticing, its good there are rules to guide.

### **Social Transition**

Students were generally not comfortable discussing their social challenges with their faculty advisors. However, over 50% of students reported using the services at the Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA) and have consulted the international student advisor for advice on at least one non-academic challenge they are facing. Students indicated that their social challenges, to a large extent, affect their academic progress and the relationships they build with their faculty advisors, as well as their ability to adapt to U of G successfully.

Table 5

*IGS' Challenges Adapting to U of G and the Challenges Students are Comfortable Discussing with Advisors (Online Survey Data)*

Major Social Challenges	IGS' responses (n=48)		IGS who would be comfortable discussing their challenges with advisor (n=48)	
	n	%	n	%
Finance (tuition and living expense)	32	67	13	27
Lack a feeling of inclusiveness and sense of belonging	15	31	0	0
Difficulty finding on campus job	12	25	5	10
Difficulty finding specific information and programs for international graduate students	12	25	5	10
Difficulty finding foods from home country	8	17	1	2
Difficulty communicating and interacting with domestic students and the general university community	8	17	1	2
Difficulty finding information on campus	7	15	1	2
Difficulty adapting to the Canadian climate	6	13	2	4
Difficulty getting around the university and the city	3	6	0	0

Students who felt isolated said they were unable to function well academically and socially because they sometimes felt rejected and unwanted, and they were usually afraid to express their opinion, ask questions, or interact with others.

Language barriers were shown to affect not only the academic transition of students but also their social transition. Students noted difficulties understanding different accents, slang, jokes, and had difficulty communicating clearly. One student stated, "My lack of understanding of humor in English affects my interaction to some extent, I get uncomfortable and not sure what to say." Interacting more with domestic students and participating in social events were suggested ways students could improve their oral communication skills and integrate better at U of G. Faculty advisors reported participating in social and sport activities with their graduate students such as organizing potlucks where students share foods from their cultures, playing soccer and basketball. Some faculty advisors indicated that engaging students outside of the classroom and official work environment increased their comfort level and openness to discuss personal issues that are affecting their academic success.

Faculty advisors and students observed and experienced cultural differences such as personal space, direct communication, respect for authority, religion, and food. Student focus group and interview participants said they had a hard time building close relationships with Canadian students; and IGS commented, "personal space is very important here, you are not sure if you can hug people or sit so close to them on the bus, you have to respect people's space."

On the online survey, student participants were asked how they perceive other students' cultural values in relation to theirs; respondents generally perceived differences between their cultures and those of other students (both domestic and international). Out of the 48 students surveyed, 21% perceived a great difference, 45% perceived a moderate difference, 5% said their cultural values are same as those of other students, 18% perceived a slightly less differences, and 10% noted a much less difference. These perceived differences were reported to influence social interactions at various degrees; only 8% of students surveyed said different cultural values have no influence on their interactions with other students. About (28%) experienced some influence or little influence, 26% reported a moderate influence, and 10% reported that cultural values greatly influence their interactions with other students. Students noted making a lot of effort to adapt to cultural differences. A student reported, "I just work harder and try to observe and understand the new culture in order to know what is expected of me, I am always asking questions and try to adapt to the culture and U of G."

Faculty also said they are sensitive to their students' cultural differences, and they do their best to respect differences such as religious beliefs and religious holidays. They also noted that it is difficult to know a student's background: "you may assume too much or too little." Faculty reported experiencing similar adaptation to their domestic students' cultural values and beliefs as they do to their international students. One student stated, "My advisor has been giving me a lot of care in terms of adapting to Canadian life and tries to show me the Canadian culture in her own way."

### **Financial Challenges**

High tuition was noted throughout our consultations with faculty, students, and staff as a common challenge among IGS. Other significant financial challenges international students have to deal with are high living expenses, limited awards/scholarships and finding job opportunities. International students who intend to stay in Canada and work noted the importance of having some Canadian work experience during their graduate studies to enable them to integrate into the Canadian job market after graduation. Students also noted that the funding and scholarships available have so many restrictions and they usually do not meet the requirements, and if they do it may be too late to apply because they might be close to finishing their program. This is particularly the case for two-year master's students. One student explained, "the tuition cost is more than 2X the normal domestic student tuition, while this is standard not just for U of G, there should be some consideration for international students to get income generating opportunities on campus." Most students underestimate their financial expense for their graduate programs at U of G; some find out that things are more expensive than they have expected and prepared for. Others factor potential income from graduate research or teaching assistantship (GRA/RA or GTA/TA) positions from their respective departments into their budgets, only to find out after they arrived in Canada that their income and expenditure calculations were not as feasible as thought.

Finance is really a challenge, as an international student and coming from the country where its money is not even comparable to dollars, I was always stressed that I had to pay the difference between my TA income and my tuition fee. (Since all of my teaching income was going towards my tuition in all of the semesters.) Also, since my College does not have enough money to support the students, I did not receive a TA position in the last semester and I am still in debt to my bank. (IGS)

Faculty members have also been affected by the financial challenges their students face. Faculty participants were generally concerned about financial constraints affecting their ability to recruit the number of international students they desire or that their departments need. They reported:

I would be happy to take on more international students but our University has made it economically impractical due to higher tuition costs. In addition, faculty do not receive the same professional credit for international students at our institution. (Faculty)

The proportion of international graduate students has been declining, I feel dismay about the policies of Ontario on international students, such as taxing universities for recruiting international students – this reduces the quality of programs. We need initiatives to help recruit more international students – there is a discrepancy between Ontario's goal of increasing the number of graduate students and the increasing decline of graduate students at university, especially international students. University programs are built on the quality of graduate students; we build valuable networks of graduate alumni in different countries when we have international students. Federal government has to create programs for funding the recruitment of international grad students; this can be delivered through provinces. CIDA merging with foreign affairs created limited channels to fund international students. (Faculty)

I am in the process of recruiting an international PhD student and it's quite difficult from the financial standpoint. Within my grant, I have \$25,000 for a yearly stipend, which covers a domestic but not an international student. The most highly qualified students for this project are international, but we're faced with a \$15,000 shortfall in their tuition + cost of living expenses. This is HUGE and I'm not sure we'll be able to overcome it to have an international student come here for the project. (Faculty)

Faculty advisors have to recruit only students with full funding from their home countries, and if they do recruit students without funding, they have to find money to support them successfully. This is becoming less and less feasible for many faculty advisors, and the quality of doctoral programs are particularly beginning to decline because of the declining number of domestic students enrolled and the limited funding available to recruit qualified international students.

## **Discussion**

This research highlighted the diversity of IGS. It became evident that IGS at U of G are not homogenous and neither are faculty advisors. Each student experiences his /her new

environment differently. While much of the literature implies that international students are homogeneous because of their culture, this research clearly contradicts this and points out that they need to be treated as individuals. The results of this research offers insights into improving the relationships and experiences of IGS and their faculty advisors at U of G as well as informing the literature and serving as reference for further research on the topic.

The findings established that IGS at U of G require more guidance from their faculty advisors during their graduate programs. From the findings and the literature reviewed, a positive faculty advisor and student relationship enhances and contributes to the academic success of students and improves their social transition. The relationship IGS build with their faculty advisor is dependent on their understanding of the formal roles and responsibilities and the academic expectations of their advisors, as well as on the advising philosophy of their advisors. It is therefore important to continually remind IGS about their responsibilities and those of their advisors. Particularly important is making sure that students understand their responsibility of changing advisors in the event of conflict, and that they can feel comfortable to do so without repercussions. Even when students understand formal responsibilities and become comfortable working with their advisors, they are not always comfortable discussing their personal issues or challenges, particularly if they do not know what to expect from their advisors. The U of G has defined roles and responsibilities on its website that guide the academic relationships graduate students and faculty members build.

While a majority of faculty and student participants in this study expressed having the same of level of comfort working with both international and domestic students, they recognized differences during interactions. Students recognized that they have to learn to adapt to the culture of their new environment, and faculty advisors also recognized the diversity of their graduate students, irrespective of their country of origin, and the need to make adjustments to accommodate students' needs.

Language competency is important to promoting academic success and improving the oral and written communication skills of students. Even though the library and other services such as Graduate Student Learning Initiative at U of G provide writing assistance to students, it is recommended that the library writing services provide more specific sessions and extend the hours of service per week to meet the academic writing needs of IGS. Faculty members indicated that the Standard English admission test for international students with English as second language is insufficient to determine students' linguistic ability for graduate studies in an English environment. Students should therefore be required to do an intake interview with their faculty advisors to determine whether they have the required English language skills to compete successfully in their graduate program at the University. Another way to improve the language skills for international students is to require them to take an English communication course in their first semester, or first year of graduate program, at the University. This is particularly important for students whose first language is not English or those who did not have their previous education in English.

IGS may experience some social challenges that may affect their academic progress but are unable to talk to their advisors about them. Those who experience academic, professional, and social support from their faculty advisors become comfortable discussing their career and scholarship opportunities, and personal challenges that affect their academic work, and they find graduate studies more meaningful. To address or eliminate feelings of isolation reported by student participants, faculty advisors, departments, and student offices at the U of G are encouraged to create strong social and support networks for international students. This would



create more opportunities for international students to interact with other students and faculty, and to improve their English communication skills and reduce social isolation. Student Life and the Office of Intercultural Affairs provide services and programs to improve the social interaction, adaptation and experiences of international students at the university. The Office of Intercultural Affairs has three mentoring projects that match new international students with current students to make their transition both on campus and in the city easier. The mentoring programs also enrich international students' learning and social experience at the university.

Another important area of social interaction is acquiring soft skills such as interpersonal communication. This was found to be as important as the technical academic and research skills students acquire during graduate studies, particularly if they intend to work in Canada. Our findings revealed that many international students planned to work and seek permanent residency in Canada. Students expressed frustration about the work and immigration policy in Canada. With the new changes to the international student program in Canada that took effect from June 2014, international students with a valid study permit are allowed to work up to 20 hours/week during study periods and full time during holidays, both on and off campus without acquiring work permits. International students are required to apply for a "post-graduation work permit" after they officially complete their program of studies in order to work in Canada for as long as their work permit allows (The Government of Canada, 2014).

The IGS orientation at U of G needs to include more specified information for students' transition into their social environment. Creating a one-stop information system where students can find out how to apply for or renew a study permit, how to apply for social insurance numbers, how to file taxes, or how to find housing and culturally appropriate grocery stores, for instance, are highly recommended at the university. Having available and accessible information is also necessary to students' social adaptation at U of G.

High tuition and high living expenses leave students wondering if they can successfully complete their graduate studies, particularly when there are limited scholarship and job opportunities available to them at the University. Students with guaranteed funding from their home countries and departments at U of G and with at least one guaranteed GTA or GRA position have less financial, academic and social adjustment stress compared to those without or those with families. It is recommended that The Office of Graduate Studies develop a standard budget for studying at the U of G and living in the City of Guelph to make IGS aware of what to expect financially before starting their graduate programs. More financial resources and funding programs for IGS and faculty members are needed to support students' graduate programs and to recruit the desired qualified number of international students' faculty advisors require for their research and lab projects.

This research does not generalize the findings to the entire population of IGS and faculty advisors at the U of G. It determined best practices that have been found to be successful for student adaptation and for building student and faculty relationship. These include:

- Students using the library writing services and other research and writing workshops to improve their academic writing. Asking students to read academic papers and produce written reports for advisor feedback also improves students writing skills.
- Making advance preparation and communicating with students prior to starting their graduate programs, and having direct communication with students from the outset of their program.

- Meeting students regularly to discuss faculty and student formal responsibilities, academic/research expectations. Students are encouraged to regularly visit the University webpage for up to date information about their formal responsibilities and graduate school program.
- Laying out an ideal plan for the student's program and reviewing them every semester to reflect their research needs. More structured advice and support where students are guided to succeed academically, and develop their professional skills, and are prepared to transition into the Canadian job market after graduation.
- Improving communication with advisor and consulting other faculty members and graduate students for advice on their academic challenges are very helpful.
- Connecting new students to existing students, doctoral candidates or postdocs, and to outside expertise for technical assistance contributes to student academic success and professional development.
- Consulting the Office of Intercultural Affairs and international student advisor for social challenges and participating in social events at the university contributes to their successful social transition.
- Enriching their experiences at the university by improving their oral communication in English, sharing their cultures and learning about Canadian culture.
- Interacting with faculty advisors and other students outside the classroom or academic setting, such as lunch and dinner to meet visiting guests, holiday gatherings, and barbecues create opportunities for social interaction and make students feel part of the community.

To inform and reflect the needs and dynamics of both IGS and domestic graduate students at the university, further research of this nature is highly recommended on a regular basis. An important research area to consider is exploring the experiences of domestic graduate students and the relationship they establish with their faculty advisors at the U of G. For example, are domestic students faced with similar challenges working with domestic faculty advisors and adapting to their graduate programs as international students? Are domestic students comfortable working with international faculty advisors and international students? These research areas could also be explored in other Canadian universities and at undergraduate levels.

The intercultural interaction between domestic and international students, faculty and administration enhances academic success and fosters good relationships that benefit the University in the long term. Making the academic and social transitions of IGS easier and addressing their financial challenges are both very important to maintaining the university's image for academic success and inclusive learning and social environment. To ensure that faculty advisors are equipped with the most up to date resources and information to advise students across cultures, all faculty orientation should be evaluated every academic year, specifically on best practices for mentoring IGS. The orientation should focus on key issues, such as the challenges and areas of support IGS need to adapt successfully to their academic and social environment at the U of G.

## References

- Adrian-Taylor, S. R., Noels, K. A., & Tischler, K. (2007). Conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors: Toward effective conflict prevention and management strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(1), 90-117.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1028315306286313>
- Council of Ontario Universities. (2012). *Position paper on graduate education in Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://cou.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Graduate-Education-in-Ontario.pdf>
- Curtin, N., Stewart, A. J., & Ostrove, J. M. (2013). Fostering academic self-concept advisor support and sense of belonging among international and domestic graduate students. *American educational research journal*, 50(1), 108-137. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831212446662>
- Dimitrov, N. (2009). *Western guide to mentoring graduate students across cultures*. The University of Western Ontario, Teaching Support Centre. Retrieved from [https://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/pdf/PG\\_3\\_MentoringAcrossCultures.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/pdf/PG_3_MentoringAcrossCultures.pdf)
- Erichsen, E. A., & Bolliger, D. U. (2011). Towards understanding international graduate student isolation in traditional and online environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 59(3), 309-326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9161-6>
- Hofstede, G. H., Hofstede G. J., & Minkov M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind: Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Humphries, J., Rauh K., & McDine, D. (2013). *A world of learning: Canada's performance and potential in international education*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Bureau for International Education/Bureau canadien de l'éducation internationale).
- Ku, H. Y., Lahman, M. K., Yeh, H. T., & Cheng, Y. C. (2008). Into the academy: Preparing and mentoring international doctoral students. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 56(3), 365-377. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11423-007-9083-0>
- Lechuga, V. M. (2011). Faculty-graduate student mentoring relationships: Mentors' perceived roles and responsibilities. *Higher Education*, 62(6), 757-771.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9416-0>
- Palys, T., & Atchison, C. (2008). *Research decisions: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), Toronto: Thomson Nelson.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- The Government of Canada. (2014). *Changes to the international student program*. Retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/study/study-changes.asp>
- The Office of Intercultural Affairs, University of Guelph. (2014). *Report 2014*.
- University of Guelph. (2016). *Academic Integrity*. Retrieved from <http://www.academicintegrity.uoguelph.ca>
- Trice, A. G. (2003). Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(4), 379-403.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1028315303257120>