

# EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## Abstract

With changing demographics, Canadian institutions of higher education are under pressure to address the challenges of student, faculty, and staff diversity. Despite growing numbers of international students at Canada's community colleges, this group has historically been underrepresented. The intersectionality of their minority-status characteristics makes their experience complex. This qualitative study of 35 international students and graduates from 15 countries uses critical theory to explore their experiences through the lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Despite a high degree of cultural diversity, some of them experienced stereotyping. Moreover, they tended to engage less in classroom discussions, and many of them were unaware of college resources and services. Consequently, they had difficulty adjusting to life at college and life in Canada.

**Keywords:** equity, diversity, inclusion, community colleges, international students, underrepresented groups

## Résumé

En raison de l'évolution démographique, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur canadiens subissent des pressions pour relever les défis liés à la diversité des étudiants, des professeurs et du personnel. Malgré le nombre croissant d'étudiants étrangers dans les collèges communautaires du Canada, ce groupe a toujours été sous-représenté. L'intersectionnalité des caractéristiques de leur statut minoritaire rend leur expérience complexe. Cette étude qualitative menée auprès de 35 étudiants et diplômés internationaux de 15 pays utilise la théorie critique pour explorer leurs expériences sous l'angle de l'équité, de la diversité et de l'inclusion. Malgré une grande diversité culturelle, certains d'entre eux étaient victimes des stéréotypes. D'ailleurs, ils avaient tendance à moins participer aux discussions en classe, et bon nombre ne connaissaient pas les ressources et les services fournis par leur collège. Ils avaient donc de la difficulté à s'adapter à la vie au collège et au Canada.

**Mots-clés :** équité, diversité et inclusion; collèges communautaires; étudiants internationaux; groupes sous-représentés

## Introduction

### International College Students as an Underrepresented Group

Initially the role of Canada's provincially funded community colleges was to train skilled workers and tradespeople for local economies. Over the years, however, some colleges evolved into complex institutions with multiple functions that include educating and training international students

(Legusov, 2017). Even though the number of international community college students is growing rapidly in Canada, the phenomenon is relatively recent.

With the 2008 amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008), it became easier for international college graduates to obtain permanent residency in Canada, and their numbers began to increase rapidly. From 2007–8 to 2017–18, the number of such students grew from 30,477 to 99,909 (Statistics Canada, 2020). Even so, according to Statistics Canada, this impressive growth was highly uneven, with 68,037, or 68.1%, of international college students in Canada attending Ontario's 24 colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs). Moreover, of all the international students at Ontario CAATs, more than 50.0% attended the five large Greater Toronto Area (GTA) colleges (Ontario Government, 2019). This distribution makes international students an underrepresented minority at most Canadian community colleges. For example, in 2017–18, there were only 180 international college students in Prince Edward Island, 60 in Newfoundland and Labrador, and three in Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 2020).

In Ontario, where this study took place, the public higher education system consists mainly of colleges and universities. In contrast to the better-known American two-year junior colleges, whose main role is to prepare students for university, Ontario CAATs are comparable to the United Kingdom's further education colleges and Australia's technical and further education (TAFE) institutes; moreover, they are one-of-a-kind, independent institutions with a mission to prepare job-ready graduates to meet the needs of employers and to support economic and social development (Government of Ontario, 2002).

Even though students from more than 100 countries attend Canadian colleges, the overwhelming majority come from a handful of countries, namely India, China, South Korea, Brazil, and Vietnam (Statistics Canada, 2020). International students from other countries encounter relatively few compatriots on Canadian college campuses. Furthermore, most international students belong to a visible minority, and a substantial number are mature students (Legusov, 2021), groups that have historically been underrepresented in post-secondary education. In the GTA, domestic students also represent a diversity of groups that include immigrants, children of immigrants, visible minorities, Indigenous people, and francophones. These students face many of the challenges that international students grapple with. Such difficulties include being racialized, overlooked, and iso-

lated, as well as having to cope with a scarcity of services designed to address their needs. But the most salient differences between these two student populations are international students' greater vulnerability due to their temporary immigration status, the higher tuition fees they must pay, their limited social and cultural capital in Canada (Legusov, 2021), and the perception, whether justified or not, that their English skills are insufficient (Bepple, 2014).

## Community Colleges and EDI

Canada's public community colleges have a longstanding commitment to open access and equal educational opportunities for all qualified students. The dramatic expansion of college access is associated with justice and social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). It can be argued that a high level of diversity among students and faculty enriches the educational experience, promotes professional and personal growth, and challenges stereotypes (Grayson, 2014). It can also be argued that such diversity may also help students prepare for life and work in a complex, pluralistic society and thereby make Canada a better, more inclusive society. Multiple factors, such as rapidly changing demographics, rising numbers of international students (Gertler, 2016), multiculturalism as a state ideology (Al Shaibah, 2014), and growing awareness of Indigenous people's rights (Pidgeon, 2016), contribute to greater student and faculty diversity on college campuses.

Even though public colleges provide open access and equal opportunities, such an approach does not automatically translate into desirable outcomes for all students. Visible minority, female, racialized, Indigenous, differently abled, and other traditionally underrepresented students often experience more precarious employment and higher poverty rates than their traditional mainstream counterparts (Michalski et al., 2017). A new approach to this educational reality is called for. In response, many community colleges across Canada have begun to implement comprehensive equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies and strategies to ameliorate prevailing institutional cultures and to help marginalized and underrepresented groups succeed (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).

## Purpose of the Study

Even though the body of literature on EDI at post-secondary institutions is growing, it is still not clear how successful such initiatives are. It may be that the EDI policies adopted

by colleges do not sufficiently account for the specific circumstances of international students. Notably, the intersectionality of international students' identities (Crenshaw, 1991) makes their experiences particularly complex. This study explores the concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion through the lens of international students attending a CAAT in Toronto, Ontario. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What experiences related to equity, diversity, and inclusion do such international students have while pursuing a college education?
2. How do they explain and make sense of their experiences?
3. How do the college's structure, policies, and practices affect their experiences?

## Literature Review

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are three closely linked values held by many institutions that promote the fair treatment of different groups of individuals, including people of different races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Most international college students belong to one or more of these categories; thus, institutional EDI strategies are vitally important to them. At the time of writing, there were no studies examining EDI policies as they pertained to international community college students. Even so, some studies have examined the challenges that such students face while pursuing a college education. In this part of the article, some of these studies are reviewed through the lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

## Support for International Students

In this section, the literature on international students' experience with various college services is reviewed. Student counselling and advising for academic and career support have always been key services provided by CAATs (Davis, 1966). That being said, such services were designed before international students enrolled at CAATs in large numbers and may not address their specific needs adequately, thus undermining student equity. Buckner et al. (2020) examined the internationalization strategies of 32 Canadian colleges and universities and found that such strategies were noticeably short on essential values such as equity, empathy, humility, and solidarity.

According to the literature, international students encounter multiple barriers when they try to use college support services. Such barriers include inconvenient office hours and locations, limited online assistance, online resources that are difficult to navigate, and a lack of relevant advising and personalized assistance (Fadulu, 2018). Research suggests that a third of all students do not know where to turn for support (National Union of Students, 2017). Cage et al. (2020) observed that inflexible office hours may prevent students from obtaining help promptly, especially international college students, who often have inflexible academic timetables and, moreover, must work to finance their education.

A study by de Moissac et al. (2020) showed that even though international university students are likely to report higher life satisfaction, they are less likely to reveal their hardships and to seek help. De Moissac et al. (2020) said that support for international students on campus should be more culturally relevant and take into consideration ethnolinguistic differences, religious practices, and other aspects of international students' reality.

Caxaj et al. (2021) explored how racialized students in a mid-sized Canadian city navigate campus life and found that such students struggled to build a sense of home because of inadequate support. Caxaj et al. (2021) concluded that service providers need "to explicitly acknowledge cultural differences as opportunities to build rapport with racialized students, and to consider normalized and overt racism as key determinants of students' progress and well-being" (p. 503). Research also shows that some international post-secondary students face food insecurity, which undermines their health and academic performance (Hanzaza et al., 2021).

One of the defining features of a CAAT education is its emphasis on practical, real-life work experience gained through job-oriented programs. Even so, research shows that when international students access career services, they often face challenges not encountered by domestic students (Arthur, 2003). In fact, numerous researchers have shown that the cultural diversity of international students calls for new approaches to career services (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Heppner & Fu, 2010). For instance, Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) argued that the Canadian norms used to help international students plan their careers may conflict with their cultural and religious values. Moreover, El Masri et al. (2016) concluded from their research on international students in Ontario that there appears to be a gap in the availability of targeted professional services for international students:

“Programs that aim to broaden international students’ social and career networks beyond the international students’ community and beyond campus also tend to be limited” (p. 5).

Perhaps the greatest contributor to inequity between domestic and international students is the difference in the tuition fees that the two groups pay. In the 2021–22 academic year, international students attending Seneca, one of Canada’s largest colleges, paid \$7,998 for one semester in a diploma program, whereas domestic students paid \$1,868 (Seneca College, 2023). International students’ ability to earn extra income to support their education and living expenses is limited because they are allowed to work no more than 20 hours a week off campus while attending college—a regulation that does not apply to domestic students (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023). Furthermore, international college students typically do not qualify for any of the financial support available to domestic students. As Alfattal (2017) points out, domestic students have access to financial aid through various programs, whereas international students are restricted to a limited number of scholarships.

## Engaging with Faculty and Peers

This section reviews international students’ engagement with college faculty and peers. Jeannin (2013), who studied students’ perception of diversity in a highly international classroom, found that cultural diversity was perceived positively by 94% of the respondents. The participants felt that engaging with students from various countries enhanced their cultural awareness and knowledge. A study by Gu et al. (2010) on the intercultural experiences of international students showed that they were most concerned about being embarrassed when unable to answer questions in class. The participants also reported feeling powerless and lacking a sense of belonging. Hanassab (2006) studied discrimination against international students by exploring the relationships between students and faculty members. She found that international students often felt that their professors favoured native speakers of English. International students in a study by Arkoudis et al. (2019) complained that some professors “overcomplicate the wording or nod without engaging because they don’t have the ability to teach in an engaging way” (p. 805).

Stressing the importance of diversity, Hanassab opined that:

a diverse campus provides its members with the skills necessary to be productive in a multicultural environ-

ment. Students must learn to view things from the perspective of others and to discover mutually beneficial resolutions. International students provide the means of diversifying the campus. (p. 169)

But, as Jeannin (2013) points out, “teachers need to make themselves aware of their biases and privileges to truly welcome students’ diversity” (p. 10).

Since March 2020, most international students have been studying remotely, many from their home countries. Some have never set foot on Canadian soil. The remote mode has prevented many students from engaging meaningfully with their teachers. According to Day et al. (2021), students who are not native speakers of English found the lack of body language and other non-verbal communication extremely stressful and, therefore, participated less in their classes. Literat (2021) reported that many students felt that their professors were less encouraging when teaching remotely. Against the traumatic background of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was seen as taking a toll on students’ mental health, with students “crying during online class, feeling isolated and scared” (Literat, 2021, p. 6). Online learning was trying for all students, but especially for international students, who may not have had a strong support system to help them cope.

Will (2016) explored the interaction between international and domestic students in the United States and discovered that international students had a strong desire to interact with their American peers. He also reported that some Chinese students complained that their domestic counterparts often held misinformed, prejudiced, and offensive views of Chinese current events. Reflecting on this situation, Will (2016) argued that “diversity should not just stay at the surface level, [because] it is the first step we take in order to promote multiculturalism and further advocate for inclusion and social equity in education. There is no superior or inferior culture” (p. 1074).

The literature also covers the numerous barriers that international students encounter when they turn to the support services offered by their institutions. It explores the challenges they tend to face when dealing with peers, faculty, and members of the broader community. Such literature provides rich insight into the research topic and contributes to an overall understanding of international students, but it is deficient in knowledge directly relevant to this research project. For instance, most research on this subject focuses on university students rather than college students, partially because the influx of international CAAT students is recent, whereas their



university counterparts have a much longer history in Canada. Moreover, no research examines international Ontario college students' experience with and perception of EDI. This research seeks to address these knowledge gaps.

## Theoretical Framework

The participants' experiences were examined through the lens of critical theory, which served as the theoretical foundation for the study. Critical theory challenges the conventional norms that prevent people from fully understanding how the world works (Nickerson & Nickerson, 2023). It examines all types of systemic biases and discrimination, such as sexism, ageism, homophobia, and racism, as well as privilege and power relationships in society. As Hanson et al. (1994) point out, it scrutinizes such relationships in their social, historical, and economic contexts. Thus, critical theory provides a powerful lens for an examination of international students' experiences in a society where the White, English-speaking majority has traditionally held power. The literature review showed that international students experience inequality and a lack of diversity and inclusion. The research questions for this study are, therefore, rooted in the philosophy of critical theory, and seek to deepen our understanding of how international community college students perceive and react to their reality.

## Positionality Statement

The study was conducted by four researchers, namely two naturalized Canadians and two international college students. The research team has substantial experience in helping international CAAT students from around the world resolve academic, personal, and immigration matters. Three of them are members of a visible minority and, like many newcomers to Canada, have experienced numerous barriers while negotiating life in a new country. They are strongly committed to social justice and equity for all. Their experience, expertise, background, and beliefs provide a powerful lens for an examination of international college students' engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion.

## Methodology

The study was conducted at a GTA community college with a highly diverse population, including a mix of international, recent immigrant, and domestic students. Information on

the purpose of the study and an invitation to take part were emailed anonymously to international students attending the college. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for confidentiality, the interviews were conducted by telephone, and detailed notes were taken of the participants' answers. The interview schedule had two distinct parts: structured and semi-structured. The first part of the interview was structured, and participants were asked to share their demographic information and overall perception of EDI to identify important trends, which were explored further in the second part of the interview. In the semi-structured part of the interview, the respondents were asked to elaborate on their experiences in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion by answering open-ended questions.

To ensure high-quality analysis, the researchers examined the qualitative data separately and then compared their findings to build a consensus on the emerging themes. They also used a reflexivity technique to ensure their personal biases did not affect the findings. Thematic coding and pattern coding were used to analyze the data to identify common trends. The limited scope of the study necessarily precluded a comprehensive examination of the subject. Moreover, even though the findings are generalizable, the study is grounded in a specific time and place, which also limits how the findings can be used.

Table 1 gives a summary profile of the research participants. To ensure confidentiality, their real names were not used. All participants had to meet one of two criteria, namely to possess a study permit or a postgraduation work permit. Note that the term "visible minority" is used in this article because it is a demographic category defined by the Canadian government. It does not include Indigenous peoples.

## Findings and Analysis

The study data are presented in three parts, each related to one of the three EDI concepts. The data analysis was conducted through the lens of critical theory, and connections were established between the research questions and the findings.

## Equity

Equity has to be distinguished from equality. Equality denotes equal opportunity for all, regardless of needs and circumstances. Thus, a differently abled person who is provided with the same resources as everyone else is treated equally, but not equitably. Equity entails fair access, oppor-

**Table 1**

*Research Participants' Profile (n = 35)*

Category	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	19	54.3
Male	16	45.7
<b>Nationality</b>		
Indian	11	31.4
Chinese	5	14.3
Vietnamese	3	8.6
South Korean	3	8.6
Ukrainian	2	5.7
Mexican	2	5.7
Other (9 nationalities)	9	25.7
<b>Minority status</b>		
Visible minority	29	82.8
White	6	17.2

*Note:* n = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

tunity, and advancement for all, taking into account individual needs. In other words, it is about creating a fair playing field for everyone (Ideal, 2021). Table 2 shows the respondents' perception of equity at their college.

As Table 2 shows, 22 of the 35 interviewees deemed their college an equitable place. Even so, some may not have had a thorough understanding of equity, as the following comment demonstrates: "[The] college environment is great. I mean, everybody is treated with respect. I mean, they promote diversity. It is much more diverse than in my country. I mean, everyone is treated equally here." Eight students did not see the college as an equitable place, and five were not sure. When asked what detracts from equity at the college, the participants cited several factors, which are summarized in Table 3.

More than 94% of the participants stressed that international students pay much higher tuition fees than their domestic counterparts and provide a major source of income in return for their college education but, unlike domestic students, they are not eligible for tuition-assistance bursaries. A participant complained:

I am paying three times what Canadian students pay; it is so not fair. Everyone thinks international students have money, but my family has no money to pay my last semester. I work two jobs: one legal, one under [the] table.

Twelve participants (34.4%) felt that some teachers geared their classes to domestic students. As one observed, "Some professors are unaware of or uninterested in international students and their perspectives." Another noted, "I think professors often treat domestic students better unknowingly, because many professors are born here and are from the same culture." She continued, "In my program, most professors were under the impression that all students understood the teachings. And sometimes professors assume that you're gonna find information really easy." She said that teachers often covered the material too fast for her to understand it. Yet another participant said that the dearth of encouragement from professors gave him a "bad impression of the school."

More than 60% of participants found the support available on campus inadequate. Many said they were not aware

**Table 2**

*The College Is a Place Where All People Are Treated Equitably*

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	12	34.3
Somewhat agree	10	28.5
Not sure	5	14.3
Somewhat disagree	5	14.3
Strongly disagree	3	8.6
Total	35	100.0

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

**Table 3**

*Examples of Unequitable Treatment*

Factors	<i>n</i>	%
High tuition fees	33	94.2
Lack of financial assistance	28	80.0
Neglect by teachers	12	34.3
Inadequate support on campus	22	62.9
Disadvantage in the labour market	20	57.1

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

of the college services available to them, such as mentoring and tutoring. Some deemed the college's employees to have a poor grasp of the relevant immigration laws and regulations. In addition, one student observed that "the college needs to have a better system to promote their events for international students." Most students who attended college events specifically designed for international students reported a positive experience, but were frustrated by inflexible schedules, delayed replies to their inquiries, and a lack of promotion of such events, as shown by the following comment: "I attended a couple of international student service workshops, and they were good, but they always have them at the time when I have classes. Also, they are so slow answering my emails."

Several participants pointed out that their international student status prevented them from securing co-op jobs open only to domestic students. As one recalled, "The job

postings...clearly mention [that] if you are an international student, you should not apply." Some employers are reluctant to hire international students because they are not familiar with immigration regulations. Moreover, employers may simply use international graduates' immigration status as an excuse not to hire them (Legusov, 2021).

## Diversity

Diversity can be discussed in terms of culture, race, gender, physical attributes, mental ability, education, and other characteristics. Diversity is less about what makes people different and more about understanding, accepting, and valuing such differences (Ideal, 2021). All the participants in the study were asked to reflect on what diversity meant to them in the college context. Table 4 shows the extent to which they consider their college diverse.

As Table 4 shows, 94.3% of the participants deemed their college a diverse place. Even so, most of them perceived diversity in the somewhat narrow sense of race, ethnicity, and nationality, as the following comment shows: “Diversity is great at the college. There are students from all over the world; it is like [the] United Nations.” When prompted to reflect on other aspects of diversity, some said that, because of various events held by the college, such as Black History Month, Pride Day, and National Indigenous Day, they had become more aware of the cultural aspects of diversity.

The participants were also asked to reflect on factors that hindered diversity at their college. Table 5 shows several key factors that emerged.

Almost all the interviewees agreed that the college’s student population was ethnically diverse to a high degree. As noted, most of them conceptualized diversity through the lens of race, ethnicity, and nationality, neglecting the

cultural aspects. Such an outlook is understandable because many international students had not been exposed to diversity in the broader sense before coming to Canada, as the following comment suggests: “Back home people aren’t that friendly and aren’t that open to talking about the LGBTQ and things like that. So, coming to a country where the LGBTQ is normal and openly talked about was a big culture shock for me.”

Nineteen participants (54.3%) observed that, even though the students at their college came from many countries, they tended to gravitate toward their own ethnic groups. “There are, like, people from 100 different countries at the college, but they all hang out in their own groups. Koreans hang out with Koreans, Chinese hang out with Chinese,” as one participant observed. Understandably, many international students feel more comfortable socializing with and seeking support from students from their own ethnic group. As another participant recounted, “All my friends

**Table 4**

*The College Is a Diverse Place*

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	28	80.0
Somewhat agree	5	14.3
Not sure	2	5.7
Somewhat disagree	0	0.0
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	35	100.0

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

**Table 5**

*Factors that Hinder Diversity*

Factors	<i>n</i>	%
Limited interaction between ethnic groups	19	54.3
Limited interaction with domestic students	16	45.7
Lack of student diversity in programs and courses	12	34.3
Limited diversity of faculty members and counsellors	13	37.1

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.



were from the same background; it was comfortable and we could communicate in our own language and talk about things back home.”

Almost half (16) of the participants said that most of their college friends were from their own ethnic community. Moreover, those belonging to visible minorities found it easier to connect with international students from other cultures than with Canadian-born, Caucasian White students.

Several interviewees who started their programs before the COVID-19 pandemic said it was much easier to connect with students from other cultures when they were on campus. They emphasized the value of international days, student clubs, and cultural events where they could mingle, eat ethnic foods, and watch performances with other students. As one student observed, “The student services have some virtual get-togethers, but they attract only a small number of people.”

More than 34% of the participants expressed concern that, in some programs, the overwhelming majority of students were from the same country. A typical comment was “Ninety percent of the students in my class are from my country; it’s like I never left home.” Such observations point to an important phenomenon, namely the large number of international students from relatively few countries, especially India (Legusov & Jafar, 2021).

Thirteen students pointed out that the college had very few or even zero faculty members and counsellors from their ethnic groups. Reflecting on her struggle with mental health issues, a student explained,

In my culture, it’s something we keep to ourselves. The most I think I can do is to tell my good friend. My student

advisor told me about counselling service, but I can’t talk to someone who cannot understand my culture.

## Inclusion

Inclusion in organizational settings can be conceived of in terms of the extent to which people associated with the organization feel a sense of belonging (Ideal, 2021). Thus, to gain a better sense of the degree of inclusion at a given institution, it is important to examine it from the standpoint of the agents active within it. Do they feel a strong connection to the community? Do they think they contribute to the community’s well-being? Do they share a sense of purpose with their coworkers and peers? (Ideal, 2021). Table 6 shows the participants’ overall attitude toward inclusion at their college.

As Table 6 shows, most of the participants (21) did not consider the college highly inclusive. They were also asked to comment on the level of inclusion they experienced in class settings, interactions with school officials and peers, and the broader community. Table 7 summarizes their answers.

Perhaps the most significant theme that emerged from the data was the participants’ sense of being excluded from the educational process. More than 28% of the interviewees said that, in the classroom, they felt left out by professors who paid more attention to domestic students. One participant recalled that a professor passed over her when his students were introducing themselves: “He completely skipped me. I guess he assumed that I’m not comfortable talking in front of people.” Another participant said that an instructor insisted that, for in-class group work, each group

**Table 6**

*The College Is a Place Where Everyone Feels Included*

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	7	20.0
Somewhat agree	8	22.9
Not sure	6	17.1
Somewhat disagree	6	17.1
Strongly disagree	8	22.9
Total	35	100.0

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

**Table 7**

*Did You Ever Feel Excluded while Pursuing Your College Education?*

Settings	<i>n</i>	%
In class	10	28.6
In social settings at college	12	34.3
In interactions with college officials	21	60.0
In the broader community	18	51.4

*Note:* *n* = number of participants; % = percentage of participants.

had to include at least one domestic student “in case we needed help or couldn’t speak for ourselves.” The participant was upset because she considered herself a confident English speaker who expressed herself well and did not need assistance. “I felt like the prof thought we were dumb,” she recalled.

Another interviewee, who described himself as a “fluent-in-English, visible-minority person,” recalled being ignored by teachers on multiple occasions. “The situation changed drastically when classes were moved online because of the COVID-19 pandemic,” he explained. He turned off the video camera on his computer, and his teachers assumed he was a domestic student: “I could feel that it was much easier to participate in class when none of the professors were able to see my face and make assumptions about me.” Reflecting on his classroom experience, he observed, “Profs do not want communication problems and rarely ask me questions.” The interviewees also had difficulty engaging with their instructors on a personal level. As one commented, “Some profs do not try to learn international students’ names.”

Twelve participants reported that they sometimes felt excluded by other students. As one recalled, “The local White girls were staring at me; that really intimidated me. I didn’t talk to those girls during the whole semester.” It should be noted that the participants often used the words domestic, Canadian, and White interchangeably and sometimes inaccurately—many non-White students are domestic, and a small number of international students are White. Several students commented that they were not taken seriously by their peers because of their accent, appearance, or supposedly strange-sounding names. For example, one interviewee complained that many students could not pronounce her name correctly. “Several friends suggested that

I add an English name to my Korean name,” she recalled, “but I can’t relate to this other name. I refuse to do that. So, some students just call me ‘the Korean girl.’” Some also felt they were victims of stereotyping. “Often people assume that because I am Asian, I am shy and docile,” a woman from China said.

Many of the interviewees (60%) said that college employees were not familiar with the needs of international students, and often gave them the run-around or even refused to help them. As one student explained, “I feel like it is a closed-off environment toward international students because of the international student label.” She pointed out that, even though international students differ substantially among themselves, they are often seen as a single group: “There is a big divide between domestic and international students. It is like us and them; we are never seen as just regular students.” Another student, who was looking for information on bursaries and scholarships, recounted, “A front-desk clerk told me to check for the information I need online. She told me that in a sarcastic way. Yeah, kind of like she knew that nothing is going to happen [namely, the student would not find any information].”

Even so, the college has begun taking various initiatives to improve inclusion. For example, a woman interviewee from the Middle East appreciated the fact that there were many women in her chemical engineering program, in contrast to her home country. She also praised the college for respecting her culture by providing women-only study sessions at its learning centre.

## Discussion

International college students are likely to differ from their university counterparts in terms of their motivation for pur-

suing studies abroad, their career trajectories after graduation, and the immigration options open to them. Previous studies, which generally dealt with international university students, show that such students encounter challenges when they try to use institutional support services (El Masri et al., 2016). Many participants in this study said that multiple barriers, such as inconvenient office hours and locations, cryptic instructions, and a lack of appropriate advising, made adjusting to their new environment extremely challenging. International community college students are likely to experience more barriers to success than their university counterparts because many are enrolled in short certificate and diploma programs and, therefore, do not have sufficient time to learn how to navigate their new environment successfully. As a result, many international college students are not aware of all the resources and services available to them. A contributing factor is college employees' poor understanding of the immigration laws and regulations governing international students.

Many of our findings reflect those of other researchers, particularly as they relate to international students' capacity to seek help and their understanding of diversity. Thus, in line with previous research (Cage et al., 2020; Corrigan et al., 2006; de Moissac et al., 2020), the study findings show that international students are hesitant to seek help with personal and mental health problems. This situation may be due to insufficient diversity among the college's employees. Many of the participants said they would feel more comfortable sharing their challenges with a counsellor familiar with their culture. A study by Jeannin (2013) found that student diversity was perceived positively by 94% of the respondents. Even though this study supports such findings, it revealed that international college students tend to have a somewhat narrow understanding of diversity; they focus on race, nationality, and ethnicity, but tend to neglect cultural aspects.

A distinctive feature of this study was that it took place at a college with large numbers of international students. Thus, more than 34% of the participants expressed concern that, in some programs, the overwhelming majority of students were from the same ethnic group. This is a new and fast-developing phenomenon. In addition to the rising numbers of international students from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, many recent immigrants and Canadian-born students of the same origins attend Ontario community colleges. In the near future, a large majority of the students on GTA college campuses may come from a single ethnic group or similar ethnic groups. Colleges and

other institutions need to prepare for such a configuration of their student body.

Some studies show that international students often perceive a wall between themselves and local students and, therefore, do not feel fully included in college life. Fear of being rejected (Jeannin, 2013), making language mistakes or failing to understand the context of discussions (Maeda, 2020), and prejudice on the part of domestic students (Will, 2016) are cited as reasons for their hesitancy to engage with domestic students. This study confirmed such findings but also showed that, at a college with large numbers of international students, such students tend to gravitate to their own ethnic and racial groups and may have difficulty engaging with domestic students and international students from other cultures. Furthermore, the participants strenuously objected to being categorized as "international" as opposed to "domestic" by college employees.

Previous research has shown that, to be included at school and work, international students sometimes anglicize their names (Pennesi, 2016). In this study, too, some international students had given in and anglicized their names. Such students reported a higher level of inclusion, especially in the labour market. Other international students, however, felt that their names were a vital part of their identity and resisted the pressure to change. Unfortunately, such students felt more isolated. Considering that practical experience is a large part of a college education, colleges may need to engage with employers to foster the inclusion of all students.

The use of critical theory in this research provided the foundation for an examination of systemic biases and discrimination. The study findings suggest that even though international and domestic students are given equal opportunities, equity is not achieved because international students are not provided with all the tools for success. Moreover, international and domestic students who belong to visible minorities both experience racial prejudice.

## Conclusions

This study explored international community college students' perception of equity, diversity, and inclusion at a single institution. Most international college students in Canada can be viewed as non-traditional, and, as this study demonstrates, they face numerous challenges, some of which are aggravated by their immigration status.

As noted, Canada's CAATs were designed to train local populations for local labour markets and were largely

caught off guard by the dramatic rise in the number of international students. This study clearly demonstrates that, in developing EDI policies, colleges need to re-evaluate their student support services, which are heavily geared toward domestic students. Specifically, college employees need to be more aware of the challenges that international students face. College structures, services, and policies need to be better coordinated to assist such students more effectively. Many of the study participants resent being tagged with the “international” label. Given that they are viewed as future Canadian citizens, the colleges need to provide equitable quality of services to all students.

One limitation of the study is that all the participants attended a single GTA college. The voices of students from small-town community colleges would have enhanced the study. Also, this research looked at students’ experiences from a critical theory perspective and, therefore, focused on the challenges that international students face. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of their experience, a different framework may be needed. Future research can address these shortcomings.

The research is pertinent from theoretical and practical points of view. The study uses critical theory to look at international students as an underrepresented group on the basis of the intersectionality of their many minority status characteristics. It fills a gap in the literature by exploring a previously underresearched topic, namely equity, diversity, and inclusion from the perspective of international community college students in the Canadian province of Ontario. The findings show that, owing to the increasing popularity of a CAAT education among international students, colleges must pay more attention to this demographic and become better prepared to accommodate the influx of international students.

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