

Navigating norms: Supporting international students in work-integrated learning and (re)establishing professional identities

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Applying Geert Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural dimensions to a qualitative study, this paper explores international student perceptions of how cultural norms affect learning and development within international education work-integrated learning (WIL). Focus group interviews were conducted with twenty international student participants, representing 11 different cultures and 11 academic programs, at a Canadian Polytechnic to explore how students' cultural norms can influence WIL expectations and experiences. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: adapting to reduced power distance relationships, adapting to increased individualism, finding friends and social support, and self-efficacy in language learning. This paper presents the findings with implications and recommendations for designing and delivering culturally relevant WIL and argues applying interventions to support intercultural discovery and development encourages international students to identify, adapt, and apply work skills in accordance with host country cultural norms and employer expectations.

Keywords: International students, cultural norms, cultural dimensions, international WIL, soft skills

With Canadian post-secondary education's multilingual proficiency, and diverse backgrounds and experiences, international students are a pillar of Canada's educational sector and long-term economic success strategy. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of international students in Canada increased by 68% with more than 800,000 international students enrolled in Canadian post-secondary programs in 2022, contributing over CA \$20 billion to Canada's GDP (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Gupta & Su, 2023) and one-third of tuition payments (Richardson & Hussain, 2022). Canada's international education strategy outlines the need to diversify the education sector while stabilizing growth, promote global ties, and ensure competitiveness by helping to address medium and long-term labor shortages, while more closely aligning with labor market needs (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). While not all international students in Canada plan to immigrate, Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP) provide pathways to permanent residency (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025) and have become the predominant program through which most immigrants enter Canada. Moreover, more than 95% of post-secondary institutions integrate international education in recruitment strategies (Sabzalieva, 2020), enticing international students with information on standards of living, safety, diversity, equity, and inclusion, labor shortages, and job opportunities.

However, many international students experience barriers achieving WIL and post-graduation employment expectations, often encountering prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment. Lack of Canadian work-experience, language capabilities, cultural understanding, and soft skill deficiencies are commonly cited concerns expressed by employers (Drewery et al., 2020; Grant, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Pham, 2021). Canada and most international students' countries of origin are far apart on the cultural dimensions identified and described by Hofstede (1984). Half of all international students in Canada come from India and China (Global Affairs Canada, 2019), cultures with much greater power distance and collectivist orientation (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede et al., 2010). Differences in cultural dimensions, values, and norms require international students to adapt to

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different teaching styles, learning strategies, unfamiliar workplace structures, processes, and behavioral norms (Cronjé, 2011; Kwadzo, 2014).

De Vita (2001) suggests cultural conditioning is reflected in the learning styles of domestic and international students and greater variances are observed in these preferences within mixed cohorts. Cultural norms shape learning and working styles (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede et al., 2010; Laroche & Yang, 2014) and offer a lens through which to understand challenges international students experience meeting employer expectations. Moreover, cultural values and norms determine and shape our understanding and perception of soft skills, and because these skills are learned at a young age and reinforced culturally through social development in school, they represent one of the greatest challenges that international students and domestic instructors/managers encounter in both education and employment (Hofstede et al., 2010; Laroche & Yang, 2014).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a model of experiential education that integrates academic training with work experiences, bringing together students, institutions, and employers (Drewery et al., 2020). By spending time in professional settings or practice relevant to programs of study, WIL combines curricular knowledge with relevant real-world learning anchored within cultural and economic systems, which results in strengthening procedural knowledge and better preparation to enter the workforce (Jackson & Pham, 2021; Smith & Worsfold, 2015). In this way, WIL is often a bridge that connects students to professional pathways. For international students, WIL offers an opportunity to gain relevant local work experience, enhance language and communication skills, build confidence, establish professional networks, understand organizational structures and nuances, develop culturally relevant soft skills, and prepare for the post-graduate labor market (Drewery et al., 2020; Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Pham, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hofstede's (1984) theoretical framework of cultural dimensions identifies and differentiates thinking and social action that exist between members of nations. Hofstede (1984) argues "people carry 'mental programs' which are developed in early childhood and reinforced in schools and organizations... most clearly expressed in the different values that predominate among people from different countries" (p. 11). Hofstede initially identified four dimensions in which cultures differ. Power distance relates to the degree of acceptance of unequal distribution of power from the perspective of subordinates (Hofstede et al., 2010). Uncertainty avoidance measures the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Chaney & Martin, 2014). Individualism vs. Collectivism compares the relationship between the individual ("I" orientation) and collective ("We" orientation) which prevail in cultures (Hofstede, 1984). Masculinity/Femininity describes the degree to which societies prefer distinct gender roles (Liu et al., 2010).

Critics of Hofstede's dimensions warn against the implications of the quantitative, normative nature of his research, and that comparing cultures on some attributes tell us nothing about the variability within each nation or whether individual samples were typical or atypical of that culture (Cronjé, 2011, p. 597). Hofstede (1984) acknowledges that his research describes entire populations, arguing that the mental programming around social norms exists at the cultural rather than individual level. However, as the participants in Hofstede's study comprised middle-class educated professionals at IBM, the comparative socio-economic and educational correlation aligned for the purpose of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Differences in personality, motivation and cognition are influenced by social learning in adapting to cultural environments, and culturally shaped variables impact academic learning (Boyle et al., 2020). Hofstede (1984) advises cultural norms are discovered and learnt first at home from the influence of family, then reinforced in educational environments. Canada, like Australia, New Zealand, U.K., and U.S., is a multicultural democratic nation and the construction of classroom cultures, in some respects, can be understood as a negotiated process (Făt, 2015) between teachers, students, administration, and community influences. However, understanding nuance, systemic, and structural forces shaping classroom/workplace micro-culture, or institutional/organizational meso-culture, is considerably more difficult for international students who have been culturally conditioned in countries with different values, rules, social norms, and political economies. Undeniably, within international education there is often discrepancy between teaching and learning as “the education processes through which members of a society learn how to function within a culture, play a critical role in reinforcing, if not shaping, learning style preferences” (De Vita, 2001, p. 167). This in turn shapes work related attitudes, values, culturally constructed workplace norms and preferred management styles (Laroche & Yang, 2014).

Understanding cultural conditioning in relation to preferred learning styles is necessary for culturally responsive teaching (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012) including WIL preparation and delivery. Many teachers of multicultural classes have discovered that even well-prepared lesson plans fail to engage all learners because culture influences the way we perceive, organize, and process information, communicate, interact with others, and solve problems (De Vita, 2001, p. 167). Research identifies significant cultural differences relating to assessment, instruction, interaction, collaboration, communication, language, and conduct (Făt, 2015; Liu et al., 2010). For example, Eastern educational processes tend to be exam oriented, whereas Western education tends to be more application-oriented (Boyle et al., 2020; Cronjé, 2011; Hofstede et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2010). Cultural values and norms relating to academic engagement have major implications for WIL preparation. In U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and U.K., instructors tend to encourage highly interactive learning environments (Făt, 2015; Liu et al., 2010), including encouraging students to challenge teachers and ask critical questions. Such assertion would conflict with values of high-power distance and collectivist-oriented cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010) where educational systems are teacher centric and students are expected to listen to and respect their teacher’s knowledge unquestionably (Cronjé, 2011; Făt, 2015).

The forms of support that students require generally fall into three categories relating to learning, emotional needs, and information management (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Although administrative staff and services tend to favor learning supports, many institutions are increasingly addressing students’ emotional needs, especially around mental health and well-being. However, several studies suggest that international students prioritize their socio-cultural needs, such as making friends with domestic students, understanding and integrating within the local culture, and navigating the nuances of living independently and finding post-graduate employment (Kwadzo, 2014; Lertora & Sullivan, 2019; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Research suggests that in emphasizing and allocating resources to support academic needs at the expense of sociocultural and acculturative supports, students’ needs to successfully prepare for WIL and transition for education-to-employment are not being met (Lertora & Sullivan, 2019; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). While international students often report a desire to establish connections with domestic students, one of the challenges in constructing and supporting socialization services is that international students lack the time to engage in social activities because they must deal with extensive intercultural and language barriers, learning style differences, and other

pressures (i.e., academic, family, financial, visa requirements, etc.). Therefore, students are prone to look within programs, classrooms, labs, and workplaces for social connections and support (Kwadzo, 2014).

By infusing industry and/or community engagement into student learning, WIL provides an opportunity for international students to orient themselves to their new culture and environment, enhance language and communication skills, increase familiarity with workplace norms and employer expectations, and build confidence and social connectivity (Jackson & Pham, 2021; Kwadzo, 2014). Unfortunately, evidence suggests that fewer international students are provided with opportunities to participate in WIL compared with domestic students (Jackson & Pham, 2021). There are several factors contributing to this. In Canada, Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) funding, which provides wage subsidy supports to employers, exclude international students from eligibility (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024). While several provinces offer student hiring tax credits that apply to all students, SWPP funding ineligibility forces businesses that rely upon funding to reject international student applicants. Furthermore, some employers are reluctant to hire international students due to the perception of weaker communication skills, lack of local contextual work experience, and concerns with cultural differences (Jackson & Pham, 2021). Additionally, some international students come from cultures where students are discouraged from working during academic study and where job prospects and opportunities are determined more by academic performance than relevant and progressive work experience (Hofstede et al., 2010; Kwadzo, 2014; Laroche & Yang, 2014). These factors, coupled with high-tuition fees, complicated co-op and post-graduate work permit processes, and the added costs associated with WIL, further prevent many international students from participating in and benefiting from WIL programs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore how cultural dimensions, values, and norms influence learning and development within Canadian international education WIL. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) In what ways do students' cultural backgrounds and characteristics inform expectations and experiences of international education and WIL? (2) How do international students come to discover cultural differences, transitional barriers, and adapt to WIL procedures, processes, and work environments? For this study, the forms of WIL explored in relation to international student experiences were those most accessible, available, and offered to international students in polytechnic and applied colleges within Canada, particularly co-operative education and industry projects. Contributions from this study can help WIL practitioners, employers, and students recognize and respond to common cultural barriers international students experience accessing, participating, and succeeding in WIL. Findings presented demonstrate processes of intercultural discovery and development and provide a guide for WIL practitioners to anticipate, develop, and implement culturally responsive supports to enhance work-integrated learning programming for international students.

METHODS

Participants

Ethical approval (3136) was granted by the University of Saskatchewan and Red River College Polytechnic (RRC Polytech) Research Ethics Boards (REB). Participants eligible for this study included international students enrolled in or recently graduated from a full-time program which included a form of work-integrated learning offered at RRC Polytech, located in Central Canada. More than two-

months was allocated to participant recruitment to overcome limitations of previous studies which have predominantly sampled the experiences of homogenous students (e.g., Chinese) or situated within a single program (e.g., Engineering). The resultant sample comprised 20 international students, including eight males and twelve females. Research participants represented 11 different countries throughout Asia, the Middle East, Central and South American, and 11 academic programs, including: business, information technology, civil engineering, aircraft maintenance, early-child care, and community development. Participants' WIL experiences included co-operative education ($n=12$), field placements ($n=1$), and community and industry research projects² ($n=7$). The aim of this diverse sample was to determine whether findings and recommendations could transcend countries of origin, programs of study, and be generalized relative to the international education WIL experience. To protect the anonymity of research participants, alpha-numeric coding was applied in the data analysis and findings when referencing or quoting a participant.

Study Design

This research employed an exploratory case study methodology anchored within constructivism (Rochat, 2024). Focus group interviews were utilized to gather data as they have been found to be especially useful for fostering social support networks while assuming that an individual's attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Further, focus groups provide opportunities for discussion, expression of shared or differing opinions and points of view, and exploration on why, how, and in what ways an issue might be salient (Gibbs, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These interviews were conducted with groups of 4 to 7 participants in the northern hemisphere winter academic term (March and April) of 2022 and two additional focus group interviews were administered in WIL work-terms (July and August) to collect additional data capturing participant perspectives as they engaged in WIL. Virtual interviews were required due to gathering restrictions under COVID-19 protocols. Zoom was selected as an appropriate platform for data collection and participants were encouraged to contribute to the virtual discussion by whatever means was most comfortable.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis approach, a process compatible with constructivist paradigms. The first phase requires familiarization with the data, this was facilitated through manual transcription of each of the virtual meeting recordings to text. Transcriptions were then shared via email with participants to ensure any language/communication barriers and contextual, cultural, or audio misunderstanding were corrected before transcription analysis. Most participants took the opportunity to provide contextual corrections and/or approval. Transcriptions were then reviewed several times, during which the researcher began to identify interesting passages within the data and developed notes in the margins. This process led to the second phase, generating initial codes. Coding "is the process of exploring the diversity and patterning of meaning from the dataset, developing codes, and applying code labels to specific segments of each data item" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 53). After completing coding of the entire data set, focus shifted from interpretation of individual data items to that of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the entire data set (Bryne, 2021). This led to the generation of themes. Each theme and supporting

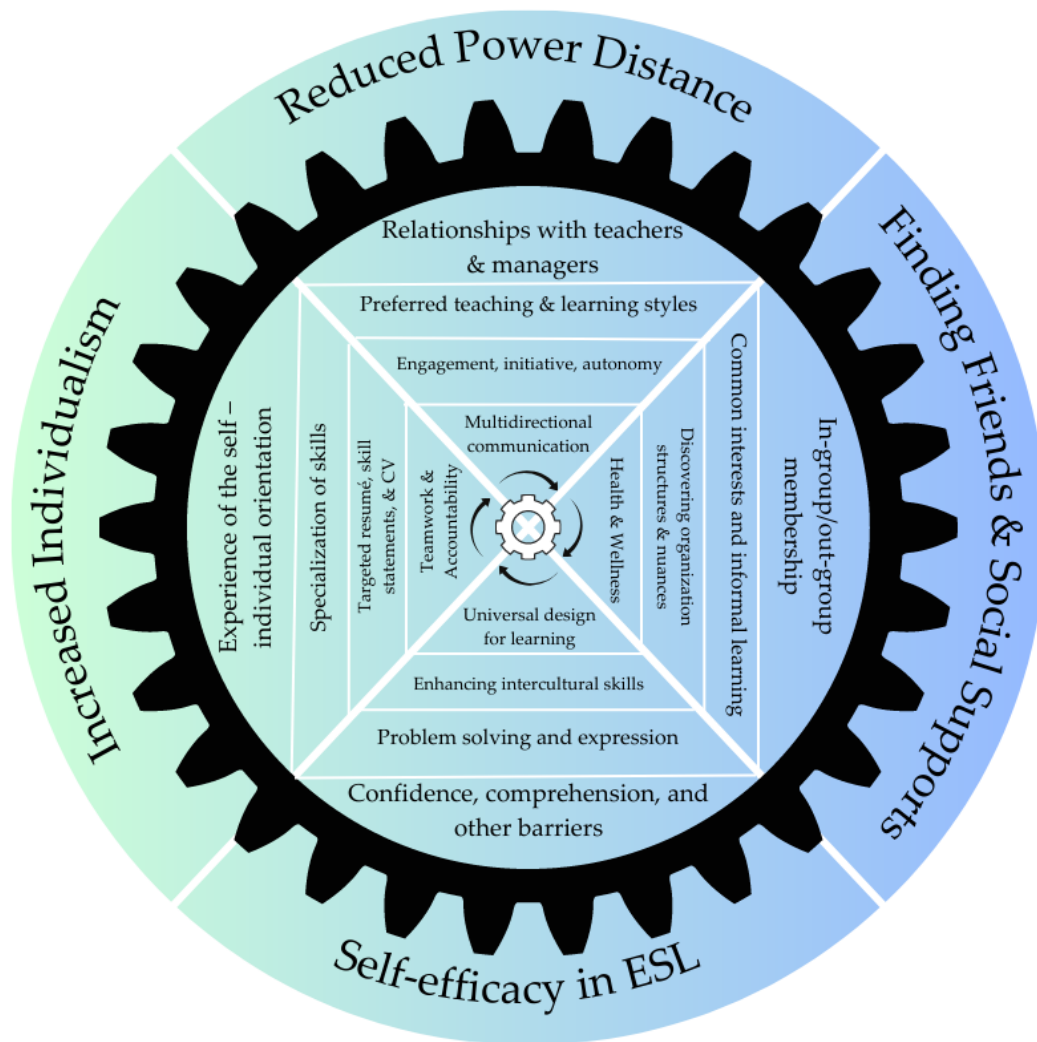
² RRC Polytech applies (CEWIL) Canada definitions and terminology of WIL types.

subthemes were then defined in relation to the dataset, research questions, and supporting theoretical framework. They are presented both descriptively and illustratively in the next section.

RESULTS

Four primary themes emerged from the analysis: international students adapting to cultures and structures of reduced power distance, increased individualism, the importance of finding friends and social supports, and self-efficacy in English language learning. Themes arose from several interconnected subthemes: relationships with teachers and managers, preferred teaching and learning styles; in-group and out-group membership, friendships with domestic students, informal learning, communication, confidence, comprehension and other barriers, expression of self, specialization of skills, and indicators of WIL and employment readiness. Findings are presented according to core themes, with references to subthemes illustrated within the theoretical model (see Figure 1) provided in this paper and corresponding discussion.

FIGURE 1: Axis of intercultural discovery and development in international education.



Note. From *Bridging Barriers: an Explorative Case Study of How Culture Influences Learning and Development in International Education* [Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan] (p. 40), by B. Rochat, 2024.

Reduced Power Distance

Hofstede defines power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). A common thread of discussion amongst participants encapsulated value systems of showing instructors respect, experiences of teacher centric education in ‘home’ countries, hierarchical cultures, conditioning to stricter classroom and workplace management practices, and an absence of public contradiction or criticism of authoritative figures (Rochat, 2024).

In India there is a gap between teachers and students. There is a difference in power. Students won’t speak to teachers the same way they do here. You can ask a question, but the teacher may choose not to answer it. In Canada the relationship between teacher and students can be seen more like friends. If you ask a question, the teacher must answer it. P8-IN

In China, except for the international company, the manager and the normal employee have a gap between them. Here I can see the manager shows more respect to employees and talk to them in a friendly manner and nice way. P10-CHN

Additional expressions of power distance are demonstrated by preferences of addressing instructors and managers with formal titles, such as ‘sir’, ‘madame’, and ‘professor.’ P5-IN noted, “It is very disrespectful thing in our country to call a teacher by their name. In India [if you address a teacher informally] they would scold you in front of the whole class.” This dimension was further illustrated by discussing classroom and workplace management practices. In the second focus group P9-JM shared being introduced to team-based learning in her program. Team-based working was also mentioned by participant P15-BR as something uncommon in Brazil, explaining “because in Brazil there is a strong hierarchy, and you must obey the person above you. While in Canada it is o.k. for everyone to provide input.”

Participant P11-BR provided another example of the power distance dimension reinforced in classrooms where, “issuing a complaint about a teacher in Brazil is a huge deal and students do not feel entitled to it”. Participant P9-JM elaborated on classroom behavior culturally permitted in teacher-centric educational systems by sharing an incident observed in one of her Canadian classes.

It was in the classroom with about twenty other students, and he was really disrespectful. The teacher really didn’t respond, and nothing came of it. He was back in the class the next day... The disrespect was evident, and I was actually quite shocked by it and that it was allowed. In Jamaica that is a no-no. P9-JM

Participants (P14-IN, P15-BR, and P11-BR) contrasted teacher and student-centered educational systems comparing instructor accessibility. P11-MB explained how in Canada she would approach instructors with other students to demonstrate shared questions, challenges, problems, or concerns with tests or assignments. Other participants illuminated power distance conditioning with examples of feeling compelled to offer detailed explanations for missing class, work, or assignment, because in home countries teachers may not accept or accommodate their reason. The concept of authoritative fear in hierarchical programming was also present in WIL experiences.

I think every international student feels timid at one point or another. They have some burning questions they want to ask, but they are so hesitant to ask because they think it may not be the

right question to ask this person and maybe will ask another person (who is not the teacher or manager) instead. P13-IN

Participants highlighted differences in teaching and learning styles. P1-IN, P5-IN, and P20-IN emphasized the importance of competing for grades in India, explaining teachers post grades publicly in classrooms. This leads to a system of gradeism and increased parental pressure because higher grades equate to being smarter, leading to more prestigious job opportunities. However, participants recognized exam dominated education systems and rote learning practices conflict with practical, hands-on, and experiential learning central to WIL.

Increased Individualism

Individualism, or 'I-orientation', pertains to societies where ties between individuals are loose and based on value systems that emphasize looking after oneself and immediate family. Conversely, in collectivist or 'we- orientated' societies, people are generally attached to strong, cohesive in-groups, which provide group membership and security in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 92). Adapting to social norms established and reinforced through individualistic orientation was one of the most discussed experiences participants shared. Social emphasis on promoting adolescent independence distinguishes processes of socialization and experiences of the self within Canada and participants' home countries (Rochat, 2024).

I think there is a lot of difference in culture. Like, I have seen that here people are kind of independent after age 16. How do they get independent? They get a job. But in India it is not like that. You have to do education, and to do education you have to rely on your parents until age 25-26. After you get a master's degree then you get a decent job. P8-IN

In another discussion, P13-IN also contrasted dependence [of socio-economic upper-class youth] on parents back in India with Canadians and international students living independently after high school. In separate discussions both P8-IN and P18-IN summarized the challenge of adjusting to living independently, household work, cooking, and working part-time while taking a full course load.

A lot of Indian students who come to Canada did not get to work in India. The culture in India is that you must focus on your studies...when you come to Canada students at just 16 or 17 start doing a job...so the culture shift to work culture was a big difference. Canada is more of a work-oriented culture with everyone so much into the work and I did not have any experience from India before coming to Canada so realized that I needed to start working to catch up with my peers. P1-IN

Individualism was also discussed in relation to job search strategies, documents and applying for jobs in Canada. Participants (P13-IN, P3-GT) recognized many international students are entering a new professional field, experiencing a new culture, and without adequate insight into expectations. Other participants (P4-NC, P2-BR, P15-BR) discussed not requiring cover letters before arriving in Canada, or contextualizing their experience and qualifications to match specific employer and position requirements. Prior to seeking out WIL support, participant P2-BR shared "I did not get a response from the first five co-op jobs I applied to," highlighting the importance of WIL and career service supports to learn how to write skill statements, cover letters, and develop targeted resumés that meet host country recruitment standards (Rochat, 2024).

I always find it difficult to write a resumé... it would be great to have someone offer to do it with you. There is a lot to learn, like how to write an objective in a precise way for what you are targeting, and with skill statements following the format of action verbs and specific statements of what you did. There is quite a lot to keep in mind. P4-NC

Awareness of establishing professional identity, skill specialization, and employment profiles also emerged in discussions. P8-IN contrasted grades as the best determinant of job opportunities in India with recognizing the importance of resumé formatting, developing and highlighting both 'technical' and 'soft' skills, acquiring and displaying certificates and demonstrating progressive work-experience, all of which are required in the Canadian labor market.

I attended many career sessions where professionals, HR people, were put the question, do you prefer a person with average scores and good communication skills or high scores and less communication skills?' The first was the answer in almost all cases...I think Canadian students put less emphasis on grades because of the teaching style from early childhood [to develop culturally relevant and valued work skills]. P13-IN

Finding Friends and Social Supports

Another commonly discussed priority, interest, and concern is the desire to connect with domestic students. However, participants expressed a shared feeling that domestic students are apathetic, indifferent, and less interested in making friends with international students (Rochat, 2024). One participant (P10-CHN) shared that they felt lonely. Participants (P2-BR, P4-NC, P6-PER, P9-JM) disclosed they felt domestic students were less friendly than advertised, or at least not as warm socially as they were accustomed to in South, Central America and Caribbean cultures. Participants (P6-PER, P11-BR) discussed experiencing artificial friendliness, describing Canadians as capable of being very friendly and helpful in class or work and then cold or not social outside of collegial corridors.

As [P15-BR] said, in Brazil we are very friendly and warm, so I believe there is kind of a barrier between making Canadian friends than international friends. I have a few Canadian friends, but I have way more international friends and I think they are more open to engage with international people. So, in my experience, it's easier to make international friends. P11-BR

Participants agreed that being full-time students, working part-time jobs, and spending much of their spare time studying and completing assignments, they relied on the classroom, or WIL workplace/space, to build social connections and find friendships. P8-IN discussed making friends with some classmates and feeling motivated that other students were working just as hard, with the same challenges of studying while living independently. P11-BR was able to expand her social network by establishing friends in school and then connecting with others through those friend groups. Participants (P1-IN, P2-BR, P4-NC, P9-JM, P12-UZ, P13-IN) discussed the value of group assignments, attending on-campus events such as hackathons, applied projects, and student conferences as valuable opportunities to connect with likeminded students, socialize, network, and foster intercultural learning.

We have a lot of group work which the professor uses so that different cultural people can adjust, adapt and learn from each other...in group work we learn from each other, learn from different cultural background...we have different ideas. P7-BD

What really helped me was participating in a lot of college activities and doing volunteering. From there I got a job inside the college as a student executive...attending one of the college

conferences I met an employer who was really interested in having me do a co-op with them.
P1-IN

Interestingly, the suggestion of mentorship emerged in relation to WIL, academia, as well as social and cultural integration to Canada. P9-JM proposed a mentorship program connecting international students with international alumni, professionals, or with domestic students, to help adapt to international education, workplace and Canadian culture. P2-BR discussed the value of peer and team-based mentorship practiced at her co-op host organization which helped her understand organizational processes, policies, structure, and nuances. Overall, participants shared prioritizing finding friends and social support, recognizing the sociocultural value offered in stress management, health and wellness, intercultural awareness, and informal learning.

Self-Efficacy in English Language Learning

Language barriers, comprehension, and confidence communicating in English were commonly discussed in focus group interviews. Understanding that language and cultural differences impact communication processes, P1-IN disclosed uncertainty, doubtfulness, and concern about whether something he said was communicated and interpreted in the way intended, explaining “the whole day I will keep on thinking about what I said, was it right? Is the other person thinking in the right way about me now?” P10-CHN shared feeling nervous communicating in English and participants (P3-GT, P20-IN) shared feelings of uncertainty when translating thoughts from their first languages to English, leading to frustration in being unable to express themselves as completely as they are capable. P2-BR noted “it is very hard...because you are not confident in your English” emphasizing frustration and doubtfulness of ever being able to communicate fluently in English. P4-LN offered an example from a television show which resonated with and validated her experience of learning and working in an additional language.

Something I relate to as a Spanish speaker is from the show *Modern Family* when Gloria says to her husband ‘You don’t know how smart I am in Spanish!’ which hits me every time because sometimes I don’t find the words and can’t express myself to English speakers how I want to, and English speakers don’t seem to understand how to feel about it. P4-LN

Languages are composed and spoken with variance in cadence, structure, cultural and contextual understanding (i.e., high-context vs low-context), even regional dialects can be diverse and difficult to understand. The use of articles, pronouns, adjectives, and word order can vary considerably, and language-based communication barriers can lead to or amplify other barriers in education, work, and WIL (Rochat, 2024). P3-GT and P19-PER shared challenges in professional communication, learning new adjectives, acronyms, and workplace or industry specific terminology. P11-BR raised concerns around academic and workplace evaluations noting “international students are doing all their work in English and have good comprehension but may need a little more time than a native English speaker [when reviewing instructions, directions, or composing messages].” Participants (P13-IN, P20-IN) discussed email etiquette, explaining it was not taught or required back home. Other participants (P4-NC, P12- UZ, P15-BR) outlined the benefits of having a teacher or workplace mentor review mistakes and provide opportunities to correct and learn from them. Altogether, participants exhibited sensitivity to their intelligence, qualifications, and job-related competencies based upon communication blind-spots.

DISCUSSION

In high power distance cultures, students are more dependent on teachers, there is more rote learning, and asking questions is seldom encouraged (Hofstede, 1984). Cultural values of obedience, reverence, and respectful fear of those in power perpetuate a teacher-student and manager-subordinate inequality in the student's mind which caters to the need for dependency, direction, clear instructions, and supervision (Hofstede et al., 2010). Rote learning, grade-orientation, passive engagement and other soft/employability skills established in high-power distance and collectivist-oriented cultures often clash with Canadian classroom and workplace expectations and cultural norms. Concerns about international students raised by Western instructors and managers include poor communication skills and cultural barriers, inability to take initiative, think critically or problem solve complex situations, and lack of local work experience (Hofstede et al., 2010; Jackson & Pham, 2021; Laroche & Yang, 2014; Rochat, 2024). Within Western education, most programs/instructors emphasize the development of technical skills, reinforced through rubrics and other evaluation tools. Students work for grades and those from cultures which have developed rote learning practices, equate high grades as the best indicator of career opportunities. Therefore, many international students subconsciously dismiss or do not understand the significance of developing soft/employability skills in accordance with host country cultural norms, which in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, U.S., and U.K. are shaped by low power-distance and high individualistic cultural dimensions.

In high power-distance work cultures, managers and supervisors hold considerably more power and authority over subordinates (Hofstede, 1984). P8-IN illustrated the power distance dimension in discussing how teachers in India exert their power by choosing whether to answer student questions, and P13-IN connected this to students feeling timid and cautious about asking questions in the workplace. This reinforces subordinates expecting to be told what to do, because often in high-power distance countries initiative outside of job responsibilities is discouraged, and direction and communication flow downward (Hofstede et al., 2010; Laroche & Yang, 2014). Behavioral expressions of the power distance dimension within WIL may include a reluctance to ask questions, offer alternative ideas or viewpoints, a tendency to wait for directions, and seek clarification or further instructions before beginning an assignment. If not addressed at the educational level, high-power distance learning styles are likely to create challenges for students and industry partners in WIL where the application of soft/employability skills are evaluated according to local standards (Laroche & Yang, 2014).

Recruitment and selection processes are shaped by and structured around predominant cultural dimensions, values, and norms within nations. Canada, like Australia, New Zealand, the U.K., and U.S., conforms to low power-distance individualistic norms. These are reflected in everything from the job analyses and position descriptions (i.e., emphasizing culturally constructed soft skills), to unconscious bias centered on egalitarian individualistic values and norms in candidate screening. The cover letter, for example, unquestionably a hallmark of individualism, requires both familiarity and comfort with emphasizing individual accomplishments over collective values, proficiency in low-context communication and language(s) which adopt "I" pronouns and thereby positioning the individual apart from the collective, as well as other individualistic-egalitarian filters which likely propagate false negatives for many international student candidates in the screening and selection processes.

Supporting Intercultural Discovery and Development in Work-Integrated Learning

Recognizing differences in cultural conditioning and applying processes or interventions around intercultural discovery and development can assist WIL practitioners, educators, and other staff supporting international education apply intercultural responsive practices. The *Axis of Intercultural Discovery and Development in International Education* (see Figure 1) can be used as a reference tool to predict, analyze, and identify common cultural barriers and opportunities to better support and enhance work-integrated learning programming for international students. The model positions the four primary findings at the outer axis, demonstrating interconnection of cultural norms and conditioning along social supports and self-efficacy in language learning. Sub-findings within the inner circle illustrate how differences in cultural programming manifest within international education and WIL, identifying both challenges and opportunities to support international students' integration to Canadian academic and workplace culture. The motion/rotation demonstrates the intersectionality and interconnection of the research findings and inclusive interventions to support intercultural development in WIL. In using this tool, educators, WIL practitioners, and workplace mentors should begin by reflecting upon and recognize how their cultural programming and assumptions influence and inform expectations around learning and working, such as active learning, interpersonal interactions, communication, critical thinking and problem solving (Rochat, 2024). Understanding international students are conditioned to learn and work differently, and that discrepancies between one's expectations may be cultural rather than personal characteristics, can help mitigate false negatives from occurring in professional preparation, WIL, and expose opportunities for intercultural development for the individual and organization. By supporting understanding and awareness in one area, for example advancing informal cultural learning via social supports, international students will better understand and adapt personal practices in managing relationships with teachers and manager (reflecting Hofstede's power distance dimension), experience of the self in relation to group membership (reflecting Hofstede's individualism vs. collectivism dimension), while also enhancing communication skills and fostering a sense of belonging.

Instructors and WIL practitioners can use the tool as a reference guide and to support international students' intercultural discovery and development simply by explaining their teaching styles, methodologies, assignments, and expectation of students in relation to preparation for professional practice and local workplace culture. WIL practitioners and career advisors can assist international students by developing curriculum and workshops realigning job search strategies and documents in ways which address Hofstede's power distance and individualism cultural dimensions, detail hiring manager expectations within cultural contexts, while outlining individualistic principles embedded within application processes such as cover letters, targeted resumés, and interviews. Support staff should work with students to reshape their awareness and understanding of document development, job search strategies, and expectations, aligning specialization of skills, language, experience, and education with employer requirements, organizational values and culture (Rochat, 2024).

WIL mentors and workplace leaders can outline cultural and organizational nuances within orientation and onboarding practices, taking care to explain egalitarian structure, encourage questions, and support multidirectional communication. Utilizing team-based mentorship can help international students feel more comfortable asking questions while providing a broader network to discover organizational nuances, foster informal learning and intercultural exchange, while strengthening leadership competencies and organizational inclusivity.

Post-secondary institutions can better support international students by recognizing the correlation and significance of peer and social support on student performance, wellbeing, informal learning, and intercultural discovery and development. Deans can encourage instructors to implement team-based learning, support social inclusion by empowering student clubs, leisure and recreational activities, intercultural mentorship exchange, and student-driven initiatives connecting international and domestic students. Enhancing social inclusion will foster informal learning, intercultural exchange, global citizenry, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and student leadership.

WIL practitioners are advised to get to know their students. International students in Western countries come from more collectivist-oriented cultures, many of which value group decision making and emphasize relationship-based trust (Chaney & Martin, 2014; Hofstede, 1984). Sharing information about the advantages of participating in WIL will help international students and their families make informed decisions regarding WIL, consider and/or select programming opportunities, and apply for necessary work permits. During academic programs, WIL practitioners can collaborate with administration and faculty to address students in their programs to (re)introduce themselves, the WIL office, and discuss the benefits of and services offered in WIL. When aware of support services, international students are more likely to utilize WIL and career services supports (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Rochat, 2024); however, students may be reluctant or unsure of what questions to ask. WIL practitioners at all levels can refer to the *Axis of Intercultural Discover and Development in International Education* (see Figure 1) as a guide to help determine where students may benefit from support, guidance, services, and/or resourcing relating to power distance, individualism, sociocultural or language supports.

Limitations

This research was conducted at a polytechnic. In Canada, polytechnics differentiate from universities on several factors: smaller class sizes often coupled with cohort enrolment and program progression, experiential learning, industry driven, teaching technical and employability skills, and shorter programs (Polytechnics Canada, n.d.). Program duration is a limiting factor as the process of culture shock is an individual variable. International students in degree granting programs may have 3-5 years of informal learning, acculturation, and time to discover and develop intercultural competencies aligned with culturally valued work skills. Whereas in short-cycle programs, more common in colleges and polytechnics, students may be participating in WIL or post-graduation labour markets within 1-2 years.

Further, the participant sample was relatively small and may not be representative of their cultures. As participation was voluntary, it is probable they were more extroverted, opinionated, and possibly in variable individual positioning on the spectrum of Hofstede's cultural dimensions compared to others from the same cultural groups. Moreover, a limitation of focus group methodology is that participants steer the conversation and drive corresponding themes. This can lead to more opinionated and vocal participants hijacking the discussion and/or shifting focus from the research questions. Future studies, either applying a similar framework or testing Figure 1 to different forms of WIL or cultural groups such as Indigenous students, are recommended.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberalism depends upon and reinforces individualistic value systems and in turn influences education, career development, workplace culture, expectations, and unconscious biases relating to measurement, evaluation, and understanding of professionalism and performance. Laroche and Yang

(2014) postulate most newcomers to Canada arrive from hierarchical, or high-power distance, cultures that place more emphasis on technical skills, whereas the relative importance of technical to soft skills is valued equally in Canada. Canadian work values emphasize the importance of teamwork and individual accountability, engagement, initiative, communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion amongst many other attributes. Herein lies the challenge, soft skills are understood, practiced, and measured according to cultural values and programming (Hofstede et al., 2010; Laroche & Yang, 2014). Understood through the Canadian cultural lens they are constructs of low power-distance, high individualism value systems brought to Canada, shaped through colonialism, and reinforced through educational, political, and economic systems. Formal and informal evaluations of international students in WIL often recognize cultural differences but may fail to account for the depth of cultural dimensions in influencing values, learning styles, working styles, and workplace behavior.

Research has evidenced international graduates demonstrate resilience and adaptability, are multilingual, intelligent, and hard working (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Jackson, 2016). The problem international students and WIL professionals encounter is not the absence of soft skills but different understandings and evaluative frameworks measuring those skills. Emphasizing intercultural awareness, discovery and development in WIL can help all stakeholders understand cultural conditioning and identify strategies to support international students and reinforce workplace cultures committed to workforce development, lifelong learning, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Reference

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