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South Asian and Chinese International Students in Canada: The Role of Social Connections in their Settlement and Integration
Étudiants d'Asie du Sud et de Chine au Canada : le rôle des connexions sociales dans leur processus d'insertion et d'intégration

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International Students from Asia in Canada's Postsecondary Institutions: Disconnections and Connections
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Abstract
Based on 18 interviews with South Asian and Chinese international students in Canadian universities, we examine the academic, financial, and social settlement and integration obstacles they encounter, and strategies implemented. Key to promoting academic and sociocultural integration are the formal and informal social connections students establish on and off campus. Online information and sociocultural, financial, and emotional guidance from other students, family, friends, faith, and ethno-racial and community groups promote students' settlement and integration (Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Kang, 2020; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Our work contributes to migration and higher education studies by highlighting the crucial role of social connections as the "connective tissue" between Canada's settlement goals and public integration outcomes (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 177). Continued growth of international students in universities necessitates a more carefully executed and expansive role for universities in facilitating their settlement and integration.

Résumé
À partir d'une série de 18 entrevues réalisées auprès d'étudiants internationaux d'Asie du Sud et de Chine dans les universités canadiennes, nous portons le regard sur les obstacles de nature académique, financière, ainsi que sur le plan d'insertion et d'intégration sociales qu'ils rencontrent, et les stratégies mises en œuvre. La clé du soutien à l'intégration académique et socioculturelle réside dans les liens sociaux formels et informels que les étudiants établissent sur le campus comme à l'extérieur. L'information en ligne, le soutien socioculturel, financier et émotionnel offert par d'autres étudiants, la famille, les amis, la foi, et les regroupements ethno-raciaux et communautaires aident les étudiants à s'insérer et à s'intégrer (Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Kang, 2020; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Nos travaux contribuent aux études portant sur la migration et les études supérieures en faisant la lumière sur le rôle crucial des connexions sociales comme « tissu conjonctif » entre les objectifs du Canada en matière d'immigration et les résultats de l'intégration publique. (Ager & Strong, 2008, p. 177.) La croissance continue du nombre d'étudiants internationaux dans les universités exige d'elles un rôle plus large, doublé d'une mise en œuvre mieux ciblée afin de faciliter leur insertion et leur intégration.

Keywords: international students, settlement, integration, social connections
Mots clés : étudiants internationaux, insertion, intégration, connexions sociales

Introduction

Between 2010 and 2020, there was a 135% increase in the number of international students in Canada (Canadian Bureau of International Education [CBIE], 2021). In 2019, Canada accepted 638,960 international students from 225 countries, representing approximately 17.1% of the total enrollment in Canadian postsecondary institutions (CBIE, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2021). In 2018, international students generated about $22 billion for the Canadian economy through tuition revenue and benefits to other sectors of the economy, including jobs, the service sector, housing, recreation, and tourism (El Masri & Khan, 2022, p. 10). International students who "study and stay" are seen as a "promising way" to fill critical job shortages in the country as skilled migrants, with Canadian educational credentials, exposure to Canadian culture and the labour market, and linguistic articulacy in English/French (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Li et al., 2016; Wang, 2018). Despite the expansion of the international student population, universities continue to focus primarily on providing academic and linguistic resources (Kang, 2020), leaving international students, as temporary migrants who are ineligible for federally-funded settlement services, to resolve newcomer settlement challenges by building social connections with academic and nonacademic groups (Sherry et al., 2010).

In this article, we pose two research questions: How and with whom do international students form social relations while settling in Canada? How do social connections with friends, family, and communities enable them to access resources that support their settlement and integration? Analyzed within a settlement and integration framework, we employ in-depth interview data from a sample of 18 South Asian and Chinese international students attending different universities in Canada to address these questions. We find the keys to supporting students' academic and sociocultural integration are the formal and informal social connections they establish on and off campus. By gaining information through the internet and relying on sociocultural, financial, and emotional guidance from other students, family, friends, ethno-racial and faith and community groups, students resolve settlement challenges and promote their own integration (Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Kang, 2020; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). Our work contributes to migration and higher education studies by highlighting the crucial role of social connections as the "connective tissue" between Canada's settlement goals and public integration outcomes (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 177). We suggest that continued growth of international students in universities may necessitate a more carefully executed and expansive role for educational institutions in facilitating their settlement and integration.

Processes of Settlement and Integration

Settlement and integration represent dynamic and multidimensional processes, or a "continuum of activities," that international students go through upon arrival in Canada (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2016; Shields et al., 2016). Settlement is often conceptualized as a three-stage process of adjustment, adaptation, and integration in which international students, as newcomers, seek to resolve a variety of academic, practical, and emotional challenges in order to establish a sense of belonging to both the university and Canadian society (DeCoito & Williams, 2000; Shields et al., 2016). Integration consists of multiple components including academic and social dimensions. Academic integration refers to the congruence of a student's academic attitude, performance, and commitment with the postsecondary institution's academic climate and policy. Indicators include grade performance, intellectual development, and comfort with academic policy (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Sociocultural integration, defined as the student's fit into the sociocultural environment on campus, includes all the relations international students establish through their

associations and affiliations with peers, faculty, and staff both within the universities and externally through their ties with different communities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2012).

In the early stages of adjustment, students need to secure affordable and accessible housing, obtain accurate academic information, figure out transportation systems, set up bank accounts, enroll in language training, and begin to search for part-time work (IRCC, 2016; Murphy, 2010; Shields & Praznik, 2018). In the second stage, adaptation, many students struggle to meet academic requirements and achieve sufficiently strong writing and speaking abilities to perform adequately in classes, establish social connections to lessen their social isolation and loneliness, secure part-time work, and navigate complex systems (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Shaffir & Satzewich, 2010; Shields & Praznick, 2018). In the final stage, integration, international students may start to feel a "sense of attachment" or belonging in Canada through their participation in different aspects of Canadian society without giving up their attachment and belonging to their home countries (Shields et al., 2016; Shields & Praznik, 2018). Neither settlement nor integration are seen as having "fixed time periods" nor "end goals" but rather become lifelong journeys that may not end even when a newcomer has achieved Canadian citizenship (Li, 2003; Murphy, 2010, p. 11; Shields & Praznick, 2018, p. 5).

Facilitating International Student Integration Through Social Connections

In this next section, we examine the literature on the role of social connections both on and off campus that facilitate international students' academic and social integration.

On-Campus Events: Social Media, Clubs, and Activities

International students achieve a sense of belonging through meaningful participation in different spheres both within and outside the university. International students use information and communication technologies (ICTs) for informational, emotional, and social purposes. According to Chien (2005), students use ICTs to resolve academic challenges and to seek information on course selection, tutors, peer advice, and educational services (p. 157). ICTs enhance students' ability to form strong social ties which reduce social isolation and loneliness. Andrade (2006) found that since international students tend to favour interpersonal sources for informational and social purposes over more formal venues, ICTs are effective ways to access academic, cultural, and community connections and to obtain social support from family and friends on and off campus, which improves their psychological, emotional, and social well-being (p. 1). ICTs have been found to provide valuable information about part-time employment opportunities (Drever & Hoffmesiter, 2008).

Studies of on-campus participation of international students show that most students establish social ties with other international students or co-ethnics. According to a Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) (2015) study, one-third of the international students surveyed said they "preferred to mix with their own culture" (p. 3). Those who attended campus diversity events, orientation, and other events found these activities to be mostly populated with other international students (CBIE, 2015, p. 6; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022). In their study of a western Canadian university, Malette and Ismailzai (2020) found that Asian international students, who were less likely to take part in sports, fraternities and sororities, and drinking, would participate in ethnicity-focused clubs, which provided them opportunities to form friendships, receive information and emotional support, celebrate holidays and traditions, and feel comfortable and accepted on campus, thus lessening their social isolation and making them feel socially and culturally included (p. 76). The social support internationals students receive from establishing

social networks with other students and from participating in campus events contributes to their psychological well-being and positively influences their sociocultural adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

In their review of the literature on international students, El Masri and Khan (2022) found that Canadian-international friendships represent steps to achieving quality social, cultural, and academic experiences because they help to build language, intercultural communication competencies, and to develop social and professional networks in Canada that help students find jobs (p. 32). But even when international students desire social connections with "real" Canadians (George & Selimos, 2019, p. 130), they are largely unsuccessful in forming social bonds with Canadian peers (CBIE, 2015, p. 1). According to the CBIE (2015) report, over half of the international students surveyed reported having no Canadian friends and 74% surveyed said they would like more opportunities to experience Canadian culture and family life but sensed that Canadians are fearful of interacting with them (p. 4–5). While they do acquire some friendships with peers in the classroom, in group projects, and in study groups, students find it difficult to form strong friendships due to miscommunication problems resulting from differing values, social rules, attitudes, and communication styles (Arthur & Flynn 2011; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Chira, 2013; Li & Tierney, 2013; Scott et al. 2015; Trilokekar et al., 2014). International students with depleted social networks experience social isolation, loneliness, and poorer mental health outcomes (Netierman et al., 2022).

Off-Campus Events

According to Shields and colleagues (2016), Canada is considered a leader in using nonprofit providers in facilitating settlement and integration (p. 25). Social life outside the academic environment plays a significant role in enabling students' academic and social integration, including sharing accommodations with other students, and joining study groups or extracurricular activities and sports clubs (Rienties et al., 2013). Many international students prefer to get information and advice from their friends, family, colleagues, and employers as well as libraries, community providers, and clinics (Muttersbach, 2010, p. 17). Students join "like-ethnic" community and faith groups (Duke et al., 1999; Hale, 2000) as well as volunteering, as ways to gain emotional, financial, and social guidance and to gain access to employment opportunities (CBIE, 2015; Muller, 1998).

Many students find their ethnic and religious social connections to be as important as family ties (George & Selimos, 2019, p. 130). Students with families close by have a built-in safety net, providing them with affordable housing, information about part-time jobs, some financial security, and maintenance of cultural practices (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 178). Given the prevalence of racism and exclusion experienced by students on campus, and the difficulty students report in finding jobs due to discrimination based on their accents and immigration status, family support and access to employment contacts become especially important (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Chira, 2013; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Scott et al., 2015; Trilokekar et al., 2014).

Students bring social connections with them into the receiving country and build new relations with family, friends, peers, counsellors, language instructors, and ethno-racial and faith groups (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, p. 1132). As we listen to how international students narrate their experiences and the strategies they use to overcome settlement challenges, we highlight the role of social connections in providing informational, emotional, and practical resources enabling their settlement and integration.

Data and Methods

Eighteen participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods using personal contacts[1]. Seven participants came from South Asia (India and Pakistan) and 11 from Mainland China and Hong Kong; seven were female and 11 were male. Participants attended six Canadian universities. At the time of the interviews, nine remained on student visas, four had become permanent residents, four had become Canadian citizens, and one was on a postgraduate work permit. Most participants had been in Canada between 5 and 10 years. For example, among the South Asians, one arrived in 2006, one in 2010, and five since 2015.

We selected the participants based on their arrival status as visa students. The majority of students arrived in the 2000s. However, four Chinese students were classified as having migrated twice to Canada. Three of the four migrated twice during the 2000s. One of the four Chinese students entered Canada in 1975 on a student visa, returned to Hong Kong, and then migrated back to Canada in 1988 as a permanent resident, eventually becoming a Canadian citizen. The 30-year gap which exists for one Chinese student may represent a methodological limitation.[2]

Among participants, six South Asians and eight Chinese immigrated to Canada alone while one South Asian and three Chinese came with siblings, parents, or spouses. Five South Asians and four Chinese lived alone while two South Asians and five Chinese lived with siblings, parents, spouses, or extended families, and two Chinese lived with "others." Thirteen participants were single, four participants were married, and one participant's marital status was unknown.

Interviews were composed of two parts: a demographic questionnaire detailing age, gender, highest education completed, employment status, immigration status, year of landing, living arrangements, and government support; and an in-depth interview exploring migration decisions, educational and employment challenges, economic sufficiency, and social support. Interviews were transcribed using an online AI program TEMI and were reviewed for errors. Following this, transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA, an online qualitative analysis software program.

Transcripts were coded for common themes using principles of open and axial coding as per grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In stage one of the coding, we began by deductively coding instances of main theoretical themes drawn from settlement and migration theory and research. Each interview was coded line-by-line and grouped into general codes, such as community, economics, family, immigration, and settlement challenges. Stage two of the coding process used the constant comparative method to create sub-codes inductively as they emerged within general codes. For example, the general settlement challenges code was subsequently sub-coded into precarious employment, loneliness and isolation, language barriers, financial insecurity, and cultural barriers. Stage three of coding allowed us to look across all sub-codes to combine similar codes to emerge with major themes examining the challenges and strategies facilitating or hindering settlement and social integration.

Findings

In the following sections, we examine the academic, financial, and sociocultural settlement challenges confronting international students and the strategies they deploy to facilitate their integration. This includes a discussion of university resources as well as the individual initiatives

[1] Ethics approval was received from York University's Research Ethics Board. Participants were given an informed consent form to read and sign.

[2] Our aim was not to discuss struggles and strategies of international students by period of arrival. Our sample consisted of students who held student visas on arrival. In this particular case, the struggles and solutions reported by the student were similar to those discussed by all other students.

of international students who establish social connections with family, friends, peers, academic personnel, and ethnic and faith communities as buffers against their experiences of adversity.

Tackling Academic Challenges

One of the key challenges facing international students is accessing academic information (Alzougool et al., 2013; Worrall et al., 2019). Postsecondary institutions offer both printed and online information about academic, financial, health and housing resources students can use to enroll in courses, find housing, set up bank accounts, consider part-time employment, and find health care services (Calder et al., 2016; Marom, 2021). They also offer orientation sessions, career centres, counselling services, and academic advisors to help students navigate university systems, and students report valuing these supports (Calder et al., 2016).

Despite receiving material on educational and initial settlement matters, many students report the information provided as unsatisfactory. Students find that information is either too technical in presentation or oversimplified. They often find university websites inaccessible (Huang & Bilal, 2017) and lacking nonacademic information, such as housing, employment, and financial resources which they require in order to settle in Canada (Alzougool et al., 2013; Taylor & Bicak, 2019). Students have questions about which documents they need, how to switch programs, and which courses to take to fulfill requirements. Some students reported being unaware of existing institutional help, such as program-specific academic advisors and more general counselors centralized in student services. For example, had Alina (*Pakistani, 29, arrived 2010*) known about academic advisors on campus, she would not have lost the money by "picking the wrong courses."

Faced with difficulties in obtaining accurate academic information, some students, especially those from China, turned to private agents in their countries of origin to receive help in applying to and enrolling in university. Almost all students reported having insufficient academic information and most of them turned to online resources via websites and social media platforms, even though they were aware that these sites might be unreliable (Worrall et al., 2019). As Rachel *(Hongkonger, 22, arrived in 2013)* noted, "You might search it up online [on] your own, but sometimes you cannot ensure the information is accurate and authentic."

Acquiring linguistic proficiency can prove challenging. Students encounter a gap between their language expectations and realities. Prior to migration, students believed that their language skills were sufficient to enable them to achieve academically. However, after enrolling in courses, some find that their academic verbal and writing skills are inadequate. Their negative linguistic experiences, especially those of Chinese students, suggest that postsecondary institutions may be relying too heavily on standardized language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Students reported that these assessments inaccurately predict their academic performance.

Those with limited English proficiency have difficulty communicating with instructors and peers in the classroom and writing academic tests and essays (He & Huston, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). For instance, while Li's (*Chinese, 19, arrived 2018*) verbal English skills were adequate, he found understanding grammar and sentence structure difficult when writing academic essays.

Experiencing language insufficiency causes many students to feel "blindsided" and "distressed." As one student explained,

> First of all, [language] surely brought me a sense of psychological inferiority. When I was [speaking] to foreign students, I felt hesitant to speak because I had my accent or pronunciation

> issues. And if they didn't catch me in the first place, I felt ashamed to repeat. *(Peik Lin, Chinese, 20, arrived 2015)*

International students acknowledge that becoming proficient in English is pivotal to achieving academic and employment success (Kyeremeh et al., 2021). While they tend to enroll in university-based English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, many also use expensive private tutoring services. Both types of programs offer students opportunities to practise English and connect with other students.

Given their ongoing academic challenges, international students appreciate the personal and academic information, advice, and support they receive from peers, faculty, administrators, counsellors, advisors, and international student services, which prove instrumental in ensuring positive student experiences (Calder et al., 2016; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Worrall et al., 2019). Students also appreciate campus mental health services as ways to resolve feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed:

> [The university] has to offer a lot of programs towards mental health. … You cannot just … sit inside and … cry over things that are happening in your life. You need to share with people (*Bilal, Indian, 19, arrived 2019*).

When available, international students benefit from campus peer mentorship programs as effective ways to overcome settlement challenges (CBIE, 2015; Hiratsuka, 2019; McGregor et al., 2022; Schecter & Bell, 2021; Shalka et al., 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016). Often initiated during orientation sessions, peer mentorships connect international students to other students, facilitate information exchange, familiarize students with Canadian culture, develop leadership and language skills, and offer opportunities to build friendships and social networks of support. In the next section, we examine the financial challenges facing international students.

Surviving Financial Challenges

Rather than arriving with significant financial resources, as is the common perception of international students (Kim & Kwak, 2019), most students experience economic insufficiency and uncertainty during their time in university (El Masri & Khan, 2022). Kevin *(Chinese, 29, arrived 2009)* challenged the stereotype that international students are financially secure by emphasizing that many can barely afford tuition and are left with no extra spending money unless they find paid employment. Many are unprepared for the high cost of food and housing, and managing money becomes a constant struggle (Ghalayani, 2014). Financial insecurity leaves them anxious about where, as Zeeshan (*Pakistani, 22, arrived in 2015*) said, "the next dollar is coming from."

International students are allowed to work 20 hours a week as temporary migrants, but many find it difficult to secure decent jobs and reported that employers are hesitant to hire them due to their lack of Canadian work experience and racial and cultural differences (El Masri & Kahn, 2022). Students experience a vicious cycle in which no one hires them because they do not have permanent residency, but they cannot obtain permanent residency without adequate job experience in the receiving country. This frustrating economic situation can be described as "a dog chasing its tail all the time" (Ng et al., 2019, p. 91).

Once they find a job, they, like Mandy (*Chinese, 20, arrived 2015)*, feel more secure, "appreciate money more," and learn to avoid overspending. But most of the jobs they obtain tend to be poorly paid and precarious (Maury, 2020). Often, they work off campus at part-time jobs in their ethnic communities at convenience stores, restaurants, or cleaning services. But students can

be vulnerable to violations of their employment rights at off-campus workplaces (Tran & Soejatminah, 2018), as one student explained,

> I mean my parents were paying for my tuition … but I still needed money to pay for my daily expenses. So … I even worked jobs that were in Chinatown. But, I think at the time I was just too young so … I wasn't able to work that long at any jobs. When I was young, people just thought … I'm very useless. All the time, when I worked, I was only able to work for a few months, and then out of nowhere they'll tell me, 'Oh, you don't need to come in tomorrow.' (*Amber, Hongkonger, 30, arrived 2006*)

International students need jobs to pay for their living expenses but long-term engagement in precarious employment hinders their professional skill development and limits their ability to develop the types of social connections that may lead them to full-time employment after graduation (El Masri & Khan, 2022; Ng et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2015).

Universities rarely offer job support for students while studying or during their postgraduation transitions (Sherry et al., 2010). But when universities offer career days, peer mentorships, job placements, and internships, students respond positively (CBIE, 2015; Hiratsuka, 2019; Lau et al., 2019; Schecter & Bell, 2021; Shalka et al., 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016). Left largely on their own to find employment, students use social connections with friends, family, jobs, faith and community agencies for information, advice, and job contacts. We now turn to a consideration of the role of friendships as facilitators of settlement and integration.

Managing Sociocultural Challenges

Finding Friendships

Upon arrival, many students without social connections feel isolated, alienated, and disconnected. They understand the importance of establishing new friendships, social relations, and "crucial acquaintances" for building intercultural competencies and enabling academic and social integration (Houshmand et al, 2014; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Popadiuk & Arthur; 2014; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019).

According to Hendrickson et al. (2011), international students develop three different types of friendships to obtain crucial information, alleviate homesickness, and forge social connections. Co-nationals or friends from their countries of origin have similar experiences can provide emotional and informational support. Multinational friendships with other international students from different countries enable students to learn about other cultures and provide a sense of commonality in a new environment. Host-national friendships with those born and/or raised in the receiving country lead to higher feelings of satisfaction and connectedness.

Students rely on their new multinational and host-national friends for information and support. Many actively seek to expand different types of friendships by attending orientations, social and cultural events, joining professional clubs, and engaging with others during classes (CBIE, 2015; Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Malette & Ismailzai, 2020; Sherry et al., 2010). Nemera (*Pakistani, 18, arrived 2019*) found that "there's so many opportunities to get involved" and make friends by joining the Pakistani Student Association (PSA) on campus. However, even when they join cultural or ethnicity-based clubs, students tend to make few host-national friends (Malette & Ismailzai, 2020).

Cultural distance, language barriers, different interests in social activities, perceived prejudice and discrimination, and a lack of motivation in cultivating relationships make it difficult to form friendships with host-nationals (Arthur, 2017; CBIE, 2015; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013; Schecter & Bell, 2021). Students facing language insufficiency have

more difficulty making friends (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). For instance, Li (*Chinese, 19, arrived 2018*) noted how "it's hard to find friends" because of language barrier. Likewise, Peik Lin's (*Chinese, 20, arrived 2015*) language insufficiency led her to be "more inclined to communicate with Asian people," due to a greater "sense of familiarity towards them." As her language skills improved, Mandy (*Chinese, 20, arrived 2015*) was "becoming more outgoing" and making new friends.

Students with fewer friendships reported lower emotional well-being, more anxiety, loneliness, and a desire to return home rather than staying to complete their education (George & Selimos, 2019; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Netierman et al., 2022; Popadiuk & Arthur 2004; Rajani et al., 2018). For instance, Rachel, an international student, stated her international friends who lacked friendships became depressed. Rachel offered the following advice to incoming international students:

> There's many assignments and exams in universities so the pressure is quite heavy. Plus, you are by yourself in Toronto so you would get upset easily. To solve this problem … there are different clubs for Hong Kong students and Korean students. … You should take part in these activities and make more friends. (*Hongkonger, 22, arrived in 2013*)

In addition to the resources and opportunities offered within their universities, international students also turn to social media, their families, and faith and community groups for information, employment contacts, and sources of support as they navigate academic, financial, and personal challenges. But, as we discuss in the next section, both family and community ties can function both positively and negatively in their settlement and integration.

Navigating Family Ties

Faced with academic challenges, students often turn to family members for guidance, even if they lack experience in the Canadian educational system. Bilal (*Indian, 19, arrived 2019*) asked his brother for advice about changing his major before contacting academic advisors. Additionally, Mandy's (*Chinese, 20, arrived 2015*) aunt helped her understand university documents and learn how to pay tuition. But some students, like Alina (*Pakistani*, *29, arrived 2010*), do not tell their families about any of their challenges to avoid disturbing and worrying them.

Students rely on family for direct and indirect financial help. If available, extended families offer students accommodation upon their initial arrival to Canada, which saves money on living costs and provides a sense of security (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016). They also help students find jobs and housing. For instance, Kevin's (*Chinese, 29, arrived 2009*) uncle offered him a job at his company "to get him on his feet again." Similarly, Chaaya's family and ethnic community was a great source of help.

> The very first source [of help] was my dad's network here. He has friends … Other than that … the school had seminars about how to get your permits, how to get your visas. … And even if you reach out to anyone, your professors, or people, maybe from the rental where you live, they all seem to help you out. *(Indian, 23, arrived 2018*)

Originally Chaaya lived in an overcrowded and "unhygienic" apartment with six other girls, but eventually her father's friend in Toronto found her suitable accommodation. Overcrowded housing is common among international students, as well as tensions between landlords and students over affordability, the number of tenants in one location, and the prohibition of certain foods (Calder et al., 2016).

Families also provide a sense of belonging, empathy, and comfort for students. For instance, Bilal's (*Indian, 19, arrived 2019*) relatives in Canada and back home provided him with emotional and financial support.

Family support reinforces students' motivation and commitment to accomplish their academic goals and finish their education (He & Hutson, 2018). It may also encourage and enable them to settle in Canada after graduation (Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022).

But families can sometimes be a source of discomfort and tension due to conflicting views and values. Disagreements that occurred before migration are sometimes repaired once students begin to communicate remotely with their families. Li's (*Chinese, 19, arrived 2018*) relationship with his family improved post-migration, and there was "no arguing." Peik Lin's (*Chinese, 20, arrived 2015)* parents "are being more tolerant" since she "stay[s] at home for a short amount of time, only during holidays." But for others, tension with family members remained post-migration.

Similarly, Amber experienced conflict with her aunt, with whom she was staying. Her aunt's insistence on Amber paying rent, despite agreeing beforehand that she would not, led to a strained relationship between her aunt and her parents. Additionally, Amber's aunt regularly criticized her, causing her eventually to disconnect and move to another place.

> She's always telling me … "Oh, you are not that smart … you won't be getting into college" … It wasn't only my aunt yelling at me every day. It was my aunt calling my mom every day to yell at her. Telling [Amber's mom], she didn't raise me right, she's a bad mom. (*Hongkonger, 30, arrived 2006*)

Difficult family relations impact students negatively. Nitesh recalled the emotional cost that came with accepting help from family members who were Canadian citizens. Living with his cousins meant enduring their microaggressions, causing him stress.

> And … I didn't feel welcomed in [my neighbourhood]. There [were] some incidents that I didn't feel satisfied. It's everyday talks. If you sit with your cousins, your friends ... they will be talking about international students. They will be talking bad about [international students] all that stuff. You feel like your underachievers or something. They will … say things from which you feel like you are below them. (*Indian, 26, arrived 2018*)

Marom (2021) found that Punjabi international students (PIS) in Surrey, British Columbia, experience "interethnic othering" and microaggressions from the local Punjabi community. Younger generations characterize PIS as "fresh off the boat," while older generations perceive them as too privileged and "too modern" to fit into established ethnic communities (p. 12). The tensions Nitesh experienced with host-nationals reveal intra-ethnic conflict (Marom, 2021; Pyke & Dang, 2003).

International students experience their immediate and extended families in contradictory ways. On the one hand, families represent significant sources of instrumental and emotional support, providing students with a sense of safety and comfort. On the other hand, students often encounter familial strain and stress in family relationship. Families thus both help and hinder the settlement and integration experiences of international students.

Building Community Connections

International students create social connections with ethnic, faith, and residential communities, all of which play a crucial role in their settlement and integration into Canadian society (Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). For instance, Netierman et al. (2022) found that adapting to Canadian culture, communicating more with host-nationals, and becoming more involved in the local

community lead to more positive perceptions of Canada and a stronger desire to remain in Canada after graduation. For example, Hui (*Chinese, 32, arrived 2009 and 2011*) felt less alone and more "Canadian" after building ties with Chinese peers. Similarly, after learning Canadian social norms, Saima "absolutely love[s] this country" (*Pakistani, 35, arrived 2006*).

Yet, building social connections represents a complex and uneven process (Valentine, 2008). Despite having social ties in Canada, some students remain rooted to their friends and families in their countries of origin (Netierman et al., 2022; Ryan et al, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). For some students, feeling comfortable in Canada does not mean that they feel at "home" in the country.

> I never felt a sense of belonging here … [After graduation], I was forced to stay. If I had a choice, I would probably choose to return to China. …Maybe it's because I still have a yearning heart for China. Yeah, after all, my root is there. (*Eric, Chinese, 31, arrived 2009 and 2011)*

Similarly, Matthew (*Chinese, 32, arrived 2010*) did not know his neighbours because he lived in a condo where residents barely interacted with each other. He rarely attended any community events because he did not find these occasions to be "attractive."

Students who seek connections with newcomer organizations, ethno-racial and faith-based groups have access to resources which provide them with crucial opportunities for social and professional development, including employment and skill training, managing integration expectations, and providing support and hope for the future (Nardon et al., 2021). For instance, Nitesh *(Indian, 26, arrived 2018)* explained how engagement in a neighbourhood faith group facilitated a sense of belonging.

> Yeah, you go there [to the Gurdwara], you eat ... you feel like you're back home. You're welcomed. *(Nitesh, Indian, 26, arrived 2018*)

Ethno-racial and faith institutions provide socialization encounters and alleviate loneliness and isolation. Ethnic communities also provide students with a sense of cultural pride and acceptance (Phillips & Robinson, 2015; Rishbeth & Powell, 2013; Ryan et al., 2021). Matthew (*Chinese, 32, arrived 2010*) is not religious, but attended church with his friends to socialize. Similarly, Eric (*Chinese, 31, arrived 2009 and 2011)* attended church with his friend where they "had [a] gathering."

Due to linguistic and cultural differences and everyday experiences of exclusion, students concentrate on building connections in environments, such as with co-ethnic or faith groups, in which they feel accepted and valued (El Masri & Khan, 2022; Houshmand et al., 2014; Kang, 2020; Smith 2016). These relationships act as buffers against isolation and loneliness, enabling them to develop intercultural competencies and a sense of belonging to Canadian society (El Masri & Khan, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

Universities offer academic, informational, and social support including some ESL training, academic help in completing assignments, mentoring, tutoring, and career counselling. On-campus informational sessions offer basic orientation to the university and the city, providing material on employment restrictions, housing, financial issues, and health care. But many students report either being unaware of what university resources are available or how to access them (Andrade, 2006; Covell et al., 2015). Moreover, when students encounter academic barriers, such as language inadequacy and unfamiliarity with North American teaching styles, students rarely

turn to institutional programs for academic assistance or counselling. Instead, they turn to social media and their own social connections as sources of information, guidance and support.

While universities offer academic guidance, they tend to ignore other newcomer settlement issues including emotional issues of loneliness, stress, anxiety, lack of friendships, and social supports; ethno-cultural issues, such as discrimination and culture shock; and practical issues, such as system navigation, finding jobs, and securing affordable and accessible housing (Arthur, 2017; CBIE, 2015; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Students work hard to build social connections to address the emotional, sociocultural, and instrumental challenges they encounter (Belford, 2017; Lertora & Sullivan, 2019; Rienties et al., 2013. In particular, they establish relations with friends, peers, counsellors, family, communities, and neighbourhoods, which function as social supports and "safety nets" for students who would otherwise have no one else on whom to depend (El Masri & Khan, 2022; Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016). By developing a web of institutional, family, cultural connections and friendships, students take on the task of becoming settled and integrated into Canadian society.

However, our findings show that some social connections may function negatively for students, hindering their academic and social integration. Some students avoid asking for help from family members because they find familial interactions to be stressful and uncomfortable. Others avoid asking their friends for too much help because they do not want to be burdensome and cause stress or tension to their friendships. But students with less social support are overall more likely to feel socially disconnected (CBIE, 2015; Schecter & Bell, 2021; Shalka et al., 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016).

Given the significance of social connections in student's settlement and integration, future research ought to examine the different types of social support students develop, the strength of social relations, and the barriers and facilitators they experience in creating connections. Future research could also explore expanding the role of postsecondary institutions as facilitators of student settlement by implementing a more diverse range of services.

Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations for universities, government-funded settlement services, and informal settlement services offered in local communities. First, peer, faculty, and staff mentorship programs at universities should be strengthened to provide needed information and guidance, foster friendships, and alleviate migration-related stress (CBIE, 2015; Hiratsuka, 2019; McGregor et al., 2022; Schecter & Bell, 2021; Shalka et al., 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016). Universities should also continue to provide both short-term, intensive language programs and ongoing language support (He & Hutson, 2018, p. 102).

Secondly, rather than leaving settlement provision solely to the nonprofit sector, international students ought to receive government-funded settlement services directly in order to provide them with vital opportunities to build academic and employment-related skills, to build connections with other sectors of the economy, and to receive essential advice and employment contacts (Dauwer, 2018; Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Mullings et al., 2021; Nardon et al., 2021).

Finally, community and faith organizations should be recognized for the essential support they provide to international students (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016) through federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal funding, to maintain youth programs and to implement additional programs aimed specifically at international students.

Integration of international students represents a collective process that is facilitated by formal and informal input from multiple sources. Evidence suggests that rather than being left on their own to implement strategies to manage their settlement and integration challenges, students

become settled and integrated when they are "supported immigrants," when they can rely on institutions, friends, family, and communities to provide the resources and opportunities they need in order to thrive (Bauder, 2019).

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