

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS: ENCOUNTERS OF RACIAL DISPARITIES AMIDST EDI RHETORIC AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

International students are integral to Canadian higher education institutions and Canada's economic gain, contributing \$37.3 billion to the economy in 2022, up from \$21.6 billion in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2024). They also add to the cultural enrichment and diversity of institutions and are a major source of bridging the gap in Canada's labour shortage. This research explored the experiences of Black graduate international students. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the researchers centred the voices and perceptions of 12 Black international graduate (BIG) students as they shared their university experiences in a foreign land, rife with unfamiliarity/anomalies. Data were gathered using focus groups and semi-structured interviews to address the question, "What are the experiences of BIG students in the contexts of race, equity, and student support?" Participants candidly shared their university experiences. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to understand how their lived experiences influenced/impacted their transition and academic milieu. The findings highlighted the emotional effects on participants as they navigate the nuances of international education and suggest the need for increased dynamic student support. Recommendations were made that would contribute to knowledge sharing and empowering universities, particularly student services units, to better understand and better respond to the needs of BIG students.

Keywords: Black international graduate student experiences, racial disparity, student support

Résumé

Les étudiants internationaux sont essentiels aux établissements d'enseignement supérieur et à la prospérité économique du Canada, ayant contribué à l'économie à hauteur de 37,3 milliards de dollars en 2022, une hausse par rapport aux 21,6 milliards de 2018 (Honey, 2025). Ils enrichissent également la diversité culturelle de ces établissements et représentent une source majeure pour combler la pénurie de main-d'œuvre au Canada. Cette recherche a exploré les expériences vécues des étudiants afrodescendants inscrits aux cycles supérieurs en tant qu'étudiants internationaux. S'appuyant sur la théorie socioculturelle de Vygotsky,

les chercheurs ont centré leur étude sur les voix et les perceptions de 12 étudiantes et étudiants internationaux afrodescendants inscrits aux cycles supérieurs (EAICS), alors qu'ils faisaient part de leurs expériences universitaires dans un pays étranger, empreint d'inconnu/d'anomalies. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide de groupes de discussion et d'entretiens semi-structurés afin de répondre à la question de recherche suivante : quelles sont les expériences des EAICS dans le contexte de la race, de l'équité et du soutien aux étudiants? Les participants ont témoigné ouvertement de leurs expériences universitaires. L'analyse phénoménologique interprétative (API) a été utilisée comme cadre analytique pour comprendre comment leurs expériences vécues ont influencé ou affecté leur transition et leur milieu académique. Les résultats ont mis en évidence les effets émotionnels ressentis par les participants alors qu'ils naviguaient dans les subtilités de l'éducation internationale, et ont souligné le besoin d'un soutien étudiant plus dynamique et adapté. Des recommandations ont été formulées afin de favoriser le partage des connaissances et d'habiliter les universités, en particulier les services aux étudiants, à mieux comprendre les besoins des EAICS et y répondre.

Mots clés : étudiants internationaux afrodescendants, disparité raciale, soutien aux étudiants, enseignement supérieur

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of higher education is significant to the Canadian educational landscape, with over 96% of Canadian universities prioritizing this strategy (Universities Canada, 2014). Knight (2008) defined internationalization as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (p. 21). To facilitate internationalization efforts and support the influx of international students, universities have implemented various strategies, providing a dynamic range of support for international students, including academic, financial, and immigration advice, and cultural activities to foster integration and adaptation. Yet, in Canada, there is sparse information on international students' experiences; particularly, there is a lack of analysis of the experiences of Black international students in relation to racialized disparities (Grayson, 2014). In Canada, “little systematic attention has been devoted to comparing the relative amounts or types of discrimination experienced by international students of different origins or examinations of differences in the experiences of discrimination of international com-

pared to domestic students” (Grayson, 2014, p. 264) to ascertain the impact of race on education. Even less documented are the experiences of Black international graduate (BIG) students.

For this research, “Black international graduate” (BIG) students are Black individuals who travel overseas to pursue master's or PhD studies at a foreign university. While there are differences in how the groups experience international education, the experiences were not delineated given the small number of participants.

Experiences of BIG students may vary and even contradict initial interactions, whether through recruitment processes or materials used to promote/invite them to Canada. An example is the inability to successfully help those students fully integrate into the university's environment and academic programs. Consequently, understanding how BIG students experience racial disparities will empower universities to understand and respond to “institutional assumptions and oversights that harm students” (Buckner et al., 2021, p. 34).

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of BIG students through the research question, “What are the experiences of Black international graduate students in the contexts of race, equity, and student support?”

Sub-questions:

- a. What is the relationship between professors and students inside and outside of classes?
- b. What are students' views on diversity and equity within the university?
- c. How do students experience transitional support offered by the university?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2023, international students made up 15% of bachelor's, 24.5% of master's, and 39.4% of doctoral students in Canadian universities (Statistics Canada, 2024). Notably, graduate students represent a high proportion of the international student body. Despite these numbers, the experiences of international graduate students, particularly those regarding racial disparities, are often overlooked. Lorenzetti et al. (2023), in examining international graduate students' experiences, noted many universities have insufficient programs and initiatives to support the psychosocial and academic needs students may encounter as they seek to be successful.

Racialized Experiences

Issues of racial injustices in Canada are rooted in colonialism and have been systematically embedded in academia (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023). International students often face significant difficulties because of systemic problems, as their sociocultural and academic capital differs from that of the host academy (Palmer, 2016). Thus, students encounter difficulties in their quest for academic success and must adapt in order to prevail without their usual support system (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Studies on experiences of international students adopt a homogeneous perspective, often overlooking important distinctions, such as differences between graduate and undergraduate experiences and racial diversity (Howe et al., 2023). Okusi (2021) highlighted the absence of research addressing experiences of Black African international university students in Canada, pointing to an important gap in understanding this group's unique challenges.

Baruwa (2023) asserted that even though universities have implemented equity and inclusion strategies, Black international students still encounter challenges. Furthermore, Lorenzetti et al. (2023) emphasized that with the increase in the number of international students in graduate programs, institutions need to provide more far-reaching policies and support to address and meet the varied transitional needs of these students.

Park and Bahia (2022), in exploring the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) graduate students, including international students, argue that research on BIPOC students highlights how "racialized inequality significantly shapes" their experiences (p. 141). Moreover, they note that there are strong parallels between Canadian and American BIPOC graduate student experiences, which serves to counter popular discourses of Canadian openness, inclusivity, and progressiveness. Buckner et al. (2021), however, challenged the perceived inclusivity of the Canadian academic landscape. They reviewed internationalization policy documents in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States and noted that while these documents promote diversity, they omit discussions of race or racism. Buckner et al. (2021) further argued that the lack of recognition of international students' racialized experiences in policy documents perpetuates racism in the institutions.

Additionally, Howe et al. (2023), in examining the academic and social experiences of international students in Canada, found that racism influences international students' successes. Their participants explicitly identified racism and discrimination as additional challenges for international students. Park and Bahia (2022) contended that racism is often associated with blatant acts that can be seen and interpreted as well as subtle forms of racism that are systemic and less visible. Lorenzetti et al. (2023) argued that universities are also responsible for actively addressing racial inequalities and other forms of discrimination that may affect students' sense of belonging in host universities.

Transitional Milieu of International Students

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role social context plays in learning and development. Essentially, learning occurs in social contexts when students interact with different social groups within the host environment, and social interaction plays a fundamental role in how students learn (Vygotsky, 1978). Theoretically, through Vygotsky's lens, these students learn through connecting with other students, from which they establish symbols of understanding that facilitate growth and development.

Having a sense of belonging and connectedness is an essential ingredient in how students adapt to their new academic environment. Feeling like they belong influences their relationships, academic achievement, well-being, and how BIG students form identities with their host and home countries (Tran & Gomes, 2017). However, Metro-Roland (2018) indicated that some interactions hinder students from experiencing the sense of belonging and well-being they had in their home country. Nonetheless, research suggests that the issue of alienation and isolation can be addressed as international students engage in events planned and sponsored by their own cultural groups, compared to events planned by other cultures (Glass et al., 2013).

Black international students undoubtedly experience unique challenges transitioning academically and culturally amidst racialized challenges. James (1983) described the experiences of international students as being like "fish out of water" (p. 209). Researchers have noted that international students' experiences are influenced by their ability to build social connections and a sense of belonging within various groups in their host institution; however, various challenges such as cultural and linguistic barriers, social isolation, and institutional policies can be a hindrance to social inclusion (Metro-Roland, 2018; Resch et al., 2021).

Hernández (2018) noted that students who live and study abroad should take steps to familiarize themselves with the new socio-academic environment and argued that many of these events and activities require students to have a

relationship with community members. Knowing the environment and how things work positions BIG students to adapt quickly and form relationships within the new academy. This process, according to Engberg and Jourian (2015), is also strengthened by "intercultural wonderment" (p. 3), which comprises a curiosity and wanting to explore new experiences while living abroad, despite any discomforts involved in learning the ways of doing in the new environment.

Berry (2005) argued that many students encounter culture shock when they enter host institutions due to the "cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 698), which is likely to result in students feeling isolated, anxious, lonely, and even ostracized (Ayyoub et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2008).

Given the likely reflexive response of shock that international students may experience, researchers believe understanding the students' adaptation challenges is critical to any discourse on their experiences. As Metro-Roland (2018) noted, if universities create the proper context for international students to feel a sense of belonging, it will also help them to better understand and explore "their multiple identities" (p. 1413) through intercultural adjustments as they immerse themselves in and integrate into their new environment.

Support Services

Support services are necessary to help BIG students navigate academic and cultural nuances and thus enhance their experiences and academic outcomes given the racialized and transitional challenges they encounter. Roberts and Dunworth (2012) argued that although universities offer support, these supports are not commensurate with students' needs.

Arthur (2017) identified support from academic faculty, counsellors, and local students as "three key social resources for supporting international students" (p. 887), but some support programs, such as transitional and orientation services, are often deemed inadequate

(Krause, 2006). Support services for international students include academic (writing workshops, English language classes, etc.) and non-academic supports (orientation/transition, financial, accommodation, networking, etc.; Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Krause (2006) argued that most successful support services adopt an integrated approach and include representation from all stakeholder groups (students, support staff, faculty, recruitment and administration staff) for a wholistic approach to supporting students. Similarly, Guo & Guo (2017) examined the experiences of international students in Canada and argued that support for international students should go beyond a one-time welcome orientation. They suggested combining “students’ academic needs with their social and cultural needs” (p. 864). They further stressed that the successful integration of international students requires participation from not only international students themselves, but also from faculty, staff, and local students (Guo & Guo, 2017).

Misra et al. (2003) found that social support is critical to the psychological well-being of international students. Cho and Yu (2015), in investigating the role of university support, highlighted the positive impact institutional support has on students, especially as it concerns their psychological well-being. Nonetheless, they noted that a rise in school life satisfaction, based on the supports offered, does not always decrease students’ psychological distress.

The reviewed literature highlights the critical need for Canadian universities to address the unique racialized challenges faced by international students, particularly BIG students, to create more inclusive environments.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of 12 Black international graduate students in the contexts of race, equity, and student support at a large, research-intensive Canadian university. Qualitatively, a multimethod approach (Saunders et al., 2016) was used to explore the experiences of BIG students across colleges in the university.

A multimethod approach, according to Creswell (2014), applies the use of multiple qualitative methods to get to the root of the matter under study. In this study, focus groups and individual interviews were used as data collection methods. This approach allowed the researchers to explore the experiences and perceptions of race, equity, and access to resources and support for participating Black international graduate students.

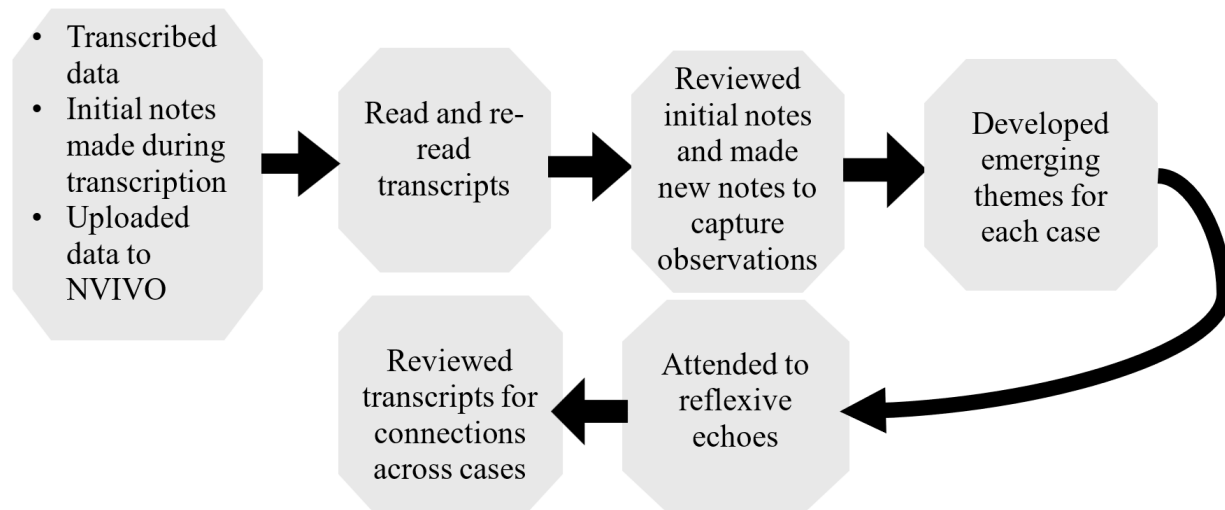
Participants were recruited based on four inclusion criteria: (a) self-identifying as Black; (b) being either past students (no more than two years post-graduation) of the university or current international graduate students at the time of data collection; (c) residing in Canada; and (d) having the ability to understand written and spoken English.

Data were collected in two phases. In phase one, snowball sampling was used to identify BIG students from a post-secondary institution in western Canada. This approach assisted the researchers in identifying key participants for the study, who then recommended other students who also met the inclusion criteria. Respondents participated in three focus group sessions with four participants per session to answer questions relating to the research question. In phase two, a purposeful sampling technique (Creswell, 2014) was used to conduct four in-depth follow-up interviews with individuals from the focus groups.

Ethics approval was received from the institution’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Informed consent was received from all participants. Participants’ responses are denoted by pseudonyms.

Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using NVivo. The data was analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a process as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis



The use of the IPA process facilitated the researchers' data triangulation and verification goals.

FINDINGS

As the researchers delved into the conversations with 12 BIG students to understand their experiences in the contexts of race, equity, and student support, they were able to extrapolate various interrelated themes and subthemes. The findings are not meant to be generalizable but highlight the experiences of the participants and is grounding for more extensive research.

Culture Shock

Participants overtly aligned some of their experiences to that of culture shock or feeling like a "fish out of water." Some participants were surprised that their professors treated them as peers and addressed them on a first-name basis, which they expressed was quite different from how they related to academic faculty members in their home country. Naomi indicated that the "first name thing took a long time for me to adjust to," a sentiment shared by others. Tony further shared,

I was taken aback when my supervisor told me to call him by his first name, and if I was going to be in [town], he was going to take me out and we would have fun. I was amazed. In "my country," you dare not call your supervisor or your professor by his first name, and most of them, even if you miss the title, for example, the person is a professor, and then you call the person a doctor, at times they get annoyed.-

John highlighted the notable difference in "cultural upbringing," and indicated that "telling me to do things in the way Canadians will do it might be...cultural shock."

Relationships

Participants spoke candidly about their relationships with their professors/supervisors and their student colleagues. They spoke about the relationships they were able to forge with professors/supervisors and other students as being both positive and negative.

Positive Student–Supervisor Relationship

The relationships students had with their supervisors were mostly positive. John likened the relationship with his professor to that of being like

a “son.” He stated, “he interacts with me and I don’t really feel as if I’m an international student, I just feel as a friend; I feel like a colleague, I feel as a son.” These sentiments were echoed by Byron, who described his supervisor–student relationship as “phenomenal.” He explained,

the relationship with my supervisor has been absolutely phenomenal and being part of her research group. She always tries as much as possible to send me to conferences and meetings and other things, giving me that sort of opportunity. For me, I feel like it is something that is great, and I hope that it continues in that regard always.

Apart from connecting and supporting their candidacy in the university, participants shared stories of how, through these relationships, professors helped them with both their personal lives and settling into graduate school in Canada. As Byron shared,

the first day I touched down in [town]... my graduate chair...came to the airport to pick me up and took me to my residence. I marvelled that such a professor at such a pedigree came to the airport to just pick me up.

Nick echoed this thought and shared, “when I was going for field work, I needed to stay in a flat for 3–4 months, so my supervisor allowed my wife to live with them. So, personally, I would say [that was] maybe something positive.”

Byron further shared that he felt supported and was encouraged by his supervisors, noting that

my supervisor is very supportive from day one...I realized that they encourage us because you know the PhD journey is challenging, sometimes you have mixed feelings, sometimes you are down, sometimes you know things like that happened, it’s a gym right, it’s kind of like a marathon race.... And for them to come to the class, for them to encourage you, and let you know that you’re not here alone, we are here together.

Bob commented,

I met with my supervisor. I told him, I think this thing is tough. I don’t have the courage.... He said to me...“Bob, listen, I’ll tell you something. I’ve come to realize that international students, when it comes to writing and the way they present their work, is far more, how do I put it, is much more, in my opinion. They do more than the domestic students, although language is sometimes a barrier, but they are far ahead in that aspect. So, capitalize on that.”

Negative Supervisor–Student Relationship

Other students conveyed negative experiences with their supervisors. These students did not believe that their relationships with professors were true or organic; rather their conversations and relationships seemed “very stiff, very transactional, nothing else” (Anna). This experience resulted in a strained relationship; one that lacked empathy and genuine support. Participants also claimed that some professors were nice, but others were at times “dismissive.” Simone shared,

I had a very negative experience with my professor, who is Black as well. But I think, other than just not being able to empathize, sympathize, be understanding and supportive, et cetera, I believe the professor also has a chip on the shoulder, but regardless of that I don’t think that you should carry that over onto your students.

Relationships with Peers

Participants, in sharing their experiences, maintained that they found it easier to have relationships with professors than with other students. Tony claimed, “I think I’ve made more friends with my professors than with my fellow students.”

However, these BIG students found it easier to build and maintain relationships with other Black students. As Naomi claimed, “I realized that as a Black student, it was very easy to make friends with people of colour.” They, however, had challenges making and maintaining relationships with White domestic students and felt they had to work harder to connect with these students. According to Naomi, “I kind of had to try hard to make friends with, you know, students that were citizens or, excuse me to use the word, White. I had to try harder because they weren’t very open to you.” Bob also commented, “domestic students shied away from making comments on my post. I came to realize later that a lot of my experiences, what I was really explaining, they could not relate to.”

John shared that he had challenges connecting with other students within the university. He explained, “after one year and three months. I don’t have a friend as such. And not having any friends will explain what it means to be an international student.”

While some participants were able to have positive relationships with their counterparts, others experienced negative interactions. Simone noted:

In my program, I don’t recall having a domestic student who really tried to get close to us. I think one Indigenous student [did], and that was on the strength of another student that they had a class with, but other than that they never really tried to understand international students; it was us versus them in our class.

Kelly claimed that through a WhatsApp group, some international students were able to connect and maintain relationships with other international students. She noted “we have a WhatsApp group, and we talk constantly. So, there’s a good relationship. There are other groups where I have friendships with persons from Ukraine, China, here in Canada, we build relationships.”

Anna also mentioned that international students rarely had interactions with domestic students. She affirmed:

When I came here, I rarely had any interactions with any domestic colleagues. It was mostly with international folks, which was very enlightening, to be honest. The interactions I’ve had with my classmates, who were mostly from Africa and Asia, have been very uplifting and positive. Because of them I felt encouraged to do my best, because I also saw them trying to do their best.

Acceptance: Feelings of Belonging

Participants also highlighted that their relationships with professors and supervisors gave them a sense of community and belonging as they were introduced to other faculty and colleagues. These relationships, students claimed, were “cordial and warm” and led to other relationships, as the professors/supervisors would introduce students to other colleagues and help make connections. According to Bob,

I had my supervisor, for instance, introduce me to his friends as his colleague. That was the first time someone had ever made that kind of introduction. So, in a way, it emboldens you; it pushes you, it inspires you to do great in that field. So, I would say that relationship is very cordial and very warm.

Racial Disparity

In examining the experiences of BIG students, the researchers captured varying perceptions of racial disparity among faculty and staff at the institution and their associations with students. Simone noted that with reference to non-White employees, “in certain spaces at the university there is literally no representation, none whatsoever.” Bob declared:

There is a lot of disparity as far as, first of all, on-campus jobs. We see that most of the Black students, or even those who have just completed their studies, they get mainly assistant roles; in teaching or research it’s mostly assistant roles, and

it's very difficult for them to, you know, move up the ranks of leadership.

Further, Paul noted:

In my department...you don't have any Black faculty members. I find that very weird, and sometimes I feel if you have a Black faculty member, in the entire college, I could only count two or three faculty members who are Black. So, being highly underrepresented as students coming in, and you want to push for a faculty position, then you tell yourself, "Oh, my goodness, if people are not even hiring Blacks to join the community, how am I even going to make it in the future?"

Paul also revealed an unnerving experience: He reported being denied the lead for a project he wrote, citing his professor's reasoning as Paul not being proficient because of where he earned his previous degrees. Paul explained:

When I finished [studying] at the university, I worked as a post-doctoral fellow. I resigned...because of the issue of racism, it blew up into a big thing. I was able to endure it when I was a student, but when I stopped being a student, I just couldn't take it anymore. We had written this proposal to apply for a grant from the government. I was the one who started the proposal, it was my idea. So, when we got the money, they began looking for someone to lead the project. My post-doc supervisor decided to give the project to someone else, so we had a meeting. I approached him personally and asked him why he did that when it was my idea. I wrote it, and I should be the one leading this project. His first point is still around the same theme, "Your undergraduate degree is from this country [Canada], so I felt that you might not be proficient enough to lead the project." At that point, I just told him I'm going to quit working, and I just resigned because I couldn't work in such an environment.

Paul further indicated that, in his attempt to resolve the matter favourably and amicably, members of the university's middle-management team informed him that resigning was the best solution. He shared:

I did take it up to the higher authority, we had meetings with deans about these issues, and the only thing they told me was "He is a tenured professor, and he is bringing in a lot of money, we can't do anything much. Because you're forced to leave, we would [still] have to pay you until the end of your contract," but for me, it's not about the money. Because my contract was supposed to finish in August, the university even admitted that I should not work, and they will still pay me if I do not want to work for him. It is about taking action, making sure no one else is treated the same way. But they didn't do anything like that, so in my opinion, much more action should be taken to protect especially Black students.

The discussions surrounding racial disparity were also conflated with arguments/perceptions of systemic racism. The participants believe racism was deeply rooted throughout the university, noting that the very ways some things are done were akin to that of systemic racism. Bob pointed to differences in treatment of distinct groups, noting that,

not only [is there war] where I come from, but other African countries are at war, and the university community has never, not even once, taken any interest in this, in the plight of these students. But we've seen the amount of mobilization, the number of resources that have been allocated for students from Ukraine because of the Ukrainian conflict.

On the other hand, Kelly opined that, as it relates to the institution's policy on equity, diversity, and inclusivity, the institution has put measures in place to address issues of equity. She commented:

I think they have done well as it relates to ensuring that there is a fair amount of equity, which is different from equality. I don't get the feeling our [people] are excluded like myself, whether because we're a part of the visible minority or anything like that. I really feel like I'm a part of the community and I really feel efforts are made to ensure that we are.

Impact of Racial Disparity on Mental Health

Participants who expressed feeling disparaged in their academic program or through interactions with their professors and peers divulged that their experiences affected them emotionally and psychologically. Nick reported moments of feeling "demoralized, and even at a point in time I felt that I had made a mistake...from time to time I feel depressed." Paul spoke about struggling with imposter syndrome and feelings of inferiority. He divulged that

I felt like I wasn't good enough.... Imposter syndrome started, and I looked at other people and I wanted what they had. I kept saying, "Why wasn't I born a Caucasian?" Or maybe, why wasn't I born here, so that I could stop being international? Then [the] inferiority complex, everything, I just lost interest in my studies, and I lost focus.

Effects of Racialized Experiences on Relationship with University

In examining the likely effects of the participants' racialized experience, Bob shared:

The university, in my opinion, is not what it seems. You know, there is, there is a university, and then there is another one behind the university. You see there is a lot of subtle and quiet racism going on, very, very subtle, to an extent that one needs to point it out, you know. For there to be a change—so, you basically have to have your knee on the neck of the system, for it

to change.... When we have any of these racial incidents like what happened with George Floyd, and all these things the President sends out [in] a message.... That has affected the way I interact and look at others in leadership roles. It influences how I see things; people could be saying one thing but also thinking of you in another light. People could even push for tokenism; you know, putting a Black face in front. But you know this is just to put a Black face in front for the publicity, in my opinion.

Marginalization and Microaggression

Stemming from the conversations with the participants, the researchers found that there was a blurring of how they understood and interpreted their experiences, which accounted for a thematic overlap with marginalization and microaggression. To represent the participants' experiences of feeling marginalized, as they described it, while attending to reflexive echoes, the researchers agreed that participants who recounted their inability to participate in scholarship opportunities were symbolic of marginalization, not as a result of being Black, but as an international student. Paul noted:

There are instances where I want to apply for a scholarship and they say it is only for Canadians, so people that are not international students, right? So, I felt marginalized. Since I am a member of the university community, I should be given the opportunity to apply for the scholarship.

Further, experiences of what resembles microaggression were highlighted, as Paul shared that he had limited opportunities to operate certain equipment because his professor believes the education system in his home country is not on par and would not have familiarized him with the equipment. Paul mentioned:

My supervisor had this perception that people coming from my country, where

our educational system doesn't have enough facilities, so you can't compare their level of understanding of how to operate analytical equipment with, say, people who have studied in Europe or are from Canada. So, because of that, I got a lot of restrictions. I got comments like "Oh, you shouldn't operate this equipment when no one is there because you're going to ruin it because you didn't operate that back home," or comments like "You didn't do this in your undergraduate degree, so I'm not sure if you're able to handle it."

Other participants experienced snide remarks about their accents and the negative feelings those evoked.

Anna shared that "a lot of folks, especially the Black folks, don't feel welcomed or included in that mix, you just feel like they are only talking about Indigenous." She further noted:

I think most international students work to show that we belong here. We work extra hard to ensure that it is manifested. I think the negative experiences too just made me be a lot more conscious to be careful of the way I speak or address them so that I don't leave a bad taste in their mouth.

Experiences of Insecurity

Students also struggled with feelings of ambivalence and apathy, as echoed in the conversations when Anna expressed that the situations she experienced "[make] you second guess yourself, and I felt a little unwelcome, not a lot though, just at the beginning— but yeah that's how I felt."

In reflecting on the crisis in Ukraine, Bob noted that there is an obvious difference in the way Ukrainian students at the institution are treated in comparison to a Black student. The situation of feeling invisible, he noted,

is very hard to describe, but it's a feeling of bad treatment in general. It is a feeling that my concerns are not as important as the next person's. A feeling that some

people are more important than others. You know, that affects you, affects the way you look at yourself, even affects the way you see yourself in terms of your competence. That plays on your morale as well. And many other things I would say, [such as] self-esteem, and it has also affected the way I look at others, like the way I look at the university community, the leadership, and all those things.

Bob further stated that, while it affects him personally, that feeling of invisibility has not negatively impacted his academic performance.

Support

The conversations with participants indicated that the institution has some supports in place for international students on the whole, but there is no targeted support for BIG students, and, as such, there is evidently a need for increased support. They mentioned limited support for attending conferences, for example, which is part of their professional growth. Byron recommended that a

policy to increase the work opportunities for PhD students should be in place for at least four years, because most of us have families as well. They [our families] are here and they have to pay fees, and it becomes a burden and a challenge on them as well. These are some of the things that they should take into consideration.

Orientation/Transition Help

According to Bob,

there is a lack of orientation for new arrivals. It is done, but not as much as they should. In the academic section, for instance, I know of so many international students who have gotten to the fourth, third, fourth final year, only to go back and restart a program because they were not properly oriented. It's mostly common with undergrad because the whole undergraduate thing is so complex.

Naomi agreed that there is a need for more transitional support, highlighting that the institution can and should do more to support international students as they transition into the new environment, and at various levels through institutional policies and practices, which currently appear inadequate. Bob agreed that the transition is not smooth:

You do not have anybody guiding you or mentoring you to just transition smoothly. And I feel like there are a lot of immigrants, there are a lot of agencies, like [the] International Women Centre [or the] Open Door Society, that have been established to transition people smoothly. And probably at the department levels, committees can be established, or people can be elected to help students transition smoothly...we can do more with these policies and practices—we can do better.

Even though there is some support in place for graduate students, participants felt there is insufficient tailored support for international students with respect to career readiness for the

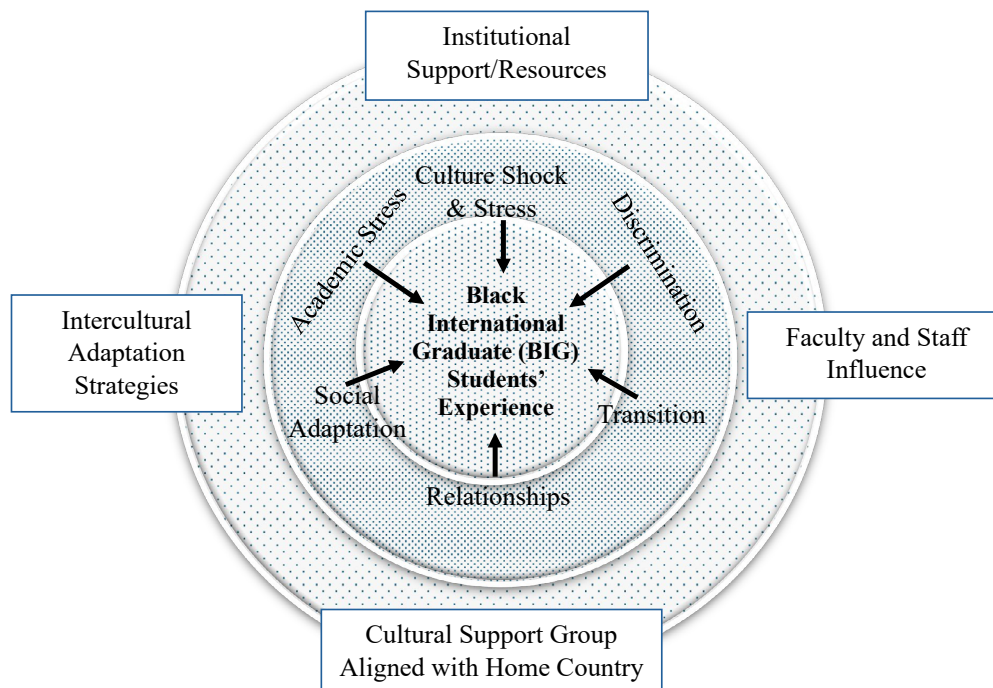
labour market. The institution typically hosts career readiness events like job fairs; however, as Simone claims, such support did not meet the needs of international student career readiness in some cases.

When I was closer to the time of ending my program, I went to the job fair and there was nothing for [students in my program], it was like zero. I went with a friend, she was also an international student, and we were very, very disappointed. There was no context where we could fit ourselves in.

DISCUSSION

The experiences of Black international graduate students are influenced by several interacting factors, as highlighted in Figure 2. With the experiences of culture shock, discrimination, academic stress, and transitional issues, and despite the institutional support available, the participants noted that even when they felt like imposters and at times wanted to give up, they “dug deep” to find the resilience to ensure their academic success.

Figure 2
Interacting Tenets Influencing Black International Students' Experience



The participants indicated that there is inadequate guidance and mentoring to help with a smooth transition. Boafo-Arthur (2013) argued that Black international students tend to experience significant adjustment issues and are faced with discrimination and prejudices, “which can lead to acculturation stress” (p. 115), and reiterated the need for institutional support. Based on the findings, it is evident that participants’ experiences in their host institution and new environment are determined by how they transition and adapt with adequate strategic support services in place. Further, the perceptions of systemic racism and students’ experiences of racial disparity have a significant impact on the experiences of BIG students.

Aligned with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, relationships and connections proved significant for these BIG students. It is through the connections they made in these relationships that they could network, integrate, and move forward in their academic milieu. The sharing of their emotional and psychological effects, their struggles with imposter syndrome, and their experiences being marginalized depicts a void in social interactions with different groups in the host institution that, if addressed, would help students’ successful growth and development. On the other hand, the experiences of the BIG students who expressed a positive relationship with supervisors mirror Vygotsky’s approach, that healthy social contexts foster successful learning and development.

Hernández (2018) and Zhou et al. (2008) affirmed that cultural transit is predicated on engaging in activities that allow international students to integrate and immerse themselves in various social and cultural activities to build relationships. However, the process of integration and cultural transition works in tandem with structured institutional support, which the participants found lacking. Engberg et al. (2016) noted that an understanding of intercultural wonderment can facilitate a better understanding of how the institution’s structured support programs encourage students to participate in activities outside of their familiar territory.

While social support programs are essential to students’ transition, other critical areas of

support, such as financial assistance and fellowships, were also noted to be deficient. Singh (2018) found that postgraduate international students were more successful when they had financial assistance, opportunities to attend conferences, graduate assistant positions, fellowships, and other subsidies. Participants argued that there were very limited opportunities for scholarships, and they struggled to find jobs to offset their expenses.

Given the significant contributions of international students to post-secondary institutions, there is an expectation that institutions have various policies and practices in place to support them. According to Martirosyan et al. (2019), some universities have instituted “specialized services designed to support students’ social adjustment, academic achievement, and language development in ways that potentially lead to greater retention and international student engagement” (p. 172). However, the article suggests not all universities have “specialized services” in place to support international students.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research highlights the diverse perspectives of 12 BIG students at one Canadian university. Participants’ stories concurred with the literature on Black international graduate students. In their stories, participants conveyed their varied experiences with the recurring themes of culture shock; relationships with supervisors, staff, and peers; racial disparity; insecurity; and insufficient support systems while at the university. Participants shared their need to be acknowledged and respected for their individual differences. They also argued for better transitional support for Black student groups and organizations at the institutional level. Participants highlighted the need for more financial support for scholarships, bursaries, and funding for BIG students.

While this study’s findings are limited to the perceptions of 12 BIG students, it serves as a baseline for a larger, more in-depth study, as the findings highlight the need for more robust

support for Black international graduate students' academic, social, and financial needs. A comprehensive support service to meet the students where they are at while addressing issues such as racism, discrimination, social isolation, anxiety, homesickness, and adaptation is also recommended.

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