

The Parts of Being an International Student No One Talks About

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When people think of international students, they often imagine exciting opportunities, cultural diversity, and academic success. Brochures often depict smiling students strolling across beautiful campuses, forging a bright future in a new country. That was the picture I put in my mind. While these images aren't misleading, they don't represent the full experience. This description reflects the brochure I found about Seneca's flyer 30 years ago. As someone who arrived in Canada full of hope and determination, I've learned that there are many aspects of being an international student at Seneca that are rarely mentioned. These hidden realities aren't always negative, but understanding them is crucial.

One of the less discussed challenges of being an international student is the constant feeling of being "in between." I discovered 29 and a half years ago that I no longer fully belong to my home country, yet I also don't completely belong to my new country, Canada. At one point, I felt, I was in limbo. I often remind students that it typically takes about 6 to 12 months to adapt to a new culture. When you return home for a visit, friends and family may comment that you have changed. Your perspective shifts, your habits evolve, and your language may begin to feel mixed. I found myself using certain English words that my friends and family back home did not understand. Likewise, in your host country, you might still feel like an outsider due to your accent, cultural references, or immigration status. Living between two worlds can be confusing and emotionally exhausting, yet this experience is rarely addressed in orientation sessions. This is why we recommend that new international students at Seneca utilize Counselling Services. They are here to help you thrive, not just academically, but also personally and emotionally.

Another reality people rarely discuss is the financial pressure. Tuition fees for international students are significantly higher, and many of us also carry the responsibility of supporting family members back home. There is an invisible weight that comes with knowing how much your education costs. Every class, every exam, and every assignment feels heavier because failure does not seem like an option. Some students work long hours while studying full-time, sacrificing sleep and social life just to stay afloat. From the outside, it may look like ambition, but inside it can feel like constant anxiety. Using all the service that Seneca offer for free or including in your tuition fees is very important. Using the gym, the library, the SSF services etc. often are ignored.

Language is another silent challenge. Even if you meet the language requirements and pass proficiency exams, studying in a second language is a different experience. It is not only about grammar or vocabulary; it is about understanding jokes, cultural references, and subtle expressions. There are moments when you want to participate in a discussion but hesitate because you are translating your thoughts in your head. Over time, this can affect confidence. No one talks about how tiring it is to think, study, and socialize in another language all day long. At Seneca we have different options to meet new people in a safe environment.

There is often pressure to represent your entire country when you are the only person from your background in a classroom. It can feel like you carry the weight of your culture on your shoulders. For instance, I was the only Latino in my business class, and majority of my classmates were eager to learn more about my country. When you make a mistake, you worry that others will associate it with your background. If political or social issues arise in your home country, you may be expected to explain or defend them. This unspoken responsibility can be overwhelming, especially when you are still trying to understand your own identity. Fortunately, the teachers at Seneca recognize that this can be a common experience for many students, and they often assist new students in adapting. Reaching out to your teachers for advice is essential.

Loneliness is another part that remains hidden behind social media posts and video calls. Technology makes it easier to stay connected, but it also reminds you of what you are missing—family gatherings, celebrations, and everyday moments. There are times when you celebrate achievements alone or face difficulties without the comfort of familiar support. Learning to be independent is empowering, but it often comes through quiet struggles that no one sees.

Despite these challenges, these unspoken parts also shape personal growth. Living between cultures teaches adaptability. Financial pressure builds discipline. Studying in another language strengthens resilience. Facing loneliness encourages self-reliance. The parts no one talks about are often the same parts that transform you the most. Being an international student is not only an academic journey; it is an emotional and personal transformation. Behind the degrees and diplomas are stories of courage, sacrifice, and quiet perseverance. If more people spoke honestly about these hidden experiences, future students would feel less alone. The truth is that the journey is not perfect, but it is powerful—and the parts no one talks about are often the ones that matter the most.

(Written by Sergio Vazquez, International Student Coordinator)

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