



Tips for Successful Communication with International Students

This document is to help professors and support staff communicate more effectively with international students. This has been adapted and is courtesy of Boston University International Student and Scholars Office.

- 1) **LISTEN:** Second language students often develop a "script" in their mind of what they want to say to you before they enter your office. Allow them to get through the script so they feel certain that you have heard what they have to say. This can be difficult if the script is long and you can easily anticipate their question or issue.
- 2) **LIMIT** the use of acronyms, abbreviations, jargon, colloquialisms and idioms when speaking (or writing), even if English is the student's first language. Terms like "ASAP" or "on target" or "home run" are culture-based and may have little meaning to an international student.
- 3) **POSSIBLE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE INDICATORS:** Certain feelings and behaviors (both yours and/or the person with whom you are communicating) can be indicators that cultural differences are at play when interacting with someone from another country: frustration, taking offense, repetition, no response, inappropriate responses for the situation (i.e., nodding continuously when clearly the individual does not understand, awkward laughter, ending the conversation abruptly, seeming distracted, etc.). Allow these indicators to remind you to take a deep breath and find a different way to approach the issue or explanation.
- 4) **CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING.** After you have discussed an issue with a student or explained a procedure, ask them to explain it to you in their own words. Don't just ask them if they understood everything you told them. This question may not confirm their level of understanding as the culture of some international students dictates that saying they don't understand shows that either you failed in your explanation or they have failed in understanding. "Do you understand what I told you?" will often be answered with a polite "Yes, thank you" as the student walks away without the vital information they need.
- 5) **NAVIGATING BUREAUCRACY** is not the same in every country or culture as strategies for getting a favorable response vary. Some approaches include working your way up to the most senior person in the office or organization; only accepting the answer of someone "in charge"; asking repeatedly until you receive a favorable response; only accepting the answer from a male staff member, etc. Be clear in your message and be certain the student has understood what you said. Be patient as you may have to repeat yourself to emphasize that there are no exceptions to the policy/procedure/answer and that the answer will be the same no matter how many times the question is asked. Talk with your colleagues and supervisor about how you will deal with requests to talk to a "higher up" and make sure that messaging is consistent.





- 6) HELP international students understand Canadian customs/norms and how "things are done here", but do not pressure them to change their behavior or viewpoints unless the change is absolutely necessary for academic or social success or to avoid serious conflict. Consider whether the situation could be better resolved if you changed your own behavior or viewpoint. If you are referring them to a service or resource, help them understand where to find that service and how to access it, such as emailing them a link to make an appointment.
- 7) NAMES: Learn to say the names of international students correctly. Do not expect the student to select an English-based nickname or shortened version of their name to make it easier for others to understand. This effort will go a long way toward making the student feel welcomed and respected.
- 8) BE CURIOUS: Take the time to learn at least a little about your students' countries of origin, customs, languages and the larger issues of concern in their home countries (i.e., current events).
- 9) DON'T GENERALIZE: Don't assume that all students from a particular country or culture will behave or respond the same way. Likewise, do not expect a student to know what everyone in her/his country think about a particular topic. Like in Canada, perspectives vary from region to region and group to group in any country.
- 10) ENJOY YOUR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS! They offer a richness of experience to the classroom. Once engaged and feeling secure and competent in their new environment, you will find yourself laughing at their insights into our own culture and appreciate the different perspective they bring!

If you need more support or assistance, please don't hesitate to contact the International Education Centre – Student Support Services.

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