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Unspoken Expectations and Cultural Navigation: Chinese International Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

Chinese international students constitute a significant proportion of Canada's international student population, yet the processes through which they navigate academic participation and cultural expectations remain insufficiently theorised. This qualitative interpretive study examines how Chinese undergraduate and graduate students experience and interpret unspoken academic expectations related to classroom participation, faculty communication, and intercultural engagement within Canadian higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 students across three post-secondary institutions in Vancouver, Canada. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings indicate that students' challenges were not primarily associated with academic capability but with interpreting implicit participation norms and culturally embedded expectations that were rarely explicitly communicated. The study introduces the concept of interpretive burden to describe the ongoing cognitive and relational work students undertake to decode hidden curricular expectations shaping engagement and belonging. By extending hidden curriculum theory into internationalized higher education contexts, the study shifts attention from individual adaptation toward institutional practices that structure participation. Implications are discussed for multicultural education and student affairs practice, emphasizing the importance of making participation norms visible and supporting cultural learning as an ongoing institutional responsibility.

Keywords Chinese international students, multicultural education, student engagement, cultural expectations, Canadian higher education

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INTRODUCTION

International students play a significant role in Canadian higher education, contributing to campus diversity, academic life, and the country's economic landscape. Chinese students represent one of the largest and most established groups. Research on Chinese international students has traditionally focused on language proficiency, cultural adjustment, and academic transition. While this body of work offers valuable insights, it emphasizes adaptation and resilience at the expense of examining how institutional norms and practices shape the student experience.

In Canadian classrooms, expectations around participation, group work, and informal communication with faculty are often assumed rather than taught. Students are encouraged to speak

up, contribute freely, collaborate, and engage with instructors outside of class. When norms remain unspoken, students may struggle to interpret what is expected of them, even when they are academically capable and motivated to succeed.

This study examines the experiences of Chinese international students in terms of academic and cultural expectations within the Canadian higher education system. Rather than focusing on adjustment, the research examines student perspectives on participation, communication, and engagement across both classroom and campus contexts. Drawing on interviews with undergraduate and graduate students across three Canadian institutions, the research explores how students make sense of their experiences and how institutional assumptions shape their engagement.
By situating student accounts within broader discussions in multicultural education and student affairs, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the Chinese student experience. It argues that meaningful inclusion requires attention to the cultural dimensions of learning and engagement that are often left unexamined.

The article contributes to international student research by shifting attention away from individual adjustment. It reframes participation, initiative, and informal communication with faculty as elements of a hidden curriculum rather than as indicators of student deficits (Jackson, 1968).

This study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

> RQ1. How do Chinese international students interpret and navigate unspoken academic expectations related to participation, communication, and engagement within Canadian higher education?
> RQ2. In what ways do implicit institutional norms influence students' strategies for participation, interaction with faculty, and social engagement?
> RQ3. How do undergraduate and graduate Chinese international students experience and respond differently to these unspoken expectations?

These questions shift analysis away from deficit explanations of participation and toward understanding how institutional norms are interpreted, learned, and negotiated by students. The study therefore examines participation as a culturally situated practice shaped by hidden curricular expectations rather than as an individual trait.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese International Students in Canadian Higher Education

Chinese international students have long represented one of the largest and most visible international student groups within Canadian higher education. Research examining their experiences has consistently identified challenges related to classroom participation, communication practices, and social integration, even among academically high-performing students (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Existing scholarship shows that many Chinese students enter Canadian universities with strong academic preparation and clear educational goals yet experience uncertainty when navigating instructional norms that are rarely made explicit.

Rather than treating participation challenges as solely individual or cultural differences, recent work emphasizes the interaction between prior educational socialization and institutional expectations. Yu (2018) found that reluctance to participate in classroom discussions was frequently connected to concerns about accuracy, fear of criticism, and uncertainty regarding the value placed on spontaneous verbal contributions. These findings complicate deficit-oriented interpretations of silence and position non-participation as a strategic response to unfamiliar academic norms rather than disengagement.

Classroom Participation, Communication, and Cultural Expectations

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the culturally situated nature of classroom participation and interaction norms. Canadian higher education environments often valorise open debate, informal dialogue, and frequent verbal contribution, yet these practices are rarely taught explicitly and are often assumed to be intuitive (Yu, 2018). For students educated in systems where classroom interaction is more structured or hierarchical, such expectations can create ambiguity and uncertainty about how contributions will be interpreted or evaluated.

Research increasingly suggests that participation reflects institutional culture as much as individual disposition. Participation behaviours are shaped by perceptions of risk, interpretations of academic authority, and awareness of implicit norms surrounding acceptable communication. Yang and Du (2025) further demonstrate that challenges extend beyond formal classroom settings. Informal interactions such as small talk, spontaneous peer conversation, and casual communication with faculty significantly influence both academic engagement and social integration. Even when students possess strong linguistic proficiency, uncertainty about conversational conventions and relationship boundaries may lead to caution or self-monitoring in social and academic spaces.

Intercultural Adaptation and the Limits of Deficit Framing

Traditional research on international students frequently framed adaptation as a process of individual adjustment to host academic cultures. More recent scholarship challenges this perspective by conceptualizing intercultural adaptation as dynamic, relational, and deeply shaped by institutional context. Liu (2015) argues that adaptation emerges through ongoing negotiation among identity, social relationships, and institutional environments, while Zhu (2014) emphasizes the non-linear nature of cultural adjustment, highlighting the role of language use, identity construction, and future orientation.

These perspectives challenge assumptions that exposure alone leads to integration. Rather than representing a linear progression toward cultural competence, adaptation involves continuous interpretation and recalibration as students encounter unfamiliar expectations.

Student Affairs, Campus Climate, and Institutional Responsibility

Student affairs and multicultural education scholarship emphasizes the central role institutions play in shaping student development, belonging, and engagement. While universities frequently offer orientation programs and intercultural initiatives, research suggests that many interventions remain

optional or surface-level, placing responsibility on students to independently navigate complex social and academic environments (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Jones et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship calls for intentional intercultural learning environments that create sustained interaction and shared purpose rather than relying on organic integration. Sector-wide research in Canada similarly highlights gaps between institutional support structures and students' lived experiences, particularly concerning belonging and engagement (CBIE, 2024; Universities Canada, 2021). From a multicultural education perspective, inclusion extends beyond access or representation. It also involves the everyday practices through which academic expectations are communicated and reinforced. When participation norms remain implicit, institutions may unintentionally privilege students already familiar with dominant academic behaviours (Jackson, 1968; Giroux & Penna, 1979).

Emerging Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Existing scholarship has described participation and integration challenges in considerable detail; however, it has not sufficiently theorised how students learn and negotiate the implicit expectations that structure academic participation. Much of the literature emphasizes outcomes such as engagement levels or adaptation success without closely examining the interpretive processes through which students decode institutional norms. This gap matters because institutional support initiatives may fail to address underlying challenges when expectations remain tacit. Students are frequently left to infer valued academic behaviours through observation, experimentation, and self-monitoring, suggesting that engagement is shaped not only by individual agency but by the visibility or invisibility of institutional expectations.

This study therefore shifts attention from outcomes of participation to the interpretive processes through which participation expectations are learned, negotiated, and performed. The literature suggests that participation is not merely an individual behaviour, but a culturally mediated institutional practice shaped by implicit expectations, signalling the need for analysis that attends to how these expectations are interpreted in everyday academic contexts.

Accordingly, this study positions participation, communication, and engagement within hidden curriculum theory, examining how implicit academic norms shape student experiences and engagement strategies across classroom and campus environments. While hidden curriculum theory provides a useful conceptual starting point, this study focuses primarily on how students interpret and negotiate these expectations in practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine how Chinese international students interpret and navigate academic and cultural expectations within Canadian higher education. A qualitative approach was selected to capture participants' meaning-making processes in their own terms and to identify patterns across institutional contexts rather than to test predefined hypotheses (Sandelowski, 2000). The study was guided by an interpretive qualitative

orientation that recognizes student experience as co-constructed through the interaction between individual educational backgrounds and institutional contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than conceptualizing adjustment as a linear process, the design emphasized how students actively negotiate culturally situated and often unspoken academic norms.

Within this interpretive framework, the analysis focused not only on what students described but also on how they described navigating uncertainty. Particular attention was given to moments where participants articulated ambiguity surrounding participation, communication, and academic initiative (e.g., uncertainty about how to contribute to discussions, communicate with faculty, or demonstrate leadership in group work). To strengthen interpretive consistency, coding decisions and emerging themes were continuously revisited through iterative comparison across transcripts. Provisional interpretations were refined through attention to disconfirming cases and variation across participant type, ensuring that final themes accounted for both undergraduate and graduate experiences across institutional settings.

Participants and Institutional Context

Participants consisted of 31 Chinese international students enrolled at three post-secondary institutions located in Vancouver, Canada. The sample included a range of undergraduate and graduate students representing multiple disciplinary areas, including business, social sciences, and applied professional programs. Participants varied in academic stage, ranging from first-year undergraduates to graduate students nearing program completion. All participants had completed at least one academic term in Canada prior to participation, ensuring sufficient exposure to Canadian instructional practices, classroom participation norms, and campus environments. While the institutions differed in size and program offerings, each maintained a significant international student population and publicly articulated commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Recruitment Procedures

Participants were recruited primarily through WeChat, a widely used Chinese social messaging platform. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached. As data collection progressed, interviews increasingly reinforced existing analytical patterns rather than generating substantively new themes, suggesting that the sample size was sufficient to address the study's exploratory aims.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted during fall 2025. Interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 45 minutes and followed an interview guide designed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. Questions addressed classroom participation, group work, faculty communication, social engagement, and perceptions of institutional support. All interviews were conducted primarily in English to maintain consistency across participants. When participants experienced difficulty expressing nuanced ideas, clarification prompts were used to ensure meaning was accurately conveyed.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) iterative approach, which is well suited to exploratory qualitative studies seeking to identify patterns of meaning across participant experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Analysis proceeded through multiple phases beginning with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts to develop an overall understanding of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding involved identifying meaning units related to classroom participation, communication practices, engagement, and perceptions of academic expectations. Coding was inductive in orientation, allowing patterns to emerge from participants' accounts while remaining informed by the study's interpretive framework (Nowell et al., 2017). Codes were developed initially at a semantic level and later refined to capture underlying meanings and relationships across participant narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

As analysis progressed, codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were iteratively reviewed in relation to the entire dataset. For example, "silence" initially emerged as a broad participation-related category (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003). Through iterative comparison and interpretive refinement, this category was later differentiated into distinct forms, including silence as risk management and silence as cognitive processing, reflecting participants' varied engagement strategies across contexts. Throughout analysis, attention was paid to both convergence and divergence across cases, including variation between undergraduate and graduate students and across institutional contexts. Cross-case comparison supported identification of shared patterns while preserving meaningful variation within the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Themes were refined through repeated review to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness in relation to the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Consistent with the study's conceptual framing, analysis focused on the interpretive processes through which participants learned and negotiated unspoken academic expectations. Emphasis was placed not only on what participants experienced but on how they interpreted, evaluated, and responded to institutional norms shaping participation and engagement, aligning with interpretivist qualitative inquiry emphasizing meaning construction within social contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to support trustworthiness and analytical rigor in accordance with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive memo writing was conducted throughout the analytic process to document coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and awareness of researcher assumptions, consistent with recommendations for maintaining analytic transparency (Charmaz, 2014; Tracy, 2010). Credibility was further strengthened through iterative comparison across transcripts and attention to disconfirming cases, ensuring that themes accounted for both commonalities and variation within the dataset (Patton, 2015). Clarification during interviews supported accuracy of meaning, particularly when participants discussed culturally nuanced experiences. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by repeated recurrence of established themes without the emergence of substantively new insights (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured that participation was voluntary and confidential. Pseudonyms and participant identifiers were used to protect identity, and all potentially identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. Researcher positionality was considered an integral component of qualitative inquiry (Berger, 2015). The researcher brings over a decade of experience living, working, and teaching in China, including professional engagement within educational and business contexts. This background supported rapport-building and culturally informed interpretation of participant experiences. At the same time, reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process to critically examine potential assumptions and ensure that participant perspectives remained central to analysis (Finlay, 2002).

Cultural Context, Participant Trust, and Interview Dynamics

An important contextual consideration during data collection involved participants' initial caution when discussing academic and institutional experiences. Several participants expressed uncertainty about how their responses might be interpreted or used, particularly when discussing institutional expectations or authority figures. Such hesitancy is consistent with literature noting that educational cultures emphasizing hierarchy and evaluation may influence openness in interview settings (Hofstede, 2001; Liu, 2015).

To support openness, interviews emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the absence of academic consequences. Time was dedicated to explaining the purpose of the research and establishing trust, practices commonly recommended when interviewing culturally diverse populations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher's familiarity with Chinese educational contexts helped interpret participant caution as culturally situated rather than as disengagement. These dynamics underscore the importance of culturally responsive interviewing practices and reflexive awareness in qualitative research involving international student populations (Smith, 2008).

FINDINGS

Table 1. *Summary of Emergent Themes Identified Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Brief Description	Representative Quote
Academic competence vs. cultural fluency	Strong academic preparation alongside uncertainty about participation norms.	"I know the material, but I'm not sure when to speak."
Participation as risk management	Silence used strategically to avoid social or academic risk.	"If I say something wrong, it feels risky."
Unspoken expectations for initiative	Expectations for proactivity and leadership were rarely explicit.	"You just watch others to learn what is expected."
Faculty communication norms	Uncertainty about how to communicate with instructors informally.	"I don't know how casual emails should be."
Informal communication and integration	Small talk and spontaneous interaction felt difficult despite language ability.	"Small talk is harder than class discussions."
Interpretive burden (integrative theme)	Ongoing effort to decode implicit institutional expectations across contexts.	"You are always trying to figure out what they expect."

Analysis of the interview data revealed six interrelated themes that capture how Chinese international students experience academic and cultural expectations within the Canadian higher

education system as presented in Table 1. Across all themes, participants described not only differences in academic expectations but also a recurring process of interpretation in which they sought to decode unfamiliar academic and social norms.

Academic Competence Without Cultural Fluency

Many participants described their prior educational experiences in China as rigorous, highly structured, and demanding, which prepared them well for academic expectations in Canada. However, this sense of academic competence did not translate into confidence in classroom participation. Instead, students seemed to rely on silence as a way of avoiding unwanted attention (Li & Campbell, 2008).

Academic Competence and Participation as Risk Management

Participants consistently described a disconnect between academic competence and confidence in navigating classroom participation norms. Although students reported understanding course content, many expressed uncertainties about when and how to contribute verbally in ways that would be perceived as appropriate or valuable. As one undergraduate explained, “I understand the lectures and readings. The problem is not the content. It’s like knowing how and when to speak in class” (P4, undergraduate).

Silence was frequently positioned as a deliberate and rational strategy rather than evidence of disengagement. One participant noted, “Sometimes I have an idea, but [I’m] not sure if it’s worth saying. If I say something wrong, everyone hears it” (P11, undergraduate). Graduate participants expressed similar concerns, particularly within discussion-based seminar environments where rapid verbal engagement was expected: “In seminars, it feels like people expect you to jump in quickly. I need more time to think; when I’m ready, the discussion has moved on” (P19, graduate).

For many students, silence functioned as a form of risk management. Participants described weighing the potential benefits of participation against possible embarrassment, misunderstanding, or negative academic evaluation. As one student reflected, “I don’t want the professor to think I’m not prepared, but it’s better to just listen” (P27, graduate).

Unspoken Expectations Around Participation and Initiative

A second theme centred on participants’ difficulty interpreting expectations related to initiative, assertiveness, and leadership. As one participant explained, “They say participation is important, but no one explains what participation means. Is it asking questions, or just talking more?” (P7, undergraduate). Group work frequently intensified this ambiguity. Participants described uncertainty about how much initiative to take and how direct they could be with peers. One student noted, “In group projects, I don’t know if I should lead or wait. If I take charge, I worry people will think I’m too boss-like” (P18, undergraduate). Others described learning expectations indirectly through observation. For example, one participant shared, “I didn’t realize I was expected to challenge ideas until I saw other students doing it. Before that, I thought agreeing was necessary. In China, we don’t argue with the teacher” (P26, graduate).

Several participants emphasized that expectations surrounding initiative were rarely articulated explicitly. As one student summarized, “Nobody says how much is too much. You just have to learn it by watching classmates” (P10, undergraduate). Collectively, these accounts illustrate how participation was experienced less as an individual choice and more as a negotiated response to ambiguous expectations.

Faculty Communication and Power Distance

Office hours, email communication, and informal dialogue were frequently described as unfamiliar practices shaped by differing expectations regarding authority relationships. Consistent with prior research on power distance (Hofstede, 2001), participants often interpreted faculty accessibility through prior educational norms emphasizing hierarchy. One participant explained, “The professor says we can email anytime, but I think a lot before writing. I don’t want to bother him” (P2, undergraduate). Others expressed concern that asking questions could signal insufficient preparation: “In China, you shouldn’t bother the teacher unless it’s important. I worry it looks like I didn’t study if I ask questions” (P23, graduate). Several participants described delaying communication until challenges became more serious: “Sometimes I wait too long to ask for help because I don’t want people to think I am a poor student” (P15, undergraduate).

Even when instructors explicitly encouraged interaction, students remained uncertain about appropriate boundaries. As one participant stated, “I don’t know the culture. I don’t want to be disrespectful” (P31, graduate). These narratives suggest that perceived accessibility alone did not eliminate hierarchical assumptions. Students interpreted faculty openness through prior educational frames, resulting in cautious communication strategies.

Limited Opportunities for Meaningful Intercultural Engagement

Participants acknowledged that institutions offered social events and programs aimed at supporting international students; however, many described these experiences as brief or surface-level. One participant reflected, “There are many campus events, but people talk for a few minutes and then leave. It doesn’t build the friendship” (P9, undergraduate). Interactions with domestic peers were often described as polite but limited in depth, as illustrated by the comment, “We talk about class, but it doesn’t go deeper. I don’t know how to continue a conversation with local people” (P14, graduate).

As one participant noted, “With other Chinese students, I can relax and be normal” (P6, undergraduate). Others expressed frustration that integration appeared to be framed primarily as an individual responsibility: “It feels like if you don’t make friends, it’s your fault. But nobody teaches you how to do it here” (P21, undergraduate). Participants consistently suggested that meaningful intercultural engagement required structured opportunities and shared purpose. For example, one student explained, “If there was something we had to do together, like a project or activity, it would be easier” (P12, graduate). These findings indicate that social integration challenges were not solely interpersonal but also structural, reflecting limited opportunities for sustained, purpose-driven interaction.

Variation Across Academic Level

Although undergraduates and graduate students shared many experiences, some differences emerged across academic level. Undergraduates more frequently described uncertainty about participation rules and informal communication expectations, particularly during early coursework and group projects. Graduate students, by contrast, emphasized pressure for rapid intellectual contribution in seminars and discussions, where expectations for immediate verbal participation were perceived as especially demanding.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Chinese international students navigate unspoken academic expectations within Canadian higher education and demonstrated that these expectations operate as a form of hidden curriculum shaping participation, communication, and engagement. Rather than reflecting individual deficits, participants' experiences suggest that engagement is mediated by culturally embedded institutional norms that remain largely implicit.

Rather than simply adapting to a new culture, students navigated evaluative academic spaces where dominant participation behaviours were implicitly rewarded. The central analytical contribution of this study is the concept of *interpretive burden*, which captures the ongoing cognitive and relational work through which students interpret, evaluate, and negotiate hidden curricular expectations across classroom and campus contexts. Engagement gaps therefore emerge not primarily from cultural difference itself but from institutional environments where valued behaviours are assumed rather than explicitly taught.

Engagement gaps are not merely cultural differences but institutional effects produced by hidden curricular assumptions. Drawing on interviews with 31 undergraduate and graduate students across three institutions, the findings highlight a consistent pattern: students felt academically prepared and motivated, yet uncertain in navigating unspoken norms related to participation, initiative, communication, and social engagement. These experiences were not isolated or idiosyncratic but reflected broader institutional assumptions about how students are expected to learn, interact, and integrate.

Reframing Participation and Engagement

Participants' accounts suggest that silence should not be read as disengagement or lack of preparation. Instead, silence often functioned as a strategic response to uncertainty and ambiguity. Students carefully weighed the potential academic and social consequences of participation in environments where expectations were rarely made explicit. These findings align with earlier studies, which have shown that Chinese international students often prioritize accuracy, reflection, and respect for authority in academic settings (Yu, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). This reinforces the importance of recognizing participation as a culturally situated practice. Multicultural education scholarship emphasizes that inclusive pedagogy requires making expectations visible rather than assuming universal familiarity. The findings suggest that greater clarity around participation, discussion norms, and assessment criteria could reduce anxiety and support more equitable engagement.

Institutional Responsibility and Cultural Learning

The findings highlight the need to reconceptualize international student integration as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual task. Students described investing significant effort in interpreting participation norms, communication expectations, and interactional practices that were assumed to be intuitive within the host context. This interpretation aligns with Canadian sector research noting persistent gaps between institutional support structures and international students' lived experiences, particularly in relation to belonging, engagement, and academic participation (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2024). Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond one-time orientation models toward developmental approaches that support cultural learning as an ongoing process throughout students' academic trajectories (Universities Canada, 2021). From this perspective, effective support involves not only providing information but also making implicit expectations visible within everyday academic practices.

By foregrounding the role of institutional norms in shaping engagement, this study contributes to multicultural education scholarship by emphasizing how learning environments themselves can facilitate or constrain participation. Attending to the cultural dimensions of teaching, communication, and interaction allows institutions to move toward more equitable learning environments that support students beyond those already familiar with dominant academic norms.

Extending Multicultural Education and Student Affairs Frameworks

From a multicultural education perspective, the findings extend existing frameworks by demonstrating that inclusion is shaped not only by representation or access but also by the everyday practices through which academic expectations are enacted. While multicultural education has traditionally emphasized curriculum, identity, and equity, these findings highlight the importance of examining the cultural dimensions of academic practice itself. Unspoken expectations operate as a form of hidden curriculum, privileging students already socialized into dominant participation norms while placing others in a position of continual interpretation and adjustment.

These findings also have implications for student affairs practice. Because student affairs professionals often facilitate transition programs, intercultural initiatives, and co-curricular learning environments, they are well positioned to support intentional cultural learning and norm transparency across the student experience (Evans et al., 2010). Rather than positioning integration as an individual responsibility, student affairs and academic units together can create structured opportunities that make participation norms explicit and reduce reliance on trial-and-error adaptation.

Educational Socialization and Learning Cultures

Participants' accounts can also be understood in relation to broader patterns of educational socialization. Many students described prior learning experiences that emphasized structured instruction, mastery of prescribed content, and performance on standardized assessments. These learning environments shaped how students understood the role of the teacher, the purpose of participation, and the risks associated with speaking publicly. Canadian higher education emphasizes critical questioning, self-directed learning, and verbal engagement as indicators of intellectual development. Classroom discussion is frequently framed as a space for exploration rather than evaluation, and students are encouraged to challenge ideas, including those presented by instructors. For students socialized in more directive learning environments, this shift can be

disorienting. Without explicit guidance, expectations surrounding participation may appear inconsistent or ambiguous.

Participants' hesitation to speak should therefore be interpreted as a reflection of prior educational conditioning rather than reluctance to learn. Several students described needing time to adjust to learning environments where uncertainty and debate were normalized. Until these expectations became clearer, many students relied on observation and imitation to guide their behavior. From an institutional perspective, these findings suggest that differences in learning culture deserve explicit attention. Rather than assuming that students will naturally adopt new modes of engagement, educators and student affairs professionals can play a role in explaining the values underlying participatory learning. Making these expectations visible may reduce anxiety, support confidence, and create more equitable opportunities for engagement across diverse student populations.

Hidden Curriculum

Participants' struggles with initiative and group work highlight the presence of a hidden curriculum within Canadian higher education. Expectations around leadership, assertiveness, and collaboration were often communicated implicitly, leaving students to infer norms through observation. For students accustomed to more hierarchical or instructor-directed educational contexts, these expectations created uncertainty about when to lead, when to defer, and how direct communication should be.

When students lack access to these informal rules, they may be perceived as passive or disengaged, reinforcing deficit narratives. The findings suggest that institutions play an active role in reproducing these dynamics when expectations remain unspoken. From a student affairs perspective, this points to the need for programming that addresses academic culture explicitly. Rather than assuming that students will naturally acquire these norms, institutions could treat initiative and collaboration as skills to be developed through guided practice and reflection.

Faculty Communication and Power Distance

Office hours, email correspondence, and casual conversations were often perceived as ambiguous spaces where expectations were unclear. Students' hesitation to seek clarification or support reflects lingering perceptions of power distance shaped by prior educational experiences. This complicates narratives that frame faculty openness as sufficient for student engagement. Even when instructors invite questions and emphasize accessibility, students may lack the cultural knowledge required to act on that invitation. Without explicit guidance on how and when to communicate, students may avoid interaction altogether. This suggests that reducing power distance requires more than signalling approachability. It requires deliberate communication about expectations and norms. Faculty development initiatives could play a role in supporting instructors to articulate these norms clearly and consistently.

The Limits of Organic Integration

Participants' accounts of social engagement underscore the limitations of institutional approaches that rely on organic integration. While social events and activities were available, many students

described these interactions as superficial and short-lived. Meaningful intercultural relationships are rarely developed without shared purpose or structured interaction. Though the Chinese student's approach to culture would eventually change, as predicted by Marginson (2014), to adapt to the new culture, this change would come too slowly to bring integration in an environment not designed for purposeful, lengthy, and iterative interactions.

This echoes research arguing that exposure alone does not produce intercultural learning (Jones et al., 2021). When integration is framed as an individual responsibility, students who struggle to navigate informal social norms may retreat into co-national networks that provide comfort and clarity. While these networks offer valuable support, they may also limit opportunities for broader engagement. From a multicultural education perspective, this raises questions about how institutions conceptualize inclusion. Inclusion cannot be reduced to access or participation in events. It requires intentional design that facilitates sustained interaction, mutual understanding, and shared goals.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes three interrelated contributions to international student and multicultural education scholarships. First, it extends hidden curriculum theory by demonstrating how unspoken academic expectations function as mechanisms through which participation and visibility are structured within internationalized higher education settings. Rather than operating as neutral academic norms, expectations surrounding participation, initiative, and communication shape which forms of engagement are recognized as competence, thereby influencing students' positioning within classroom environments.

Second, the study introduces the concept of interpretive burden, which captures the ongoing cognitive and relational work students undertake as they interpret, evaluate, and negotiate implicit participation norms. This concept reframes engagement not as an individual disposition but as a dynamic interpretive process shaped by institutional context. By foregrounding interpretation as an analytical mechanism, interpretive burden offers a transferable lens for understanding how students navigate culturally mediated expectations across diverse higher education environments.

Third, the findings highlight how engagement is co-produced through the interaction between prior educational socialization and institutional habitus. This perspective shifts attention away from individual adaptation narratives toward the relational dynamics through which academic cultures are learned and enacted. Inclusion, from this perspective, is embedded within everyday pedagogical and interactional practices rather than residing solely within formal support structures.

Taken together, these contributions position interpretive burden as a conceptual mechanism linking hidden curriculum processes to observable patterns of participation and engagement in internationalized classrooms. In doing so, the study advances understanding of how institutional cultures shape engagement outcomes beyond individual motivation or preparation.

Implications for Institutional Practice

The findings carry several implications for institutional practice. First, participation and communication expectations should be treated as culturally situated academic practices that require

explicit articulation. Second, institutional support should move beyond one-time orientations or optional programming toward developmental approaches that support cultural learning over time. Consistent with prior research, sustained social networks and structured engagement opportunities appear central to meaningful integration (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Third, universities may benefit from designing structured opportunities for sustained intercultural engagement that emphasize shared purpose rather than passive participation. Programs grounded in collaborative activity and ongoing interaction are more likely to foster meaningful intercultural learning, aligning with internationalization frameworks that emphasize mutual responsibility for engagement (Jones et al., 2021). Finally, the findings reinforce the importance of reframing integration as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual challenge (Strayhorn, 2012). Canadian sector evidence similarly highlights the need for alignment between institutional support structures and students' lived experiences of belonging and engagement (CBIE, 2024). From this perspective, institutional responsibility involves not only providing services but also attending to the implicit academic cultures through which engagement is shaped.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research focused on a relatively small sample of Chinese international students drawn from three post-secondary institutions in a single metropolitan region. While the sample size was sufficient to reach thematic saturation and identify shared patterns, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all Chinese international students across Canada or other national contexts. Institutional cultures, program structures, and regional characteristics may shape student experiences in different ways.

Second, participants' prior educational socialization may have influenced both the content and depth of their responses. Many students described educational backgrounds that emphasized structured instruction, memorization, and examination performance, often referred to as rote learning. Within such contexts, students may have limited experience articulating personal perspectives, questioning institutional practices, or discussing challenges openly. This background may have contributed to initial caution during interviews, particularly when discussing classroom participation, faculty relationships, or institutional expectations.

Some participants appeared hesitant to provide detailed or critical accounts at the outset of the interview process. In several cases, responses were initially general or descriptive before becoming more reflective as trust developed. This pattern suggests that concerns about disclosure, evaluation, or potential consequences may have shaped how participants framed their experiences. The use of bilingual interviewing allowed participants to express complex ideas more comfortably than English-only interviews might have permitted. Future research could explore the use of extended first-language interviews or follow-up conversations to further deepen data richness. The researcher's positionality, including prior experience teaching and working in China, shaped both rapport and interpretation. While this background supported culturally sensitive engagement and contextual understanding, it also required ongoing reflexivity to ensure that participants' voices remained central. Future studies might incorporate multiple researchers or comparative perspectives to further enhance analytic depth. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into how unspoken academic and cultural expectations shape international student experience.

Future Research Directions

This study introduces interpretive burden as a conceptual lens for understanding how international students navigate hidden curricular expectations within higher education environments. Future research is needed to further examine the scope, durability, and transferability of this construct across contexts. Longitudinal inquiry would be particularly valuable in tracing how interpretive burden evolves over time, including whether students gradually internalize participation norms, develop adaptive strategies, or continue to experience cognitive and relational strain even after extended exposure to institutional culture.

Comparative research across student populations represents a second important direction. While this study focuses on Chinese international students, future research should examine whether interpretive burden operates similarly across international student groups, domestic students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, or first-generation students navigating unfamiliar academic cultures. Comparative designs would help determine whether interpretive burden reflects culturally specific experiences or constitutes a broader mechanism through which hidden curriculum processes shape participation and visibility in higher education.

Additional research is also needed to examine how interpretive burden varies across disciplinary and institutional contexts. Participation expectations are not uniform across fields; differences in pedagogical norms, assessment structures, and classroom interaction styles may shape how implicit expectations are encountered and interpreted. Multi-site or discipline-specific studies could provide insight into how institutional habitus and program culture mediate participation practices, offering a more nuanced account of how hidden curriculum dynamics operate across academic environments.

A further priority involves moving from descriptive analysis toward intervention-based research. The findings suggest that participation norms and communication expectations function as learned cultural practices rather than intuitive skills. Future studies should therefore evaluate institutional strategies designed to increase norm transparency, such as scaffolded participation frameworks, explicit communication training, or faculty development initiatives focused on cultural signalling in the classroom. Empirical examination of such interventions would help clarify how institutions can reduce interpretive burden while fostering equitable engagement.

Finally, methodological expansion could deepen theoretical development. Ethnographic approaches, classroom observation, or mixed-methods designs integrating engagement data with qualitative insight may illuminate dimensions of hidden curricular negotiation that are less visible in interview-based studies alone. Such approaches would also enable scholars to examine participation as a situated interactional process rather than solely as retrospective narrative.

Taken together, these directions position interpretive burden as a generative concept for future scholarship examining equity, participation, and belonging within internationalized higher education. Advancing this line of inquiry may contribute to a shift from adaptation-focused explanations toward analyses that more fully account for how institutional cultures structure engagement and shape student experience.

Implications for Canadian Higher Education Policy and Practice

Beyond classroom and student services practice, the findings carry broader implications for Canadian higher education policy and institutional planning. Canadian universities increasingly position internationalization as a strategic priority, yet policy discourse often emphasizes recruitment, enrolment targets, and economic contributions more than the lived experiences of international students. The experiences described by participants suggest a disconnect between institutional aspirations for inclusion and the everyday realities of learning environments where expectations remain unevenly communicated.

At a policy level, assumptions that international students will naturally adapt to Canadian academic culture through exposure alone warrant reconsideration. Participants' accounts indicate that unspoken norms related to participation, initiative, and informal communication can function as structural barriers, even in institutions that formally promote equity and inclusion. Policies that frame integration as an individual responsibility risk reinforcing these barriers by overlooking how institutional practices shape student behaviour.

The findings also raise questions about how institutions evaluate student engagement and success. Metrics that prioritize visible participation or assertive communication may inadvertently disadvantage students who are navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations. From a policy perspective, this highlights the importance of aligning assessment practices, faculty development, and student support initiatives with a more nuanced understanding of engagement that accounts for cultural diversity.

The study underscores the need for policy approaches that recognize cultural learning as an ongoing developmental process rather than a transitional issue addressed through orientation alone. Embedding intercultural learning into academic programs, co-curricular structures, and institutional planning may better support international students' long-term success while also enriching campus learning environments more broadly. In this sense, addressing unspoken academic and cultural expectations is not only a matter of student support but also of institutional responsibility and educational quality within an increasingly globalized higher education sector.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that international student engagement cannot be fully understood through adaptation frameworks alone. Instead, unspoken academic expectations function as a hidden curriculum through which institutional norms shape how participation, initiative, and communication are interpreted and evaluated. By introducing the concept of interpretive burden, the study shifts attention from individual adjustment toward institutional structures that influence visibility, engagement, and belonging.

The article challenges the assumption that limited participation or hesitation reflects disengagement or a lack of preparedness. Instead, participants' accounts reveal deliberate strategies for managing uncertainty, risk, and ambiguity in learning environments where expectations are rarely made explicit. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing participation, initiative, and communication as culturally situated practices rather than universal academic skills.

From a multicultural education standpoint, the research contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusion by shifting attention from access and representation to the everyday practices that structure learning and interaction. Inclusion is not achieved solely through recruitment or support services but through the visibility of institutional expectations embedded within pedagogy, assessment, and informal academic culture. When these expectations remain implicit, students who are unfamiliar with dominant norms must rely on observation and trial and error, often at the cost of confidence and engagement. The implications for student affairs practice are equally significant. Participants' experiences point to the limits of approaches that rely on organic integration or self-directed adaptation. Structured opportunities for cultural learning, guided engagement, and explicit discussion of academic norms may support more equitable participation across diverse student populations.

This study highlights the need to reconceptualize international student integration as a shared institutional responsibility. As international student populations diversify, understanding how unspoken expectations shape experience will remain central to advancing equity, belonging, and student success within Canadian higher education. By foregrounding interpretive burden as an institutionally produced condition rather than an individual challenge, this study reframes international student engagement as a question of how academic cultures signal participation norms. This shift offers a foundation for future research examining how hidden curricular expectations shape equity and belonging across diverse higher education contexts.

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