



March 2024

# International Students: First 48 Hours in Canada



**INNOVATION HUB**

# Introduction

In collaboration with the Office of the Associate Vice-President, International Student Experience and Centre for International Experience, the Innovation Hub sought to identify a small and diverse group of 8 international students who were willing to document their first 48 hours in Canada using journals, video diaries, and participating in interviews. The data and stories collected were used to better understand the needs on incoming international students as they arrive to Canada for the first time. We hope the insights from this research will help the University of Toronto create future programs and services to support international students.

## Methods



At the Innovation Hub, we have established an in-depth understanding of student experiences. Our team takes a human-centred approach, using in-depth qualitative research methods and design thinking strategies to foster rich data collection and elicit honest stories from students about their perspectives. We translate the stories into themes that help us understand their diverse perspectives and reveal insights that will inspire the future design of programs and services.

In the summer of 2023, we initiated a widespread call for participants for an opportunity called, *International Students First 48 Hours in Canada Project* where we identified **8 International students** to document their first 48 hours in Canada. Students recorded their journeys through video diaries and journals. Before the students left for Canada, we conducted interview sessions where we asked them about their experiences and their preparation to study abroad.

In September 2023, we held a *Welcome Celebration & Filming Day*, where we facilitated an event for the international students to meet and share their experiences. We conducted a series of interviews to better understand their journey and initial month settling in Canada. The results of these interviews were compiled into the documentary, *International Students: First 48 Hours in Canada*. In October 2023, we conducted interviews to further learn about student experiences settling in Canada and U of T.

Our data was transcribed and de-identified and included the interview transcripts, journals, and summary of the video diaries.

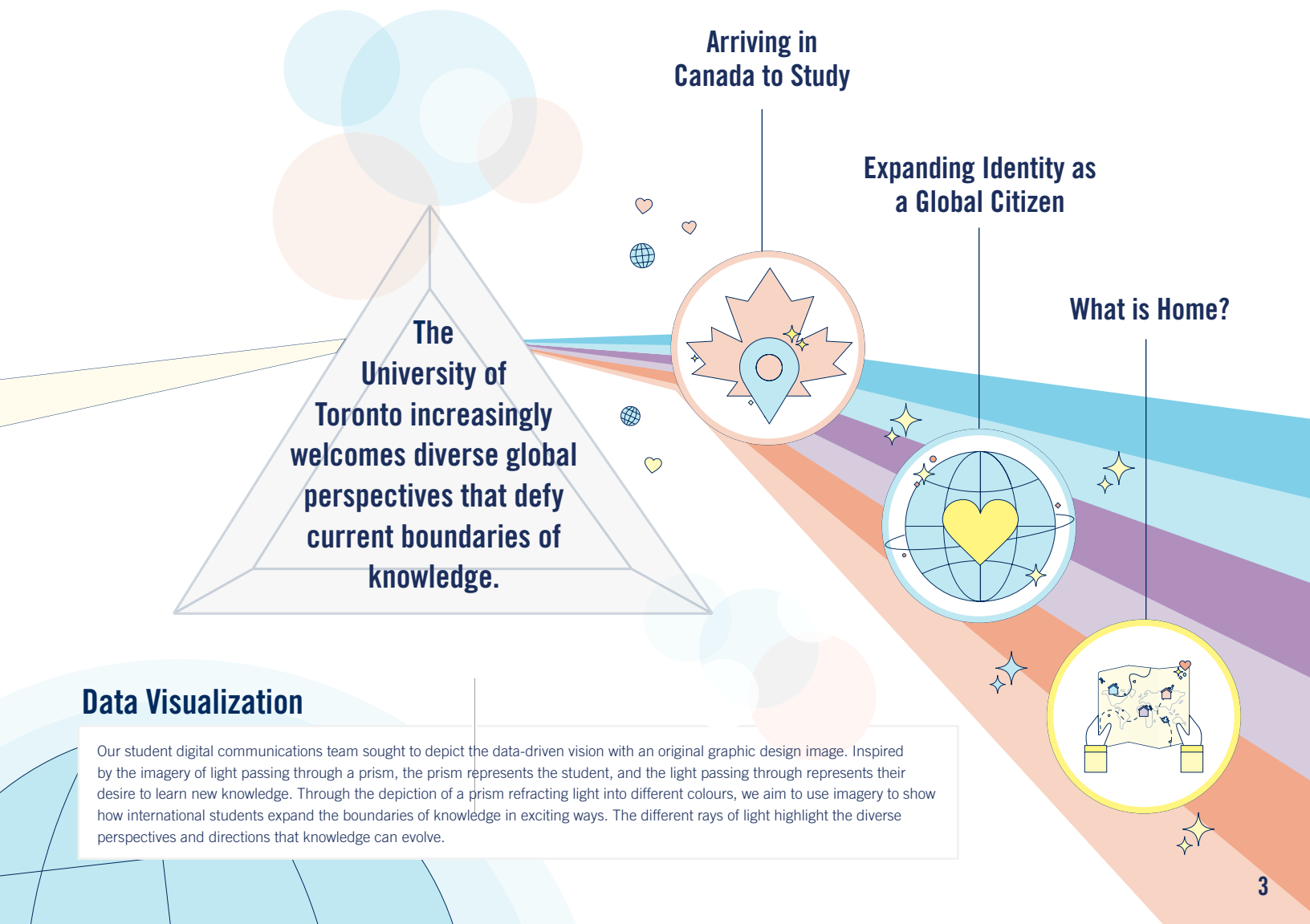
In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students communicated and developed a vision based on our insights.



# Our Findings

## Vision: The University of Toronto increasingly welcomes diverse global perspectives that defy current boundaries of knowledge.

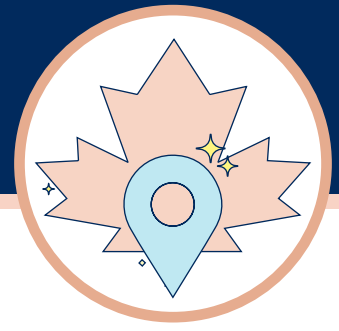
We found that international students arrive at the University of Toronto with a natural sense of curiosity that allows them to see Canadian perspectives through an exploratory lens. Students described facing both excitement and instability at the cultural shock of arriving in a new country and shared how these experiences challenged their understanding of the world. The international students we spoke to willingly embraced change amidst the discomfort of adjusting to life in a new country, allowing them to broaden their worldviews in exciting ways. With new experiences came new learning for our participants, and we saw how valuable their perspectives became in academic conversations and beyond. We envision learning spaces that empower international students to confidently leverage their unique experiences within and across global cultures to challenge and interconnect existing knowledge systems. **The University of Toronto increasingly welcomes diverse global perspectives that defy current boundaries of knowledge.**



### Data Visualization

Our student digital communications team sought to depict the data-driven vision with an original graphic design image. Inspired by the imagery of light passing through a prism, the prism represents the student, and the light passing through represents their desire to learn new knowledge. Through the depiction of a prism refracting light into different colours, we aim to use imagery to show how international students expand the boundaries of knowledge in exciting ways. The different rays of light highlight the diverse perspectives and directions that knowledge can evolve.

# Arriving in Canada to Study



This theme explores the critical transition international students experience when leaving their homes and embarking on their journeys to Canada. Students shared how they learned to navigate their new environments and overcome challenges before they left their home country, during their journey to Canada, and when they arrived at U of T and began to embrace new beginnings.

## Pride in Perseverance

Students demonstrated **persistence and determination throughout their journey to Canada**. Despite experiencing the difficulties of navigating immigration and adjusting to a new environment, students shared feeling determined to persevere through their challenges leaving home. Students **felt confident in their ability to succeed and take on future challenges** and contribute to the U of T academic community once they arrived.

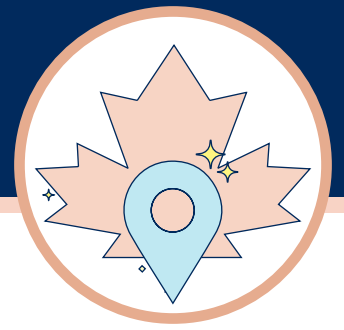
- One student described arriving in Canada late after their classes had started because of a delayed visa. Despite feeling disoriented, the student managed to step out of their comfort zone and attend their class with luggage on the same day they landed. When reflecting, the student felt proud adjusting to the unexpected situation and confident they can face future challenges.
- Another student who was worried about the long flight to Canada made a conscious decision to believe they could do it.
- Many students shared feelings of vulnerability while waiting for their visa documents to be approved. For example, one student felt nervous when rushing to catch their transfer flight after learning they needed to collect their study permit at a layover. Upon reflection, the student felt proud of themselves for remaining calm and determined despite feeling rushed navigating study permit protocols and reaching their connecting flight on time.

## I am Welcome

Students spoke about the importance of feeling **a sense of belonging while trying to engage in unfamiliar environments**. Students reported feeling uncomfortable participating in spaces where they did not know anyone because they were uncertain if their presence would be welcomed. **Moments when students felt embraced by others were pivotal to helping them feel settled** in Canada and enabled them to feel more comfortable participating in university activities.

- One student expressed feeling stressed and uncertain about living with extended family whom they had not seen for a long time. Upon arrival, the student felt embraced by the family members, alleviating all fears. When family members spent time with the student and helped them to buy groceries and school supplies, they felt welcomed.
- Another student felt surprised by the friendliness of their roommate and appreciated how easy they made friends on their first day in Toronto. The student felt instantly that U of T was a welcoming place where they could comfortably connect to people from other backgrounds and, in turn, share their own culture.
- One student felt disappointed missing their program's orientation activities because their visa was delayed, they had wanted to connect with other students, faculty, and staff before starting the program. The student felt nervous to raise their hand to contribute to class discussion during the first lecture because they did not want to leave a bad first impression and be judged for arriving to class late.

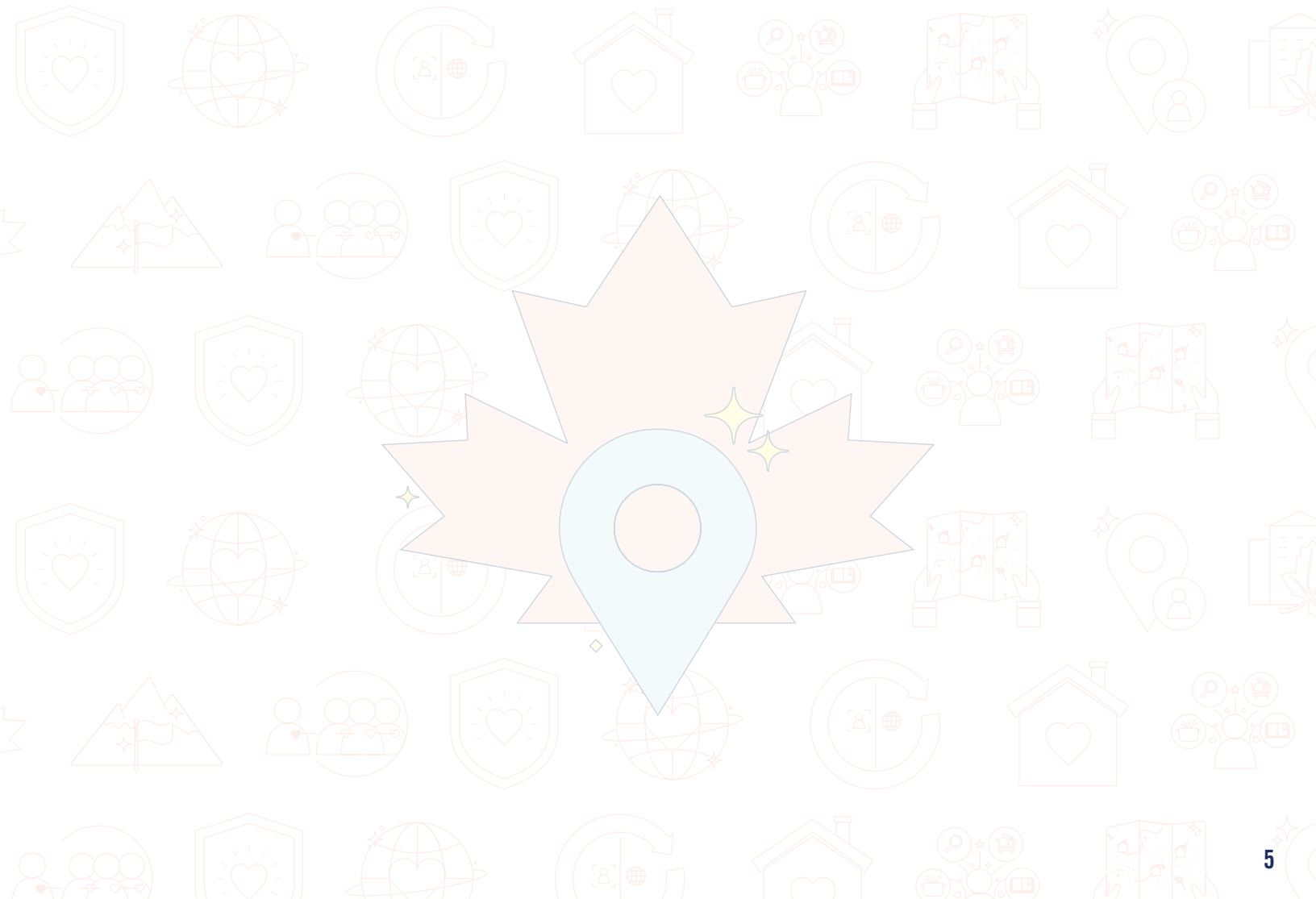
# Arriving in Canada to Study



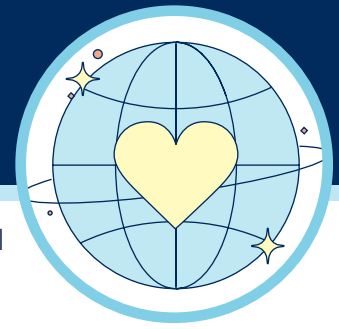
## Settled & Safe

Students expressed the **importance of feeling secure in meeting their basic needs** before meaningfully participating in new environments. Students reported feeling disconnected and nervous when initially adjusting to living their lives in Canada and setting up their basic accommodations. Once students found stability, they felt settled and experienced a **sense of permanence that allowed them to feel safe** to fully participate in university life.

- One student reported difficulty securing long-term housing and having to stay in temporary accommodation far away from the U of T campus. Finding accommodation was the toughest hurdle to overcome and the student struggled to establish a consistent starting point, limiting time to explore and enjoy campus.
- Another student felt they would feel settled and comfortable as a resident in Canada for the year after they officially obtained their SIN number and opened a bank account to signify their identity in Canada.
- One student shared that after settling into their dorm room, they were able to explore their residences and meet some of the other students on their floor. After sharing a meal with their new friends, they began to feel comfortable in their student residence.



# Expanding Identity as a Global Citizen



Attending university is a time of intense identity development for all students. International students shared they also must discover what it means to be a resident in a new place while making the transition and exploring what it means to become a global citizen. The intensity of facing culture shock while beginning their lives as university students continued the learning journey for international students.

## Integrating Cultural World Views

Students shared that feelings of culture shock led to a sense of being lost between the cultural norms familiar to them, and the new Canadian norms they were experiencing for the first time. Students shared how embracing their cultural heritage allowed them to be grounded while navigating unfamiliar environments. Students felt pride in expanding their worldview to integrate perspectives from different cultures in their new identity as a student in Canada.

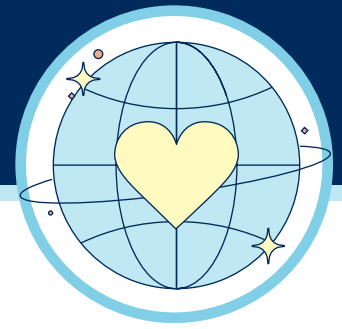
- One student mentioned feeling pressured to ‘read the room,’ uncertain if how they behaved in their home country would fit in with local cultural norms. When feeling lost and unsure, the student found solace in wearing a shirt representing their culture as a powerful way to reaffirm their identity.
- Another student relied on their cultural traditions, especially their religion when they encountered challenges and difficulties in Canada. The student reported finding inner peace and calm when they prayed, which guided them through difficult times.
- One student felt they could express themselves and share stories from their background, after a few people from their residence floor went out to dinner. The informal setting allowed domestic and international students to get to know each other. The community dinner helped the student feel they belonged in Canada.

## Resident in Canada

Students shared their excitement **exploring their identities** as individuals within the context of becoming residents in Canada to study. Students were eager and prepared to encounter new experiences and embrace Canadian culture but felt their *outsider* identity led to moments of discomfort and awkwardness when interacting with others. Students shared moments of curiosity as they encountered new experiences and aspects of Canadian culture. In some cases, students took these moments of difference to **encourage dialogue within their academic communities and create opportunities to expand on the established boundaries of local cultural understandings.**

- Some students expressed concerns about their accents or English language proficiency hindering their interactions with others in Canada. In a new cultural setting, the students felt worried they would be judged for their English-speaking abilities, which led them to reflect on the linguistic diversity of students at U of T.
- One student recalled a moment when they greeted people in the elevator with enthusiasm and received less acknowledgment compared to what they would expect in their home country. Although greeting strangers is more common in their home country, the student reflected about the cultural difference in Canada and how they could learn about the new social norms while maintaining their cultural authenticity.
- Another student reflected on a critical conversation in their Art Theory class exploring “what is art” where they challenged the idea of art to extend past professional or Eurocentric pieces. Recalling a pair of earrings gifted to the student from an artist friend back home, they emphasized that art does not need to be complex or shown in galleries but rather something that reflects the cultural moments in people’s daily life.

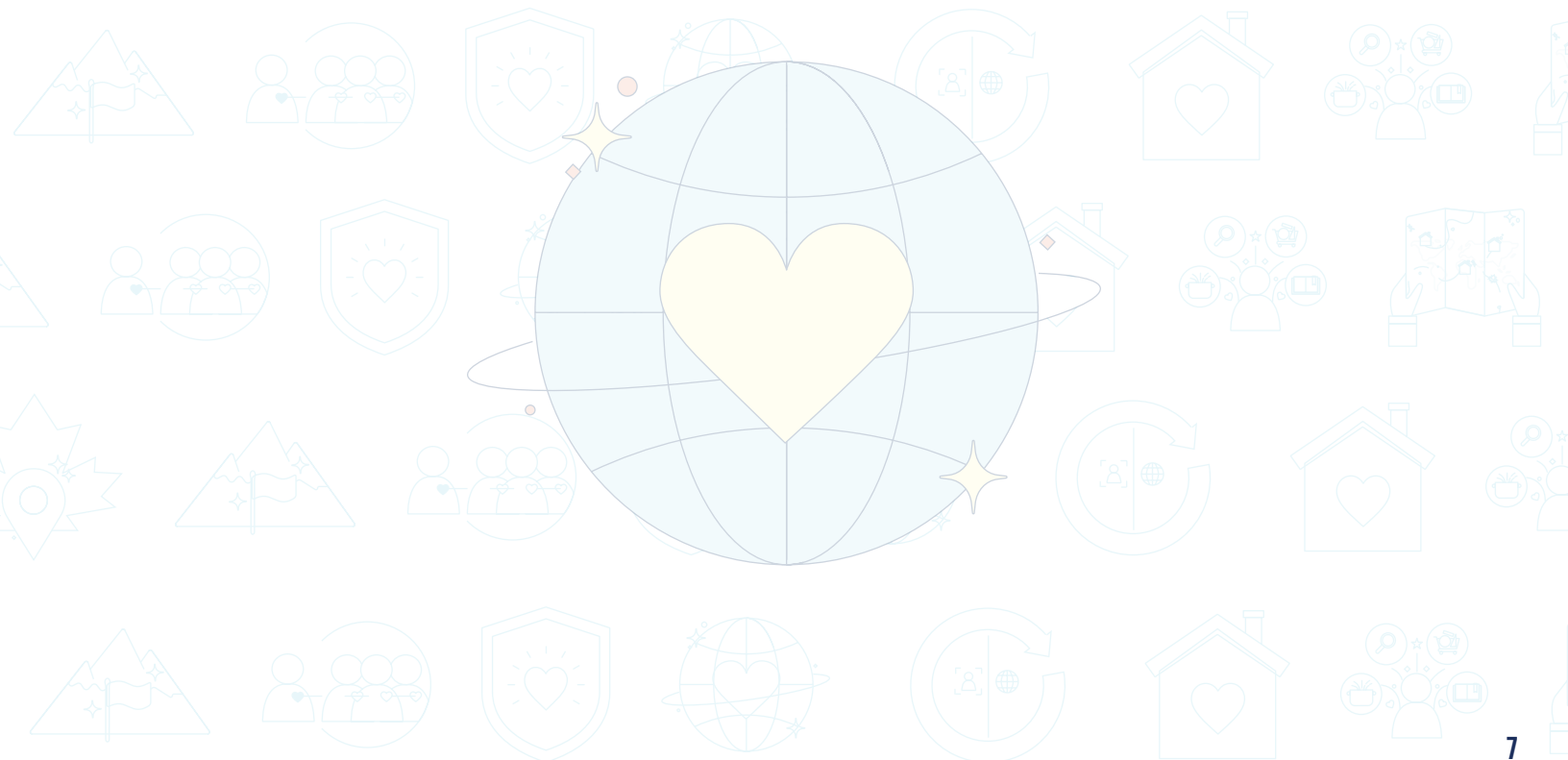
# Expanding Identity as a Global Citizen



## Establishing Independence

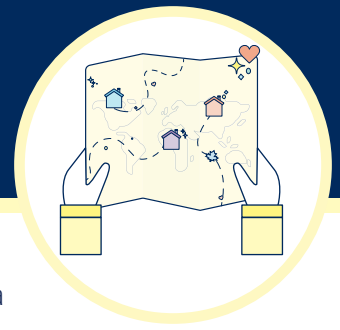
International students shared they want to **feel confident and challenge their understanding of what they are capable of** as they establish independence and self-efficacy. Students shared how building independence in a new place inspired them to take agency, exploring opportunities and perspectives beyond their current understandings and values.

- One student felt the normalized career path for their field of interest did not align with their learning style and career goals. Through choosing to study abroad, the student felt empowered to defy social norms and pursue an independently crafted vision of their future career.
- Another student felt studying abroad allowed them to step out of a self-imposed limitation they had around their aspirations and ambitions. By pursuing an international study experience, the student could do whatever they wanted and be whoever they wanted.
- One student chose to attend U of T because their program of study offered specializations that were more appealing to their interests than similar programs offered in universities in their home country. The student explained how they could imagine being fulfilled in their chosen fields when provided with the opportunity to pursue an individualized academic experience.





# What is Home?



This theme plays with the idea of home in three ways - where one comes from (or one's home of origin), the temporary idea of making a home as a student at U of T for a time, and the ambiguous and unknown concept of what and where home will be in the future. Students shared ideas around what it really means to be a global citizen and the unique experience that they have when learning in a new home that is far from their home of origin.

## Where I am from

Students expressed the importance of **retaining a connection to their original home and their country of origin while transitioning to life in Canada**. Students felt that maintaining connections to aspects of their home country while in Canada helped make their transition feel meaningful and comforting. Students reported how sharing aspects of their culture with their new friends and community was important to adjusting to life in Canada and building a unique experience that integrates their home connections with their new Canadian ones.

- One student expressed that wearing clothing from their culture was a way to share their perspectives and background with others. The student felt that when they took the time to share their culture, others felt confident enough to share their backgrounds and stories with them.
- Another student expressed their eagerness to meet people from diverse cultures because meeting people from around the world is one of their favourite parts about living in their home country. The student shared excitement to expand their knowledge on how different cultural perspectives compare to theirs and try new dishes.

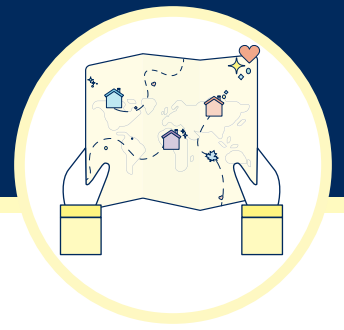
## Creating Home at U of T

While settling into U of T, **students experienced tension between homesickness and excitement** about creating a new life while studying in Canada. Students expressed feeling destabilized and missing their families back at home while also feeling eager to establish their new home. Making Canada feel like home was gradual and complex for students. Once new routines were established and communities built, students started to embrace a new normal. When students started to **feel at home at U of T, they expressed confidence and excitement to engage** in new opportunities.

- One student who was nervous and sad about leaving their family shared that hearing “welcome home” from their residence dons and residence mates made them feel warm and enthusiastic about engaging with the community and adjusting to their new life in Canada.
- Another student described how hosting a Friendsgiving meal with their roommates fostered a deeper connection among them. The student, who previously felt anxious about being alone, was grateful to share and learn about their roommates' culture by sharing foods from their hometowns. Although they missed home, they created their new ‘home’ here by cooking with their friends and celebrating their cultures together.
- One student shared their eagerness to join various clubs at U of T to continue engaging in similar hobbies and activities they enjoyed participating in at home. After arriving in Canada, the student appreciated the experience of attending a dance club where they made friends with people with similar interests and indicated they had no trouble calling Canada their new home.



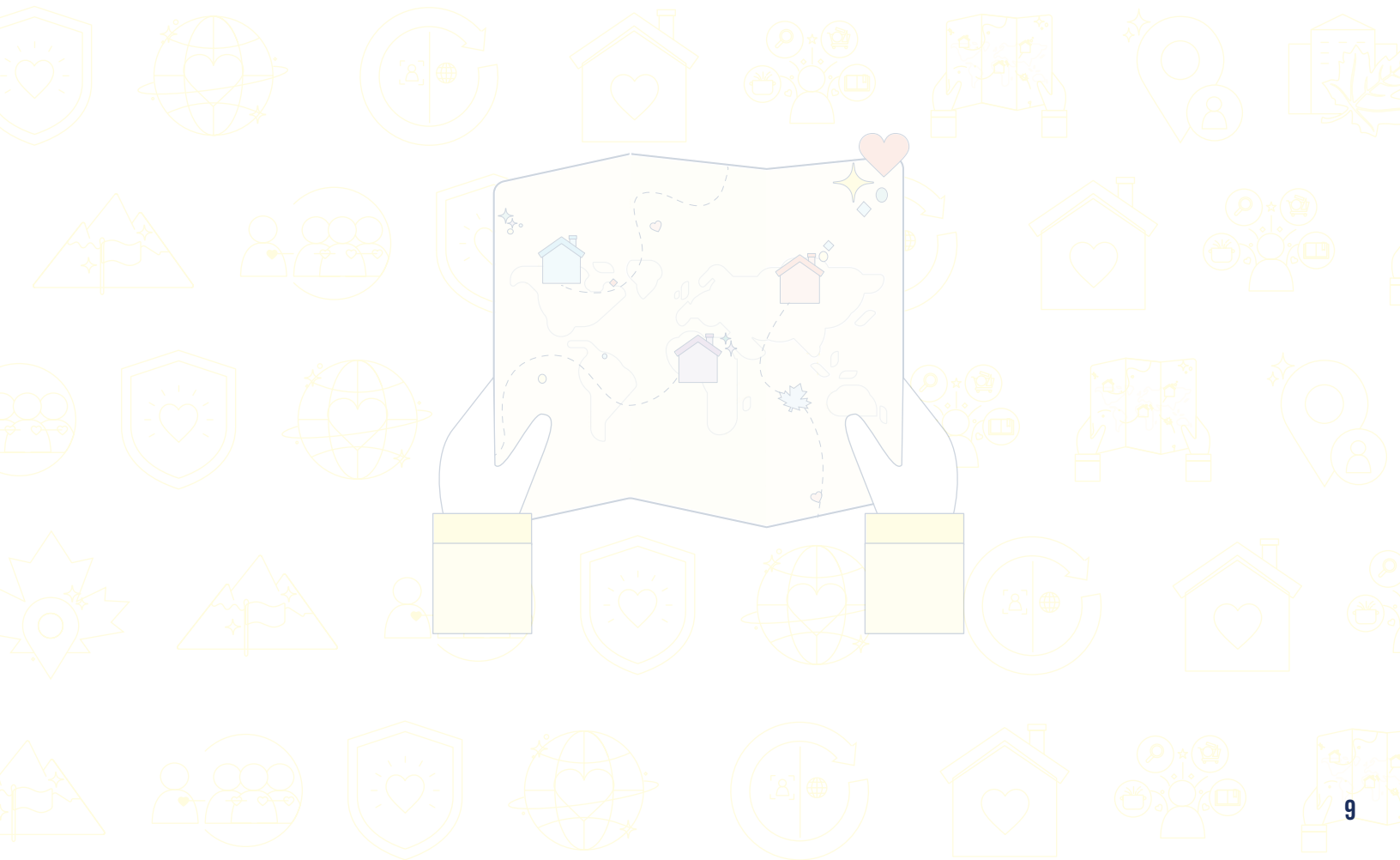
# What is Home?



## My Future Home?

Students expressed the importance of **exploring their aspirations and goals while studying abroad**. Students shared feeling excited to study in a new place because they could be open-minded to new opportunities. In some cases, feeling settled in Canada contributed to the students' motivation to challenge what their future could be like and feel confident in their success wherever they go. The experience students gained in the transition to setting up a new home at U of T **built confidence for the possibility of creating a new home anywhere in the world**, opening their minds to many future possibilities.

- One student described knowing they would miss their family while studying in Canada but emphasized their determination to change their hometown's healthcare landscape after the pandemic's disastrous impact. The student expressed a sense of pride in having been accepted to their program and was eager to use what they learned to eventually make an impact globally.
- Another student spoke of the opportunities to pursue their dream career in large metropolitan cities. The student was excited about future possibilities that urban cities offer in their chosen field.
- One student always dreamed of studying abroad because of the opportunities available to them in North America in their highly specialized field. Having attended an international high school, the student felt prepared for higher education abroad and expressed excitement about future career possibilities beyond university.



# Conclusion

In conclusion, international students are incredibly valuable to the University of Toronto, coming from diverse and unique backgrounds and perspectives. International students are a source of strength and capacity for the university, contributing new experiences to challenge and integrate existing knowledge systems in unique and exciting ways. While international students are eager to engage in new environments and explore beyond their home countries, they face challenges navigating culture shock and transitioning into a new chapter in their lives. We found that students explored what it means to become a global citizen and how to create the idea of home in unique and impactful ways that inspire them to accept change and contribute to the global perspective. **The future of the University of Toronto increasingly welcomes diverse global perspectives that defy current boundaries of knowledge.**

We hope the findings from this project will contribute to the University of Toronto's understanding of the needs of international students.



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