



# Learning Shock: An International Student Experience

## What is Learning Shock?

Learning shock (also known as academic shock) can occur when a student is exposed to an unfamiliar learning environment and teaching methods. The learning methods that they have established in the past may not be applicable to or work with the new approaches. Students may feel frustrated, confused, and anxious at the disorienting cues and conflicting expectations that are particular to learning shock.

Learning shock ties closely with culture shock as some of the feelings that arise are similar. However, international students are not the only demographic who can experience learning shock. Secondary students entering post-secondary schools, mature students, first-generation students as well as students transitioning from online learning to in-person learning since the COVID-19 pandemic can all experience forms of learning shock.

Addressing student learning shock is important as it can deter students from learning, and impact their confidence, their sense of purpose, and their relationship with their fellow peers and professors. If approached with the right mindset, learning shock can be a way to enhance learning, step outside of comfort zones, and be an enriching experience to navigate.

## Culture and Learning

International students from various parts of the world may be used to different approaches to teaching and learning.



**In some non-Western cultures, passive learning, where students are guided mainly by their professors in a lecture-based lesson, is the norm. Professors are the authority on the subject and are not questioned on the topic they are presenting, nor are the students asked for input.**



**Rote memorization and reproduction of the learning material are also valued in a passive classroom, as opposed to the critical thinking, creativity, or synthesis that is required of students in Canadian classes.**



**The types of assessments used in post-secondary institutions in Canada (such as online quizzes or “bell-ringers”- a type of timed lab exam with multiple stations) can also be strange or daunting for some students who are used to more traditional methods (pen and paper exams).**



Western student-professor relationships can be informal and encourage free discussion, while in some cultures, they are regarded with utmost respect and formality as they are authority figures.



For some international students, learning can be more independent and less collaborative compared to learning in their home country.



Switching between online and in-person learning can be disorienting even for a domestic student, but it is an additional instability to navigate for international students on top of the other challenges they may face.

## Supporting International Students

- ✓ Ensure that international students are aware of the learning resources available through their school libraries, as well as student accessibility services.
- ✓ Include an introduction to teaching methods and style during first-year orientation.
- ✓ Normalize the use of campus services such as accessibility services, counselling, or health services, as many international students are hesitant to use them.
- ✓ Offer digital supports for students and ensure that their technologies and devices can support required software.
- ✓ Offer peer-support options with domestic students or upper-year international students within the first year to help the transition.
- ✓ Faculty should be reminded to provide a thorough introduction to the course, including how it will be assessed and examples of what is expected from students, along with available information on online course platforms for accessibility.
- ✓ Ensure that faculty and teaching assistants take a culturally responsive approach to teaching and grading where students' experiences are considered in course expectations instead of making judgements about them.

## Resources

[A video on Cultures and Learning](#)

[A guide for faculty and teaching staff on Cultural Variation in the Classroom by Carnegie Mellon University](#)

[Check assumptions on the learning styles of students with this quiz](#)

[The Teaching International Students Project in the UK provides ideas and resources to better support international students in their learning](#)