

Strong Start to Supervision: An International Student Companion Guide

Preamble

Graduate Studies at York University welcomes students from all over the world, adding to the richness of graduate research and scholarship. International graduate students are responsible for the full and timely completion of their degree's milestones, requiring independent learning and collaboration with their supervisor. They must engage fully with their studies, meet deadlines, and maintain open communication. In support of this, graduate supervisors are expected to provide mentorship, guidance, and timely feedback on the student's work. When working with an International graduate student, there are added layers requiring empathy and cultural competence.

The **Strong Start to Supervision: An International Student Companion Guide** aims to bring awareness to the unique aspects of the International graduate student experience while fostering open dialogue between supervisor and student. It is offered as a companion to the [Strong Start to Supervision Checklist](#) for supervisors. The Companion Guide is structured around the phases that International graduate students follow from pre-arrival to pre-graduation in order to provide the supervisor with a complete picture of their experiences.

<p>In each phase, we have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ what students are managing▶ links to sites and resources to support supervisors and for supervisors to help students▶ what supervisors can do and say with suggested phrases and questions to use either in-person or via email when necessary to provide the student time to craft a response	<p>As a communication tool, the Companion Guide can help with the following :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ clarifying roles and programmatic milestones▶ proactively addressing potential mismatches in expectations and responsibilities▶ encouraging empathetic, regular communication ensuring both parties understand their roles, program expectations, working styles, wellness and communication
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Working through this guide can support the acknowledgment and shared understandings of cultural differences and commonalities integrated into the supervision process, leading to more effective, inclusive, and supportive experiences that are grounded in best practices for interculturally competent supervision.

The **Strong Start to Supervision: An International Student Companion Guide** can be reviewed annually along with the [Strong Start to Supervision Checklist](#) at the beginning of the student-supervisor relationship and be revisited periodically to discuss additional items that become relevant, especially during significant changes in circumstances or committee membership.

Pre-Arrival: Admission to Acceptance

International graduate students in this phase are managing:

- › Getting to know Toronto: housing, diverse [communities](#)
- › [Immigration preparation](#): visa requirements, study permit applications, passport information and requirements
- › [Housing and accommodation](#): applying to live on/off campus, key dates
- › [Financial literacy](#): [expectations](#), tuition, living, [budgeting](#), [scholarships](#), [awards](#), [bursaries](#), financial aid

Graduate programs may need to:

- › Navigate administrative complexities related to the International student's visa status and immigration regulations
- › View [study permit conditions](#)
- › View [study in Canada as an International student](#)
- › View [funding and relevant scholarships](#) and [funding packages](#)
- › Provide information about [housing services](#)
- › Provide the [Incoming Students Checklist](#)

Pre-Arrival: Acceptance to Enrollment

International graduate students in this phase are managing:

- › [Studying in Canada](#): preparing for the Canadian classroom; [academic integrity](#); library resources; defining labs, tutorials, campus terminology; course enrollment; navigating the REM, technology and terminology; building a timetable
- › [Travelling to Canada](#): [YYZ to YorkU Guide](#); documents to prepare, [health insurance](#)
- › [Living in Canada](#): weather and climate; transportation; cell phone needs; food; and healthcare
- › [Financial literacy](#): how to pay tuition, [setting up a Canadian bank account](#); transferring money
- › [Community building](#): learning about the existing York graduate community and peers

Pre-Arrival: Enrollment to Arrival

International graduate students in this phase are managing:

- › YorkU navigation: campus tours; [York International Office](#); getting a [YorkU card](#)
- › [Safety](#) at YorkU: scam protection; security supports and services; police relations
- › Travelling to Canada: [packing essentials](#) and documents; Canada border expectations; family and parent travel information; [YYZ to YorkU Guide](#)
- › [Orientation](#): [graduate orientation](#); how to register; watch [the orientation introduction](#)
- › Family support: managing expectations; communication

Arrival and Transition In: Acculturation

International graduate students in this phase are managing:

- › [Staying healthy](#): introduction to [wellness](#); [UHIP](#) and extended health
- › [Community building](#): [meeting new people](#); getting involved; maintaining faith
- › Personal essentials: food and grocery; navigating Toronto and YorkU; fashion and culture
- › Potentially extreme financial stresses; [cost of living](#); [budgeting](#)
- › [Safety](#) at YorkU, in Toronto and in Canada
- › Family [support](#)

What Supervisors Can Do and Say

Culture

- › Be aware of cultural adjustment and homesickness. International graduate students often experience culture shock and difficulties adapting to a new environment, impacting their academic performance and requiring sensitivity and support from supervisors.
- › Be flexible and adapt supervisory styles to meet the unique needs of individual International graduate students, considering their cultural backgrounds and experiences.
- › Actively and empathetically listen to International graduate students' experiences

with cultural challenges and validate their feelings without judgement.

- › Educate yourself on cultural norms, traditions and experiences to contextualize your International graduate student's behaviours, concerns and perspectives in supervision and to understand the effect on their learning and professional development.
- › Be informed about systemic issues related to finances, race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity that might affect your International graduate students and prepare to share relevant resources with them and have conversations about culture and inclusion.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “Let's discuss your preferred learning style. Do you work best independently, or do you prefer more structured guidance?”
- › “I'd like to share my supervisory approach with you. I tend to be...”

Communication

- › Encourage open dialogue and foster trust.
- › Schedule regular meeting times to provide ongoing feedback and support.
- › Initiate discussions to understand the International graduate student's preferred learning style, acknowledging that cultural differences may influence how learning and feedback are approached.
- › Revisit discussions periodically and reassess the effectiveness of the current supervisory approach as International graduate students may need different levels of support as they adjust to living and studying in Canada.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “I value your perspectives and experiences and want to create space for open discussion.”
- › “Let's set up regular check-ins to discuss your progress. How often would you feel comfortable meeting—weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly?”
- › “I understand that adjusting to a new academic system can be challenging. Let's discuss how you prefer to learn. Do you work best independently, or do you prefer more structured guidance?”

Support

- › Strive to create an environment where International graduate students feel comfortable expressing thoughts and feelings. This may involve establishing clear communication protocols and demonstrating respect for the individual.
- › Be aware of potentially extreme financial stresses many International students face .
- › Reinforcement of expectations may be beneficial especially where English is a second language.
- › Be aware that International graduate students may lack established support networks, placing a heavier reliance on their supervisors for guidance and mentoring.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “If you’re facing challenges such as adjusting to life here, there are resources I can connect you with at York.”
- › “I know that academic expectations here might differ from what you are used to. If anything feels unclear or unfamiliar, please let me know so I can help clarify.”
- › “Do you feel you’re getting the right level of support and feedback? If not, what can be improved?”
- › “I appreciate your hard work on (a specific task). Here’s what I think you did well, and here is an area to focus on improving.”

Arrival and Transition In: First Year Experience

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › In partnership with York International, for the first 6 weeks, International students are involved with:
 - week 1 orientation
 - week 2 graduate settlement needs
 - week 3 wellness
 - week 4 transportation
 - week 5 language confidence
 - week 6 getting involved on campus

- Academic prep: graduate classroom/lab expectations; academic support
- All incoming graduate students are required to complete the Faculty of Graduate Studies Academic Integrity Module through the link that is exclusively provided to them from gsaahc@yorku.ca, with the exception of master's students in the Schulich School of Business*. Progression beyond the first term of study is not possible until this requirement has been met. You may advise them to contact gsaahc@yorku.ca if they need any assistance or encounter any issues. *Master's students in the Schulich School of Business shall follow the procedures governing Academic Honesty Modules established in the Schulich School of Business.
- Language confidence: written and oral communication with [graduate peers](#), faculty and supervisors
- Personal essentials: [living with roommates](#); cooking
- Financial literacy and aid: understanding their [graduate funding package](#); [budgeting](#); [scholarships, awards and bursaries](#)
- [Types of Work Performed by Graduate Students](#); the differences between TA, GA and RA
- [Community building](#): [getting involved on campus](#); building relationships outside the classroom; leadership building; getting involved in graduate community

What Supervisors Can Do And Say

Culture

- Be aware of difficulties understanding local norms and customs. Navigating social customs, workplace etiquette, and administrative procedures can be challenging for International graduate students and requires patience and understanding.
- Supervisors may adjust communication styles to meet the cultural needs of International graduate students. For example, be mindful of indirect vs direct communication styles, levels of formality, and nonverbal cues as these vary significantly across cultures. Offer clarification when needed to avoid misunderstandings and frustration.
- Supervisors may be proactive by initiating discussions about culture, diversity and inclusion and creating a space for International graduate students to share.
- Be mindful of power differentials. In some cultures, students may hesitate to challenge authority figures. Reassure them that their self-directedness and input is valued.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › "To ensure effective communication, let's discuss your preferred communication style. I want to be mindful of cultural differences and adapt my approach accordingly. What works best for you?"
- › "I'm interested in learning about your prior academic experiences. Understanding your background will help me tailor my support to your needs and expectations."
- › "I've noticed you seem to work well with [specific approach]. Is this accurate, or would you prefer we try a different approach?"
- › "Your perspective is important, so please feel free to share your thoughts."
- › "For draft feedback, I usually need [X] weeks."

Conflict

- › Create space by being approachable and nonjudgmental during discussions.
- › Be aware of cultural differences that may affect how International graduate students express disagreement (e.g., indirect communication styles).
- › Strive to reduce conflict through regular, empathetic and open communication with International graduate students.
- › Be aware of the [FGS Conflict Resolution Reparative Approach](#).
- › Refer to the [Quick Tips for Difficult Conversations](#).

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › "Conflicts can happen in any working relationship including graduate supervision. If something isn't working for you, please bring it up so we can address it together."
- › "I value open communication. If there's anything unclear or concerning, let's talk about it early before it becomes a bigger issue."
- › "If you ever feel uncomfortable bringing concerns directly to me, you can always reach out to the Graduate Program Director."

Communication and Language

- › Be aware that some International graduate students may have language barriers. Even with proficiency in English, nuances of language, idioms, and slang can create communication difficulties. This can impact the clarity of feedback, instructions and comprehension.

- › Encourage the use of translation tools when needed. Certain words and concepts are often not directly translatable between languages which can limit some International graduate students' ability to fully express themselves in English.
- › Schedule regular check-in meetings (scheduled calendar invites), use a variety of communication methods (e.g., email, in-person meetings, Zoom) to show a commitment to clear communication.
- › Acknowledge receipt of emails if you need more time to respond fully.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “Let’s revisit our discussion about learning styles and supervisory approaches. Has anything changed since we last talked about this?”
- › “If I’m unavailable for an extended period, I’ll let you know in advance and suggest alternatives for support.”
- › “Here are some resources like the [YorkU writing centre](#), the YorkU [ESL Open Learning Centre](#), [SPARK at York](#) and [external writing help](#) that you may find helpful.
- › “How do you prefer to communicate—email, in-person meetings, or online platforms?”
- › “I aim to respond to emails within [X] days. If it’s urgent, please let me know in the subject line or follow up if I haven’t replied.”

Support

- › Offer referrals to campus support and financial services and check-in regularly to show concern and care.
- › Offer information about [accommodations](#) at YorkU for International graduate students.
- › Normalize seeking external support by framing it as part of the academic journey.
- › Introduce the International graduate student to other people who can offer mentorship, friendship or professional guidance.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “It’s important that you feel supported. Here are some university resources that might help if challenges arise.”
- › “Here are some [campus groups and clubs](#) and [recreation activities](#) you may be interested in.”
- › “Here are links to [Student Accessibility Services](#), [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#), [Student Counselling, Health and Wellbeing](#) and the [Office of the Ombudsperson](#) and the [International student emergency bursary](#) at YorkU.

Transition Through: Academic Support

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Learning skills: [Keele](#), [Glendon](#), [Markham](#) Libraries; essay writing skills; learning skills and styles; research and lab skills; study skills; numeracy skills(SNACK)
- › Language confidence
- › University resources: accessibility needs
- › Studying in Canada: academic integrity; terminology; cultural curriculum differences and commonalities
- › Building relationships with graduate professors; benefits of office hours

What Supervisors Can Do and Say

Culture

- › Be aware of cultural differences in work ethic and collaboration as concepts of teamwork, individual contributions, deadlines and work-life balance may differ.
- › Be aware of academic expectations and approaches. International graduate students may have been educated in systems with different grading scales, teaching methods, and research expectations, requiring adjustments in supervision strategies.
- › Recognize and address power imbalances in the supervisory relationship especially those related to cultural identity by fostering an environment of collaboration and mutual respect.
- › Read books and articles about cultures represented among your International graduate students.
- › Attend workshops or training on cultural competence.
- › Ensure International graduate students from all cultural backgrounds feel seen, heard and supported in their academic and professional growth.
- › Regularly engage in self-reflection about your own cultural competence, identifying areas for improvement and committing to continuous learning.
- › Engage in conversations or seek mentoring with colleagues experienced in diversity, informed supervision and teaching.

- › Consult resources such as [Intellectual Property and Graduate Education](#) and the [Intellectual Property Checklist](#) for Graduate Students and Graduate Supervisors.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “I’m interested in learning about your prior academic experiences. Understanding your background will help me tailor my support to your needs and expectations.”
- › “Let’s review YorkU’s [Academic Integrity](#) expectations and resources together.”
- › “How about we review [GenAI at York](#) together and feel free to ask questions about it.”
- › “After you’ve completed the mandatory FGS [Academic Integrity Modules](#), let’s discuss some of the concepts such as plagiarism, together. What does plagiarism mean to you?”
- › “I want to make sure we are clear on [Intellectual Property](#) issues. Let’s discuss what some of those might be.”

Communication and Feedback

- › Encourage International graduate students to voice concerns or feedback regarding supervision without fear of repercussions, emphasizing a partnership approach.
- › Providing constructive criticism in a culturally sensitive way requires careful consideration and may require different approaches than with domestic students.
- › Encourage International graduate students to reflect on how their cultural identity influences their academic/creative work and interactions with others and discuss strategies for navigating these complexities.
- › Provide culturally appropriate feedback by considering the International graduate student’s background and tailor the delivery to ensure it is constructive and respectful. The direct, argumentative or analytical nature of Western academic feedback is not universal and may have unintentionally negative repercussions.
- › Offer choices in feedback delivery and provide oral and written feedback with time for reflection and clarifying questions.

- › Ensure that feedback is specific and actionable and avoid generalizations. It can be difficult for International students to separate criticism of research from criticism of grammar, style and vocabulary used.

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › "I want to provide you with feedback that is constructive and helpful. Is there a particular way you prefer to receive feedback?"
- › "What approach to feedback would you find most helpful?"
- › "The reasonable expectation to receive feedback from me or your committee on submitted work is normally up to 15 business days and depends on the size of the document and timing of submission."
- › "Let's set up regular check-ins to discuss your progress. How often would you feel comfortable meeting—weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly?"
- › "Here is a [Meeting Agenda template](#) and a [Meeting Notes template](#) that we can use together."

Support

- › Explain the importance of co-creating an [Individualized Development Plan](#) (IDP) to help the student identify and develop goals during their studies and in their future professional life.
- › Discuss the International graduate student's [funding sources](#) and any associated expectations.
- › Review the availability of [scholarships and awards](#) and what the student's and supervisor's roles are attached to these opportunities.
- › Provide information about [YorkU libraries](#) and [writing skills](#).
- › Share the [Student Papers and Academic Research Kit](#) (SPARK).

Transition Through: Community Engagement

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Cultural development: cross-cultural education; significant holiday celebrations; connecting with local organizations; community cultural support
- › Community building: [getting involved on campus](#); [clubs for graduate students](#)
- › Canadian culture: living in Toronto; immersing in Canadian culture

What Supervisors Can Do

- › Be open to creating connections between domestic and International students by organizing or finding intercultural workshops or cross-cultural celebration events on campus through student associations.
- › Recognize and celebrate cultural holidays. Adapt expectations around significant cultural periods, inviting International graduate students to advise you of these ahead of time.
- › Provide information for campus and local cultural centres or community groups.
- › Encourage and assist, if necessary, with setting up peer mentoring initiatives.
- › Perhaps pair International graduate students with senior students to help navigate graduate studies and life in Canada if not done earlier in the supervisory journey.

Transition Through: Wellness

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Mental health: [education](#); stigma reduction; [healthcare navigation](#)
- › Crisis support: community and cultural support; how and when to ask for help
- › Physical health: education; healthcare navigation
- › Maintaining connection: holiday breaks; staying connected with loved ones
- › Financial literacy and financial aid

What Supervisors Can Do and Say

- › Be aware of, discuss and encourage the importance of work-life balance for International graduate students.
- › Be aware of the rights of International graduate students to take time off.
- › Co-create an inclusive teaching and learning environment within the academic space and supervisory relationship.
- › Review and practice the FGS approaches to [Supportive Listening](#).

- › Acquaint yourself with the [Supporting Graduate Students in Distress: A Response Guide for Supervisors](#) for more information.
- › Share mental health resources if appropriate, including [Graduate Wellness and Counselling Services](#).
- › Ensure the International graduate student is staying connected with you, members of the supervisory committee members and with peers.
- › Recognize there may be a need for the International graduate student to register with [Student Accessibility Services](#).

Suggested Questions and Statements

- › “How are you doing?”
- › “Is there something you would like help with? May I share some resources to support or help you?”
- › “I am going to share with you the contact information for [the Graduate Student Wellness Services](#) at FGS.”
- › “Here is the contact information for the [Student Counselling Health and Wellbeing](#) at YorkU that offer a range of health and wellbeing services.”

Transition Through: Career Experiences

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Personal branding: transferable and [scholarly skills](#); marketing yourself; leveraging skills
- › Canadian work context: working in Canada eligibility and immigration; navigating a new work system, norms and culture
- › [Career education](#): on and off [campus job education](#)
- › [Leadership development](#): experiential learning; volunteer education
- › [Professional development](#): accessing [Career Education Development](#); aligning academics with career paths
- › [Mentorship](#): finding a mentor

What Supervisors Can Do

- › Explain the necessity to build academic skills related to future career readiness.
- › Stay up-to-date on FGS [Graduate and Postdoctoral Professional Skills](#) (GPPS) offerings and share with International graduate students.
- › Provide International graduate students with assistance to seek out and avail themselves for academic, personal and professional growth.
- › Share the YorkU [Organized Research Units](#) (ORU).
- › Share that [Mitacs](#) offers free workshops taught by professionals which are structured around cultivating and improving important professional skills.
- › Host or organize career path panels.
- › Inform International graduate students about networking events or other opportunities.

Transition Through: Pre-Graduation

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Career education: workplace culture and expectations
- › Professional development: employer networking; [alumni mentorship](#); job shadowing
- › Personal branding: professionalizing their image

What Supervisors Can Do

- › Discuss and share experiences about Canadian [workplace culture](#) and expectations.
- › Share how International graduate students can [create LinkedIn profiles](#).
- › Introduce International graduate students to alumni networks or alumni that work in industries of interest to them.
- › Share how International graduate students can [network in person](#) and [connect with colleagues online](#).

- › Share images of and discuss [types of attire](#) in Canada. Consult the Career Centre's guide to [dress for success](#).

Transition Through: Career Foundations

International Graduate Students in this phase are managing:

- › Immigration prep: path to [permanent residency](#) (PR); [Post-graduation Work Permit](#) (PGWP)
- › Career education: Canadian interviews; [interview support](#)
- › Industry insights: negotiating salaries; industry hiring practices and timelines

What Supervisors Can Do

- › Share information about [workplace rights](#) in Canada and how to proactively deal with violations.
- › Connect International graduate students with the [YorkU immigration specialist](#) for information sessions and perhaps workshops on PR pathways and PGWP eligibility.
- › Assist graduate programs to arrange [mock interview sessions](#) and role-playing exercises in partnership with the YorkU Career Centre.
- › Inform International graduate students of Canadian interview norms e.g.: behavioural interviews, and the STAR Method or [watch](#) the STAR Interview Method Explained.
- › Discuss [industry trends](#) and sector-specific recruitment practices relevant to the International graduate student's field.
- › Field questions around salary negotiation expectations and strategies.