

Teaching International Students

Supporting Success Across Cultures and Languages

Purpose: International students enrich our classrooms with diverse perspectives, experiences, and questions—but they may also face unique challenges navigating new academic expectations. As an instructor, you can support these students by making expectations explicit, clarifying the “hidden curriculum” of U.S. higher education, and offering strategies to address language and cultural differences.

1. Understand and Address Cultural Differences in Academic Norms

a. Grading

In some systems, only a select few earn top marks and most students receive average grades. Others expect a wide range of grades for demonstrated effort or improvement. Explain your grading system, what “A” work looks like, and how assessments are structured in your class.

b. Participation

Expectations for class participation differ greatly. In many cultures, students are taught to listen quietly and only speak when called on. Make your participation expectations explicit, and consider multiple ways to contribute: written, verbal, live, or asynchronous.

c. Originality vs. Correctness

Some international students come from traditions that value learning and repeating established knowledge over proposing original ideas. In contrast, many U.S. classrooms prioritize critical thinking, argumentation, and unique viewpoints. Explain clearly when you want students to synthesize, critique, or create, clarifying that their own ideas are valued, even if they differ from “the textbook answer.”

2. Navigate Language and Communication Challenges

1. Multilingual Learners

Many international students are studying in their second (or third, or more) language. Allow additional time for reading or responding, and provide written copies of key instructions or prompts.

2. Allow Support Tools

Unless your assignment specifically assesses language mechanics, permit students to use Grammarly or similar editing software. These tools can help support clearer communication.

3. Demystify Academic Integrity & Citation

a. Citation Practices

In some contexts, memorization and reuse of published ideas (often without citation) are standard. Don't assume familiarity with U.S.-style citation practices; make sure they have access to the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#).

b. Plagiarism Education

Discuss not only what counts as plagiarism, but why academic integrity is emphasized. If possible, use low-stakes assignments to practice paraphrasing, summarizing, and citation. This is often helpful for American students as well.

4. Communicate Expectations Explicitly and Often

a. Assignment Clarity

Provide rubrics, samples, and detailed instructions for major assignments. State clearly when you expect original arguments or creative work, and what "participation" looks like in your context.

b. Feedback

Offer detailed, actionable, and gentle feedback especially early in the term so students can adjust to your standards.

c. Build a Welcoming Community

Encourage Peer Support: Create buddy systems or small groups to foster connections.

d. Informal Check-Ins

Use brief after-class check-ins or one-on-one meetings to ask how international students are experiencing the coursework and what support they may need.

5. Direct Students to Resources

- a.** There are links to a number of available resources (Writing Center, Math Question Center, and tutoring) here:

<https://extension.harvard.edu/student-experience/academic-support>

- b.** Find important resources specifically for international students at the [Harvard International Office](#).

Instructor Planning Guide

1. Cultural Expectations

Have I explained how grading and participation work in my course?

2. Communication & Language

Have I provided clear, accessible instructions and ensured support for multilingual learners?

3. Academic Integrity

Have I clearly introduced citation practices and explained why they matter?

4. Transparency & Feedback

Have I shared models and rubrics, and given early, helpful feedback?

5. Classroom Community

Have I created opportunities for international and domestic students to connect?

6. Support Resources

Have I directed students to academic and international student support services?

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I explained grading criteria, expectations for “A” work, and how effort and originality are assessed.
- ☐ I clearly defined how participation would be graded.
- ☐ I allowed tools like Grammarly unless assessing grammar or mechanics.
- ☐ I taught U.S. citation norms explicitly and shared resources such as the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#).
- ☐ I used low-stakes assignments to practice paraphrasing, summarizing, and citation.
- ☐ I provided rubrics or models to clarify assignment expectations.
- ☐ I gave constructive and culturally sensitive feedback early in the course.
- ☐ I created opportunities for peer interaction and community-building among international and domestic students.
- ☐ I conducted informal check-ins to understand student needs and course experience.

Resources

- ☐ I shared links to academic and international student support resources:
 - [Academic Support Services](#) (For Harvard DCE students)
 - [Harvard International Office](#) (For international students University-wide)