First Things First:  
Welcoming new international graduate students.

1. **Before arrival:** Graduate students are excited about beginning this new phase of their lives; international students may be even more excited if this also means learning in a new country. We are finding that new students have more energy and time to learn about SFU **in advance of their arrival.** **Encourage them to do some of the following:**

1.a. Do the **Virtual Orientation** on the DGS Website (https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/new_graduate_students/before_you_arrive/orientation.html) and sign up for in-person **Orientation.** There are three that may apply to your new students: the GSS Orientation conference (run with DGS) that covers a lot of the most immediate issues that arise for students such as work permits, financial aid, health benefits, establishing a good relationship with their supervisor etc; International Orientation (run this year as a stand-alone orientation for international graduate students); Residence Orientation (if they are living in Hamilton Hall or Louis Riel House).

1.b. Join the incoming grad student Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/sfu2013/ and/or the grad students Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/sfugradstudies/. We are finding that the most committed and interested students start out on those sites, asking questions, making connections, building networks.

1.c. Get them connected to those who will be steering them through the program. Introduce all of your new graduate students to your graduate program assistant and impress them with the importance of this person in answering questions about the program, deadlines, norms and expectations around your unit. Let them know who is the Graduate Program Chair in your unit and what role the Chair plays. Let them know that there is a GSS Advocate and the SFU Ombuds Office is there to help if they run into difficulty at any point in their time at SFU. Finally, the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies (Students) is also available to help.

1.d. Can you connect them to a senior successful graduate student who may have some insights in the particular transition from their previous academic setting to SFU? Grad programmes report that implementing a ‘buddy system’ helps students make the switch to grad school and helps them build community.

1.e. There are a number of good guides for students who are new to the Canadian academic environment. Now is a good time for them to read up on Canada, academic life and ‘academic culture shock’. See: http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/publications/csigs_emanual.html; http://www.universityaffairs.ca/how-to-survive-your-first-year-of-graduate-
2. **Before arrival (for supervisors):**

   2.a. Check your assumptions: Recognize that many of our students have studied in multiple locations not just their home country. So many are fully aware that academic cultures vary from country to country, and from institution to institution; still they will need time to learn the particular culture here in Canada and at SFU. Be aware that they will take some time to acclimatize, likely 1-2 semesters. You may wonder, during this time, whether you made the right decision to admit them, but be patient. (and see below for suggestions during the first semesters).

   2.b. Review the resources that are available for international grad students and be prepared with suggestions when these seem warranted. Not all the students will need, for example, assistance with English, but if you see this as a problem for your student, then be ready to offer concrete suggestions such as the assistance that is available through the Library’s Student Commons ([http://www.lib.sfu.ca/slc/services/eal](http://www.lib.sfu.ca/slc/services/eal)). See our list of resources posted here: [http://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/current/international_students/student-support.html](http://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/current/international_students/student-support.html).

   2.c. Check your awareness: What role does culture play in our academic interactions? While we want to remain critical of cultural stereotypes, some general guidance around broad-based cultural norms can be helpful. Have a look at Nanda Dimitrov’s *Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures* ([http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/faculty_programs/pdf/PG_3_MentoringAcrossCultures.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/faculty_programs/pdf/PG_3_MentoringAcrossCultures.pdf)). Or her slides from her presentation at SFU in 2013: [https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/administrative-memos/MentoringAcrossCulturesMay2013.html](https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/administrative-memos/MentoringAcrossCulturesMay2013.html).

   2.d. Check your awareness: Do you share the often-unacknowledged assumption that international students are a lot of work? Our surveys do indicate that international graduate students meet more regularly with their supervisors than domestic students. But does this necessarily mean that they are ‘high maintenance’? Some emerging research suggests that many international graduate students already have the skills they need to succeed and that we have a critical role to play in helping them bring these out. Have a look at: Lisa Moores and Natalee Popaduik, “Positive Aspects of International Student Transitions: A Qualitative Study,” *Journal of College Student Development* 52(3)(May–June 2011). ([http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/journals/journal_of_college_student_development/v052/52.3.moores.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/journals/journal_of_college_student_development/v052/52.3.moores.html)).

3. **The big day: arriving in Canada.** Our students never forget their first day in Vancouver; their first experience of the SFU campus. What can you do to make sure these are good memories? What can you, your Graduate Program Chair, or your Graduate program assistant do to help your new student feel welcome. Can you be at
the airport when they arrive? Offer advice on Vancouver neighbourhoods, life in residence or on Burnaby Mountain? Help them navigate check-in at residence by making sure they’ll be able to get their room when they arrive? One student from Brazil was forever grateful to the graduate program assistant who steered her clear of a dodgy looking apartment building (the g.p.a. just did a drive by to check the place out) and set her on the right track to better accommodation.

4. Your first academic meeting: Expectations.

4.a. The nature of your relationship. We know that hierarchical relationships, like all normative relationships, vary across culture. Rather than assuming we know what that variation is, it might be better to ask these students about what such relationships look like at their previous institutions (remembering again, that our students may have studied in other places besides their home country). Get them to tell you what their expectations are and share yours. Do you want to be called by your first name? Are they used to that? Would that work for them? Do you hold the assumption that it is polite to allow women to go through a doorway first? What if your student, a woman, believes that higher ranking people go through the door first? Can you live with that? What culture are you working in? If you and your students share a non-Canadian culture, do you bring those norms into the student-supervisor relationship or do you both transition to Canadian norms (or a combination)? Is this patchwork of expectations recognizable to both of you? Can it be articulated and clarified?

4.b. SFU’s expectations: Work with your student to review SFU’s Student-Supervisor expectations document (see: https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dean-gradstudies/faculty/Expectations(Grid).pdf). This provides an opportunity for you both to understand what SFU expects of you but also how these expectations may bring into relief variation in the supervisory relationship across cultures and institutions.

4.c. Figuring out your own expectations: Then you might wish to use this tool to help stimulate discussion about what each of you expect in the nuts-and-bolts aspect of the supervisory relationship. See https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dean-gradstudies/faculty/Expectationsgraph.pdf.

4.d. Be prepared to come back to both these documents as your relationship develops and particularly over the next couple of semesters as your student comes to understand better the norms of academic Canadian culture in your discipline.

5. The coming semesters:

5.a. A word about department orientations: Many departments and departmental grad caucuses hold their own orientation and this is a really good idea. As you plan yours think about accessibility. Is everyone going to feel comfortable going to a pub, for example? being out after dark? travelling
by public transit? What food and beverage choices will you have at your event? And will any extra costs exclude those students who are waiting on student loans or their first TA paycheque?

5.b. Building Community: International students tell us that they find it very challenging to make meaningful connections with domestic students. New international students may feel unsure how to initiate new friendships with Canadian students and they are worried that their English is not up to the challenge. What can you do to help build community among your students? Lab socials? Cohort meetings that have a social aspect? A hike together on the local trails? Anything that brings your students together in a common activity will help international and domestic students build community together.

5.c. Patience and openness: The transition from undergraduate to graduate training is a daunting one, more so than our students expect especially if they have changed institutions. Moving from one country to another adds an additional layer of complexity and challenge for our international students. Our experience indicates that the first semester can be particularly tough. Facing an academic environment of total English immersion, students begin to wonder if they can handle it. We have learned that for many of our students, struggling with English triples the time it takes them to work through the material assigned to them in courses or in their research. Just learning how to navigate the public transit system, what to buy to put in the washer for laundry (why isn’t it called ‘washing powder’)?, how to find classrooms in the AQ can shake their confidence. Add to that homesickness, perhaps managing a long-distance relationship, or experiencing worry about family members far away, it is not surprising that some of our international graduate students do not perform as well as we (or they) expect in their first semester or two. But the literature, and our experience, demonstrates that they do meet our expectations following this period of adjustment. While your students may not want to talk to you about their worries, you can demonstrate your openness and your awareness of this transition period in a way that accepts what is today and demonstrates your confidence in them over time.