

## **Transcript: ONBOARDING NEW GRADUATE STUDENTS (Dr. Ali Shiri)**

ALI SHIRI: “Hello. My name is Ali Shiri, and I’m an associate dean in the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, and in this presentation I would like to share some tips and strategies for building rapport with students/supervisors who have not met in person, and also how to build a cohort of students who are remotely located. Given the Covid-19 situation, it is particularly important to maintain that line of communication between supervisors and students.

“Initiating and maintaining communication is key to establishing a friendly, supportive, and collegial relationship. Normally an introductory and welcome email to new students would be very useful, followed by a virtual face-to-face interaction, as an effective way for a supervisor to meet and talk with the student.

“This is particularly important for international students who are new to Canada, and for supervisors to articulate academic and cultural expectations and norms for the student.

“It is always a good idea to establish format, mode, and frequency of communication, and have a timeline for meetings and for providing feedback. You can use platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, BlueJeans or Skype, and ensure that there is an ongoing and scheduled set of meetings to maintain connection with students.

“Some instructors even have virtual office hours, which saves them time because, particularly if you have a large number of students, this would be an ideal kind of venue for advising students as a group.

“Forty percent of our graduate students are actually international, so this is particularly important. If you’re using Google Meet, for example, Google may not be available in certain countries, for example in Iran or China. So what else can you do?

“You can use other social media platforms and applications that are widely used in China, Iran and India, for example. WeChat, WhatsApp and also other platforms are very useful that they could use and connect, and they are free, and they are widely used in those countries.

“In general, using the University of Alberta learning management system called eClass would be preferable to other platforms for communicating and sharing content if you feel that’s something that you are familiar [with]. Depending on the number of graduate students, [and] whether you have course-based or thesis-based students, you can use different strategies.

“For example, in a fully online program on campus, we have been using BlueJeans as a teleconferencing, video conferencing system to hold virtual online real-time orientation sessions for all students, and the advantage is students can actually interact and ask questions.

“Usually those sessions would be recorded and later on, shared with students who are not able to make those meetings. So it is particularly important for students coming from different time zones and international students who are geographically dispersed.

“And in terms of building a graduate student cohort through remote learning and technologies at a distance, there are certain strategies. One big kind of factor in the whole online teaching and learning environment is to create an online community, so students can feel a sense of inclusion, being part of a team, or being part of a group. So this is particularly important for remotely located students.

“These could be synchronous or asynchronous. As I said before, eClass can provide some tools, technologies, and mechanisms for creating synchronous and asynchronous approaches. For example, discussion forums, collaborative tools, video conferencing, Screencasting, for example Stream2 within eClass you can use to record your lectures in advance, file sharing, and screen sharing, and content management tools, as well as mind mapping technologies are available.

“So, for example, if you have a group of thesis-based students, you can offer a virtual orientation on the research process and your supervision approach and style. For course-based students, you can hold periodic virtual advising and hanging out meetings, and this would be, again, useful for students who are located remotely.

“In terms of monitoring how engaged and interactive students are, we developed a tool in collaboration with IST on campus, called Learning Analytics, which is part of the eClass learning management system. You can actually monitor and measure how engaged students are, or how interactive they are, when it comes to course content, or if you have even set up a discussion, or have shared content using eClass, you can actually measure how often students have consulted various sources, digital learning objects, et cetera.

“So, to foster peer mentoring and support, basically, you need collaborative spaces and platforms. People use on campus Google Drive, Dropbox, among the common applications. There are some commercial applications like Asana which you can use to manage tasks, time, and projects. Google has recently introduced in June 2020, Currents, which is an application [that is] part of the Google suite application, and enables people to have meaningful discussions and interactions, post content, tag content, and also share thoughts and ideas using different platforms and devices.

“Another important element to consider when it comes to graduate student onboarding is the use of virtual library resources. You can advise students to attend the University of Alberta libraries virtual information literacy webinars, for example, to become more familiar with search techniques and search strategies. For example, how to conduct sophisticated searches within electronic books, electronic journals, digitized content and digital data repositories.

“This is particularly useful for international students with limited digital literacy skills, who may not have had extensive experience with searching within large digital libraries.

“Course instructors and supervisors can also request from the U of A libraries to incorporate digital information sources from the library into their courses or eClass site, and this ensures that students have seamless and unified access to library resources. Whether they are familiar with the kind of volume and the vastness of library resources or not, they would have access to top hand-picked selected disciplinary focused resources within your course.

“And finally, the Centre for Teaching and Learning on campus offers very useful support and tutorials for creating engaging learning environments.”