
INSIDE THE ITOJU MENTORING PROGRAM

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"Itoju is an opportunity to build the support I wish I had as an international student. Mentoring only scratches the surface of the challenges, but it's our step towards addressing them."

— Obakemi Rotimi-Fadipe, Co-lead, Itoju Mentoring Program



"This is deeply personal to me. I want to create what I needed when I was navigating life as a student in Canada."

— Mofi Badmos, Co-lead, Itoju Mentoring Program

Itoju Mentoring is a hybrid initiative that pairs new African international students with mentors who share similar backgrounds and have successfully navigated the Canadian education system. Itoju addresses the unique challenges faced by Black African international students in Canada through mentorship, a supportive community, and resource sharing. The program focuses on the interconnected challenges of migration, academics, and finances through a four-month curriculum centred on academic success, financial literacy, career planning, mental health, and cultural transition. Itoju aims to provide a supportive community and create a soft landing for African international students in Canada.

WHAT DOES 'ITOJU' MEAN?

Mofi: Itoju is a Yoruba word that means "care" or "to care for." Obakemi and I are both Yoruba and we wanted to honor our heritage by centering it in the name of our program. Care is also a deeply shared value for us, and it shapes everything we do as we design a program and build a community focused on transition, belonging, academic success, and wellbeing.

This focus on care is especially important because it's something that's often denied to our demographic, due to the politicization of Blackness and Africanness, and the systemic anti-Blackness embedded in institutions and systems across Canada. With Itoju, we want African international students to always know that they are seen, valued, and cared for.



TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND HOW GOT INVOLVED WITH THE ITOJU MENTORING PROGRAM?

Obakemi: Growing up in Canada as an international student shaped the person I am now. I moved here at 14, and the first few years were incredibly challenging, mentally and emotionally. For a while, I was going through the motions, meeting the minimum requirements as a student while juggling big responsibilities, like maintaining my immigration status. I didn't realize how much support I was lacking because I didn't know what I needed. The pressure eventually caught up with me, and I hit rock bottom. I came dangerously close to failing out of school. That moment was a loud wake-up call because I couldn't let all the sacrifices my parents made, including paying high international student fees, go to waste. Failure to that extent was new to me, but it forced me to stop ignoring the problems I had been avoiding. I had no choice but to seek help from talking to my professors, student advisors, and my peers. Gaining access to more information and learning opportunities completely changed my experience. I started to do much better in school and felt happier almost overnight. I wish I had known earlier that being an international student didn't have to be a lonely, isolating experience, and I didn't have to suffer alone.

After graduating university and checking off some of the key milestones of the international student journey; graduating, getting a job, and securing a work permit, I spent time reflecting on my experience. I felt a deep sadness for my younger self, who didn't know what I didn't know. I developed a sense of responsibility to support those who were in the position I had been in; feeling isolated, not knowing where to start, and completely unaware of the resources available. I started sharing honest feedback with anyone who asked about my journey and even started an Instagram blog where I interviewed friends about their international student experiences.

It was through this blog that I reconnected with Mofi, and together we built the Itoju Mentoring Program.

Mofi: My journey as an international student began when I moved to Canada at 16 from Nigeria. In my second year at Ontario Tech University, I became the president of the African Student Association because I noticed a gap in community, connection, and support among the African student population on campus. Following that, I worked on campus in the International Student Office for two years, coordinating orientation and providing support to new international students.

After I graduated, I did my masters in Immigration and Settlement Studies at TMU, focusing my research on the experiences of Nigerian women international students. I explored how race and gender impact the international student experience, and this really highlighted the gaps in support for African International Students in Canada.

After completing my Master's, I moved to Kingston to work at the Queen's University International Centre, where I designed programming for international students. I eventually worked at Queen's University for five years, designing programming and leading advocacy for international students and other marginalized groups.

As someone that has gone through the journey of being an international student myself, I frequently get questions from newcomers seeking support as they transition to life in Canada. However, because of the limits of my own knowledge, I thought about creating a program that could match newcomers with mentors with similar experiences for guidance and support, and that's how Itoju Mentoring was born.





WHAT IS THE VISION BEHIND THE ITOJU MENTORING PROGRAM?



Mofi: Itoju was born from a collective awareness and commitment to addressing the lack of intersectional support for Black African international students. Our vision is to bridge these gaps by creating strong, supportive communities that empower young people as they navigate new environments and unfamiliar systems.

HOW ARE YOU FEELING NOW THAT ITOJU IS OUT IN THE WORLD?

Obakemi: We've been steadily building Itoju, chipping away at it bit by bit. Now, reaching the point where we've onboarded actual mentees and mentors makes it all feel so much more real, exciting, and just a tiny bit scary. We've been lucky to get validating feedback and support from volunteers along the way, which has been incredibly encouraging.

Meeting with our mentors one on one, seeing their eagerness and passion made me even more confident in the #ItojuCommunity we're creating. It feels daunting at times to take on the challenge of building this program, but knowing we're not doing it alone makes it so much easier. We're ready to make mistakes, learn from them, and keep improving as we go.

Mofi: I'm feeling a mix of excitement and nerves, let's call it "nerve-cited." I can't believe that something we've been working on for years, something that only felt like a concept, has now grown into a full blown program. I'm feeling very grateful and so proud of how far we've come.





HOW DO YOU SEE MENTORING SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THROUGH THEIR CHALLENGES?

Obakemi: Realizing ‘I don’t know what I don’t know’ was both eye-opening and intimidating as an international student, and it’s a feeling that has stuck with me to this day. The thought that incredibly valuable information, which could make school easier or open up new opportunities, might remain beyond your reach because you don’t even know to ask for it is unsettling.

With Itoju, I want mentees to organically increase their access to this kind of information; random but incredibly helpful tidbits that might make navigating this journey easier, by learning from the mistakes and experiences of others. I also strongly believe in the power of community, surrounding yourself with people who encourage and motivate you. Sometimes, all we need is that external reminder that we’re capable of overcoming any challenge and achieving success.

Our goal is to create a support network and community for international students that provides them with access to resources, guidance, and reassurance that they are not alone on this journey.

Mofi: Having someone to talk to can truly be a game changer. I envision international students in our program receiving personalized support from their mentors, who will serve as an additional sounding board and resource as they navigate academics, career, and general transition needs.

To support this relationship-building, we’ve developed a mentoring guide that includes thoughtfully designed activity and reflection sheets, along with a curated resource bank. This tool is meant to deepen the connection between mentors and mentees, offer structured guidance, and create space for mentees to reflect meaningfully on their journey as international students

WITH 8 MENTOR-MENTEE PAIRS ALREADY IN THE PROGRAM, WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT?

Obakemi: I’m excited to see how our community grows and how relationships develop over time. I hope our mentees find the program valuable and build a sense of comfort and safety within our community so they feel confident enough to seek support from our mentors, even those they haven’t been formally matched with. I’m also looking forward to receiving feedback from both mentees and mentors, so we can continuously improve the program to meet the needs of the community we aim to serve.

Mofi: I’m really looking forward to hearing how things are going for both our mentors and mentees. I’m excited to learn from their experiences and see how we can tweak things along the way. The learning process is important, and I can’t wait to discover how we can improve the program together.





HOW DO YOU SEE ITOJU HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & WHAT DO YOU HOPE MENTEES WILL GAIN FROM BEING A PART OF THE PROGRAM?

Obakemi: I want Itoju to remind African international students that they are not alone. While their journeys are individual and unique, they don't have to face their struggles in isolation. I want Itoju to be a space where international students can ask any question, no matter how unpolished, and, even if they don't get exact answers due to the complexities of their situations, they will at least be guided to resources that can help.

My hope is that mentees gain more than just answers to occasional questions. I want them to find a support network of people who truly understand the international student experience. I want them to feel confident in themselves, their self-worth, and their ability to overcome challenges. Beyond all of that, I hope Itoju opens doors to career opportunities and inspires them to take control of their journeys, and create their own paths to success.

Ultimately, we hope to build a self-sustaining, interdependent community where mentees support each other, eventually becoming mentors themselves, allowing Itoju to grow and thrive organically.



WHAT'S A JOYFUL OR INSPIRING MOMENT FROM BUILDING ITOJU THAT STANDS OUT TO YOU?

Obakemi: Our one-on-one calls with our mentors were incredibly inspiring. The mentors are a core part of the program, so hearing their stories about their own international student experiences and seeing their enthusiasm to support others was very encouraging and affirming. It reminded me that even if all Mofi and I achieve is connecting eager mentors with mentees, that alone is a meaningful accomplishment.

Mofi: A joyful moment was receiving the email from the Laidlaw Foundation letting us know we were successful in the grant application. It's a three-year grant of \$300,000, which will resource us to build Itoju with intention and provide adequate support to our mentors and mentees. Reading that email filled me with an overwhelming sense of affirmation - it felt like a powerful reminder that the vision for Itoju matters and is worth investing in. That moment gave me a deep sense of confidence to continue on this path, knowing that the work we're doing is seen and valued.



CAN YOU SHARE ONE STRATEGY OR HACK THAT HELPED YOU ACHIEVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS WHILE YOU WERE AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT?



Obakemi: After nearly failing out of school, these two hacks literally got me on the president's list. The first was forming study groups with classmates to do homework together. 'You might not know what you don't know', but when a group of people pool together the bits of information each person has; whether it's something a professor casually mentioned that you missed or a different perspective that makes things click, it makes learning so much easier.

The second hack was forecasting the cumulative GPA (cGPA) I wanted for the semester and determining what grades I needed in each course to achieve that goal. I found that having a clear target from the start of the semester helped me stay on track and prevented me from compromising on seemingly low-impact assignments. As they say, "Shoot for the moon; even if you miss, you'll land among the stars."

Mofi: My friends always teased me about this, but my biggest hack was befriending my professors. A bit of a story time - back in secondary school, I was a student who didn't care much about my studies. But when I moved to Canada, I realized that if I wanted to succeed, I had to take charge and do well in university, and I did. I even ended up being the valedictorian of my faculty.

My hack was building relationships with my professors. I made it a point to sit at the front of the class, talk to them after lectures, and discuss the course material. This approach made me feel more connected to my classes and made my professors more willing to support me when I needed help. They became genuinely invested in my success, and that made a huge difference. So, if you're shy or introverted and want to do well in school, I highly recommend taking advantage of office hours and connecting with your professors and academic advisors. You never know how much it could help you.

The Itoju Mentoring Program is more than just a support system; it's a living, growing community rooted in care, connection, and shared experience. Through honest conversations, intentional mentorship, and a deep understanding of what it means to be an African international student in Canada, Mofi and Obakemi are building something powerful.

As the program continues to grow, so does its impact; one mentee, one mentor, and one story at a time. Whether you're a student seeking guidance or someone ready to share what you've learned, Itoju reminds you that you don't have to walk this journey alone.

Sign up to join the Itoju Mentoring today!

Thank you for reading!

