

**SATISFACTION AS A FACTOR INFLUENCING
RETENTION RATES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
AT SFU**

by

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ABSTRACT

The study addresses a threefold research question: (1) What factors contribute most to the feeling of satisfaction with SFU; (2) What factors discriminate between students who are thinking of leaving and those who are not; (3) What is the relationship between students' satisfaction with SFU and their intention to drop out.

A feedback survey of existing international students, analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods, reveals the following: international students are less likely to drop out of SFU if they are satisfied; if their expectations about SFU are met ('confirmation'); or if they come from one of the East Asian countries.

Our core recommendations for SFU International include ways to: (1) proactively orient new international students to SFU's teaching and learning systems; (2) re-position itself as a welcoming place for international students, including improved physical facilities; (3) manage international students' perceptions of SFU, thus increasing their level of satisfaction.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study provides a data analysis and recommendations for SFU International's goal to increase the retention of SFU's international students. The retention rate for international students is currently lower than for domestic students. Testing the relationship between international students' satisfaction and their likelihood of dropping out of SFU, the study addresses a threefold research question: (1) What factors contribute most to the feeling of satisfaction with SFU (based on the opinions of current international students); (2) What factors discriminate between students who are thinking of leaving and those who are not; (3) What is the relationship between students' satisfaction with SFU and their intention to drop out.

A feedback survey of existing international students was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative statistical tools, and reveals the following: international students are less likely to drop out of SFU if they are satisfied; if their expectations about SFU are met ('confirmation'); or if they come from one of the East Asian countries. Additionally, these students are more satisfied with SFU if they get better instructional quality; if they feel better supported by library, computer, and administrative resources, and by the quality of life on campus; if they have a high level of 'confirmation' and a low level of 'disconfirmation' formed during their period of adjustment to SFU; and if they infrequently use and/ or dislike the advising services of SFU International.

Based on the project's core findings, we recommend that SFU International incorporate into its plans: (1) proactive and innovative ways to orient new international students to SFU's teaching and learning systems and styles during their adjustment period of the first 12 months; (2) ways to improve its customer focus and re-position itself as a friendly, welcoming place for international students, including improved physical facilities; (3) ways to better manage

international students' perceptions of SFU and SFU International, thus increasing their level of satisfaction.

DEDICATION

To our little daughters:

One day you will appreciate it –

we took all this time away from you

to become better mothers and to teach you by example

Моё родное солнышко!

西西：

Когда-нибудь и ты поймёшь –

妈妈为你而骄傲，

«хочу» и «надо»

也希望你为妈妈而骄傲！

всегда рядом

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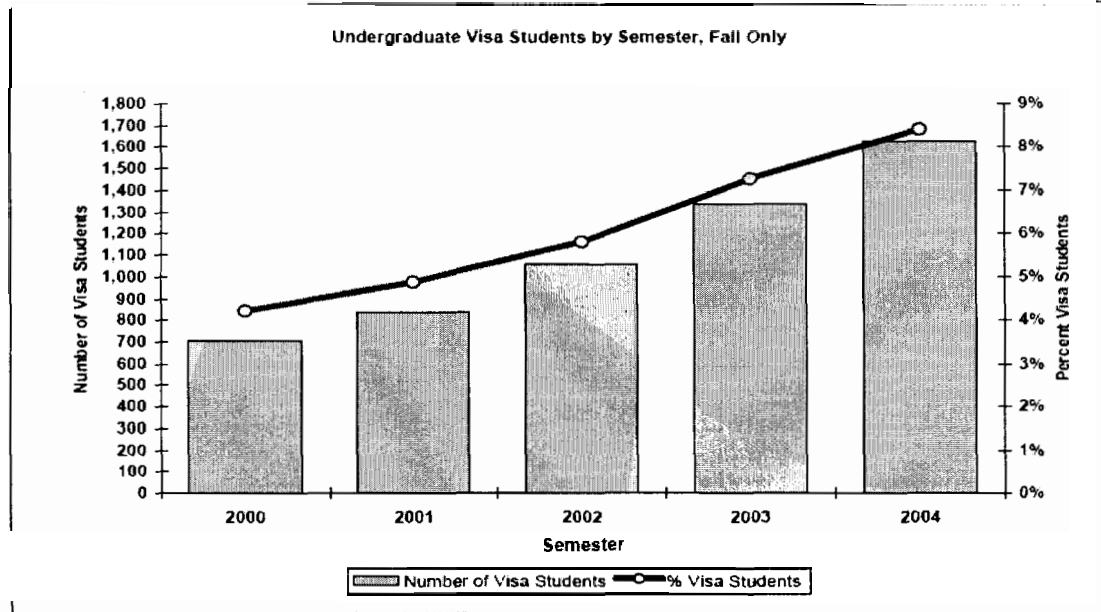
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1 CHAPTER 1 -- INTRODUCTION

“The presence of international students is a cost-effective way of developing and maintaining relationships that will create trading partnerships to ensure BC's future prosperity. Educational contracts valued at more than \$70 million are currently being managed by BC public post-secondary institutions” (BC Ministry of Advanced Education Performance Plan, 2000).

Just as most other schools, SFU has been enjoying steady increase in its international students' enrolment (SFU Office of Analytical Studies, 2005).

Figure 1-1: SFU Undergraduate Visa Students by Semester



Source: Table D-22

Source: SFU Office of Analytical Studies, 2005, by permission

This trend is expected to continue for SFU -- undergraduate visa students headcount is expected to more than quadruple by 2007.

Yet, international students leave SFU prior to completion – drop out – more frequently than domestic students. It is very unfortunate to see international students leave. Both parties – international students and SFU – lose when yet another decision to drop out is made. For international students, the costs of making this decision are typically much higher than for domestic ones – both in monetary and in psychological terms. As for the university, international students’ recruitment is a high-involvement and expensive activity that SFU undertakes in order to stay competitive among North American schools in meeting enrolment quotas and in order to enhance both the SFU budget and SFU students’ life experiences. Effective reduction of numbers of international SFU drop-outs has economic, organizational, and ultimately branding and marketing benefits that can more than repay the investment made in a retention or exit survey system.

SFU International is a department at SFU that is responsible for university-wide international programs and services. Among other tasks, SFU International is concerned with recruitment and retention of full-fee paying international students. As the business of marketing international education becomes more and more competitive, while quotas for international student enrolment at SFU significantly increase every year, SFU International pays more and more attention to the issues of retaining existing international students and facilitating students’ academic, general, and personal experiences while at SFU. The management team of SFU International aims to explain the discrepancy in the attrition rates of international and domestic students at SFU and to design and implement

actions to alleviate the problem. “Perceptions, motivations, personal characteristics and study behaviour of early leavers are relevant to the design of university admission, orientation, advising and information services” (Conway, 2001).

For our purposes, we define an international student in Canada as someone who was born outside Canada, spent the majority of his/her life outside of Canada, self-identifies with a culture other than Canadian, expected to pay the full fee, required a study permit to enrol at SFU, and faced with immigration restrictions regarding employment in Canada. ‘*Visa student*’ and ‘*international student*’ terms are used interchangeably here and assume the same definitive criteria. SFU ‘*drop-outs*’ are students who leave or transfer to another university prior to completion of their SFU program even though that was not their original intention when they first came to SFU.

Having defined the basic terms, we turned to the literature on marketing international education in the hope of finding extensive work on retention. However, satisfaction / turnover literature offered a better framework. Together, these groups of research (Chapter 2) provided us with sufficient basis to proceed with our cross-sectional design, implementation, and analysis presented in Chapter 3 and the results described in Chapter 4. Major findings, limitations, and direction of future research are offered in Chapter 5.

2 CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction is a close, albeit not exclusive, predictor of an intention to drop out (Mazzarol, Soutar, Seng, 2003; Sam, 2001). The radical strategy to reconcile dissatisfaction is an ‘exit’ strategy – ‘vote with their feet’ (i.e., students leave or transfer to another university prior to completion of their academic program even though that was not their original intention when they first enrolled in school). Satisfaction is determined by a variety of factors some of which -- including financial, family, or academic problems or difficult personality traits of students – most likely fall outside of the scope of influence for university administrator responsible for international program development and implementation (Howarth, 2005). Typically, there are also strong links between (1) the academic success and /or (2) the marketing mix (i.e., content and form of international student programming) and students’ satisfaction (Sam, 2001).

Increasing international students’ overall satisfaction with their school is suggested as a way to further enhance school’s brand and its competitive position in a market with several local competitors. Use of opinion and exit surveys helps school administrators to monitor the competitive and operational environments (Mazzarol, Soutar, Seng, 2003) and effectively react in areas where their complex marketing mix can be fine-tuned to improve satisfaction and, as a consequence, retention of international students (Wood, 2001; Mazzarol, 1998).

2.1 Marketing International Education = Marketing Services

Last decade's global developments turned international education into a booming industry worth over US\$ 2.2 trillion worldwide (Symonds, 2000 citing Merrill Lynch, 2000). The direct economic impact of international students coming to study in Canada is 3.5 billion annually (BCCIE, 2004). Vancouver Board of Trade recognizes that the "future of BC's economy will depend on vision, leadership and growth in both traditional and newer knowledge based industries" (Vancouver Board of Trade, 2005). International education creates new international business and economic links when graduates become cross-border ambassadors (Industry Canada, 2001).

The underlying reason for sharp increase in provision of education to international students is financial – institutions worldwide compete for international students as additional source of revenue. USA, Australia, and UK governments heavily invest in order to develop "Education US", "Education Australia", and "Education UK" brands and to achieve double-digits growth rates in the enrolment of international students (Russell, 2005; Binsardi, Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol, Soutar, 2002).

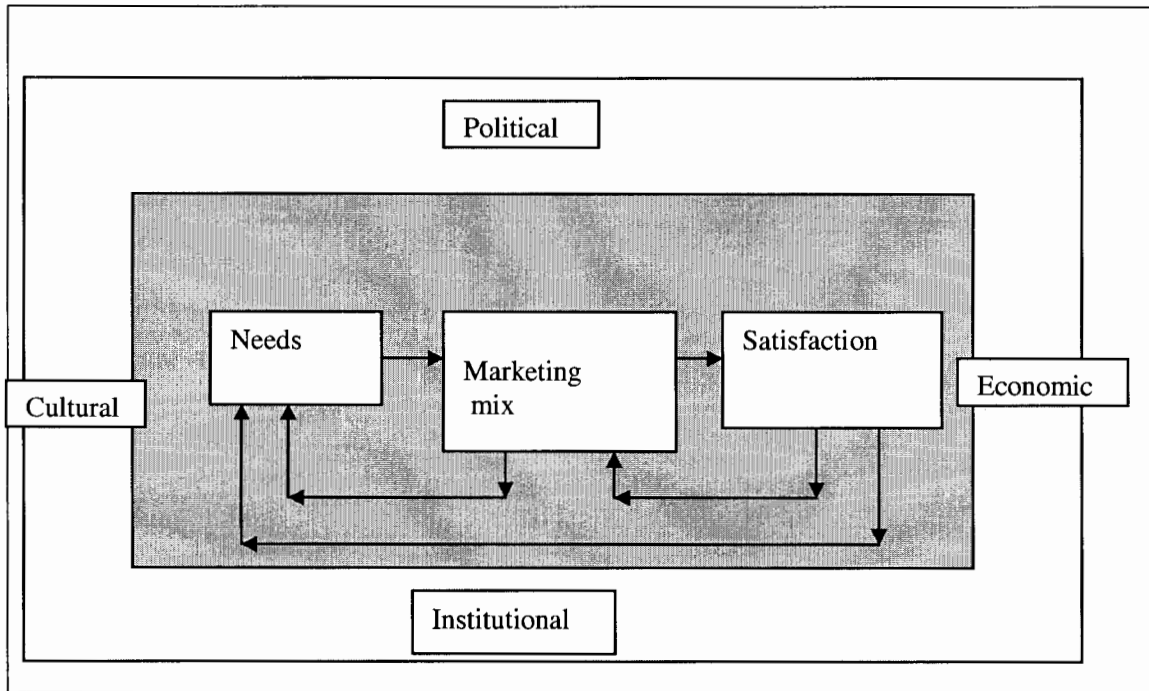
Canada is a latecomer in this market. However, *unfunded full-cost recovery international students* are increasingly more visible in Canadian schools. "In a planet where mobility barriers are fading day by day, Canadian institutions have no recourse left other than to participate in such dynamic processes, attempting to strike a fine balance between a sense of social responsibility and adherence to the bottom line" (Molina, 2004: 29). The limitations of BC- or even Canada-wide government policy and commitment with respect to international education (Liakhovetska, 2003; Industry Canada, 2001) is a

lemon which can be turned into lemonade since each university is free to conduct its own studies discovering its own core competencies and working out its own branding.

Preparing for increased numbers of clients as well as working on building their own competitiveness in the international education market, universities are increasingly concerned with why and how choices are made by students in favour of one school or another. Mazzarol et. al. (1998, 1999, 2002, 2003) created extensive body of research on factors influencing students' choices. The outstanding factor is *perceived* quality of education. Actual quality is often deemed "less important than its prestige, or reputation for quality, because it is the university's perceived excellence which.... guided the decisions of prospective students" (Kolter & Fox, 1995).

Issues in marketing international education are quite similar to issues in marketing any other service. Among many models of international marketing, Majaro's model takes into account sufficient amount of the complexity of the environments surrounding the recruitment process: political, cultural, economic, and institutional (Majaro, 1975 cited in Kinnell, 1990). It is a multi-stakeholders model which, we believe, can be successfully applied to marketing of international education. The issues of satisfaction, needs, and adjusted ways of offering marketing mix to clients (e.g., new and existing international students) are the core ones in designing international student programs at a university level.

Figure 2-1: Model of International Marketing



Source: based on Kinnell, 2005 based on Majaro, 1977

For example, branding falls within the marketing mix, and each school undertakes a variety of activities to position and to differentiate itself from its competitors (Keever, 1998; Kolter & Fox, 1995). Branding draws upon excellent school rankings and other attractive school features like innovativeness, successful co-op links with industry, etc. (Keever, 1998) However, branding actions must be designed and tested against all other environments which are cross-connected.

Moreover, in marketing educational services, “the service encounter and location assume greater importance for on-campus delivery, with satisfaction influenced by interaction with the service providers, facilities and peers. Services must be transformed to tangible offerings for evaluation and comparison with competition. If the institution does not do this itself, students will form their own judgement.” (Mazzarol, 1998).

Keefe (1998) confirms: “Create an image for your company or your competitors will do it for you”.

The method of service delivery from the framework of Mazzarol (1998) also points at the key potential solution: educate the “human actors” which participate in the delivery of services to international students about the fact that perceived friendliness and professionalism of the service delivery agents (e.g., staff) plays an important role in satisfaction of international students with campus experiences. It is noticed that the full-fee paying international students are also *more sensitive* to internal and external quality issues and are *less understanding* (than domestic students) of a failure of institution to meet their expectations (Wood, 2001).

Moreover, accountability to parents is playing increasingly higher importance than in the case with domestic students – both due to difference in cultural dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance and well as individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2005) and due to high fees payable (Howarth, 2003). In fact, in many Asian cultures, importance of family preferences and respect for parents’ choice of educational opportunities are the decisive factors in choosing foreign school (Lyakhovetska, 2003; Mazzarol, 2002; Pimpa, 2003).

Our discovery is that there are limited findings in a way of retention that we could derive from the marketing international education literature. However, detailed discussion of retention issues is offered by turnover literature.

2.2 Satisfaction/Turnover Literature Findings as Applied to International Student Turnover Issues

According to our literature scan, an assumption where, in the case of educational institution, 'international students' can be treated as 'employees' and 'university' --- to an 'organization' holds well throughout. There is one exception though – we have to exclude issues of compensation (i.e., issues of tuition differential fees) in its entirety for this particular project in order to preserve manageable scope.

Figure 2-2: Decision to Stay / Decision to Drop Out

		School's Impact on Decision to STAY / DROP OUT	
		LOW	HIGH
Student's Impact on Decision to STAY / DROP OUT	HIGH	< 25% reasons given (transfer to another school, job etc.)	> 50% of reasons given (overall treatment, administration, relationship with supervisors etc.)
	LOW	< 25% reasons given (family circumstances, illness, etc.)	involuntary drop-out

Source: Adapted from Gray (2005)

As evident from the table above, satisfaction does not explain 100% of dropout decisions. Personal characteristics, among other factors, shape subsequent academic attitudes and behaviour. Even a satisfied student may choose to drop out due to

circumstances which are out of control of university staff (e.g., a student could have been satisfied but still had to leave because of a bad roommate, increased tuition, family problems, and other things which are not directly related to satisfaction with his/her experiences at a foreign school. Thus, an important distinction is made between the above mentioned *idiosyncratic* reasons for leaving, over which international departments at universities have little control, and the *systemic* reasons for leaving. The systemic reasons are depicted in the shaded areas in the Figure 2.1 -- university planners can study and exercise substantial control over them (Peters, Bhagat, & O'Connor, 1981).

Satisfaction in conjunction with *commitment*, seem to quite accurately predict withdrawal behaviour. Dissatisfied students may choose to complete their degree because of a strong commitment. They may even praise their school upon completion (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003) in order not to 'lose their own face' -- i.e., not to feel embarrassed for their poor choice of school (Tung, 1994).

However, for any long-term goals, schools are better off to have satisfied students because they "spread positive word-of-mouth, and in effect become a walking, talking advertisement for an institution whose service has pleased them, thus lowering the cost of attracting new applicants. Achieving satisfaction thus provides a key competitive advantage" (Russell, 2005) for higher education institutions. To boost *satisfaction*, it is best to create realistic expectations. Realistic job preview literature argues that if an organization creates more accurate expectations, people would be more likely to stay (Boggie, 2005; Liu, 2005).

In general, management of turnover follows general policies aim to improve satisfaction:

Establish and maintain both the practice and the impression of fair treatment of all students, so as to help foster a positive, consistent and reassuring work environment;

Ensure that senior management and immediate supervisors demonstrate their own sense of commitment to the organization;

Emphasize the need for a close match between the personality/work style of prospective students with the organization's culture as well as providing prospective students with realistic job previews – there is evidence to suggest that newcomers to a university who leave within the first year may have a different commitment propensity at the time they enter university (as opposed to those who stay) (Mowday et.al., 1982).

Mowday et.al. (1982) divided commitment propensity into separate components:

(a) personal characteristics (i.e., less efforts to socialize newcomers with a stronger desire for academic accomplishment); and (b) expectations (i.e., newcomers bring with them expectations that serve for them as a frame of reference in evaluating their new experiences). In some cases, nothings needs to be done if schools are lucky to admit students with in-built strong commitment (e.g., this is generally more true for Confucian cultures or Asian heritage) (Lu, 2005; Tung, 1994).

Alternatively, schools can boost commitment via an effective attachment policy. In other words, communications of university culture clearly and early in each new student's experience – helps to retain students. Newcomers form or fail to form a basic attachment to organization (Mowday, Porter, and Steers, 1982 cited in Lee et. al., 1992). However, situational variables and personal characteristics and experiences always affect or mitigate this impact so the outcomes are uncertain. General guidelines include the following policy recommendations:

Properly incorporate new students into the school's life and manage their expectations and initial experiences with SFU – in fact, a large financial

services firm found that it could effectively reduce turnover among new hires by deliberately improving the process of socializing new employees into the corporate culture, particularly through the use of mentoring.

Communicate realistic and attainable expectations of performance to all employees, so as to avoid the potential for “shock” and the development of dissatisfaction.

Give positive and constructive feedback on a regular basis, including through both formal job performance reviews and informal channels of communication with employees, as well as ensuring that viable reward and recognition programs are used to motivate all employees.

Offer clear-cut opportunities for academic enhancement, advancement and career development (Mowday et.al., 1982).

Dissonance reduction is the key goal for managers to accomplish. Effects of previous job exposure (i.e., study in North America exposure) are inversely correlated with intention to quit. (Boggie, 2005; Liu, 2005). Our research of the literature suggested that important factors to student retention would be overall satisfaction, personal characteristics of new students including their individual motivation to succeed, and environmental factors such as orientation activities confirming positive feeling about decision to study (reducing ‘post-purchase dissonance’) provided by the host university.

3 CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research project's main purpose was to discover potential ways to improve the retention rates of international students of Simon Fraser University (SFU). We addressed the three-fold research question through quantitative methods.

A broad qualitative exploratory stage preceded the questionnaire in order to clarify the needs of SFU managers as well as the general availability of research into the issues of retention and international students at SFU. SFU International, SFU Student Development and Programming Centre, and SFU Office of Analytical Studies were willingly sharing their research and findings on retention and satisfaction of international students at SFU. SFU International shared with us results of focus groups done within the last year. SFU Student Development and Programming Centre shared with us their orientation surveys they used on all SFU new students, as well as access to *Zoomerang.com* membership. SFU Office of Analytical Studies confirmed the discrepancy we were to address – international students' attrition rates are much higher compared to those of domestic ones.

On-line opinion survey of existing (versus those who dropped out) students -- measuring student intentions -- was our preferred method for the following reasons.

An on-line survey is:

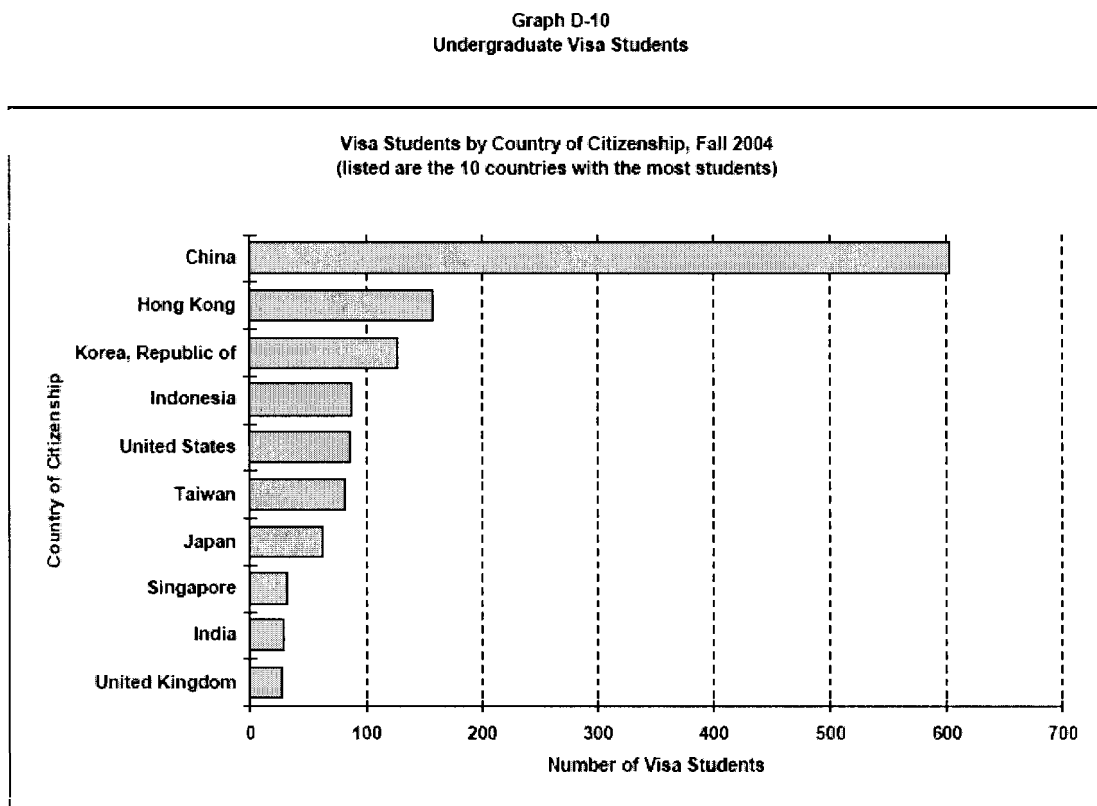
- Relatively quick to complete;
- Convenient -- allowing students to complete surveys at their own pace;
- Less erroneous – respondents type in their own responses thus eliminating recording error (e.g., in focus groups and in paper and pencil surveys)
- Guarantees anonymity – anonymous survey as opposed to focus groups or individual interviews was better suited for this study for a number of reasons. First, international students, just like any other students, tend to feel less pressure to provide socially approvable answers. Secondly, international students, especially those from high-context high power distance cultures are known to be reluctant to share non-flattering opinions in a face-to-face conversation (losing your face phenomenon). Moreover, the service we have used (www.zoomerang.com via SFU student services membership) prohibits asking respondents any personal information;

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

All 1,028 international students at SFU (that are included in the mailing list of SFU International) were contacted with several email invitations to participate in the survey. This study used a cross-sectional design. A 21-question survey was launched on March 21, 2005 via email to all SFU international students in the term of spring 2005. As of May 27, 2005 around 10:00pm when we closed the survey, there were 245 completed responses among 530 visitors resulting in a high -- 23.8% -- completion rate.

In terms of regional representation, our convenience sample fairly well matched actual composition of SFU international student population in 2004-2005 (Figure 3-1).

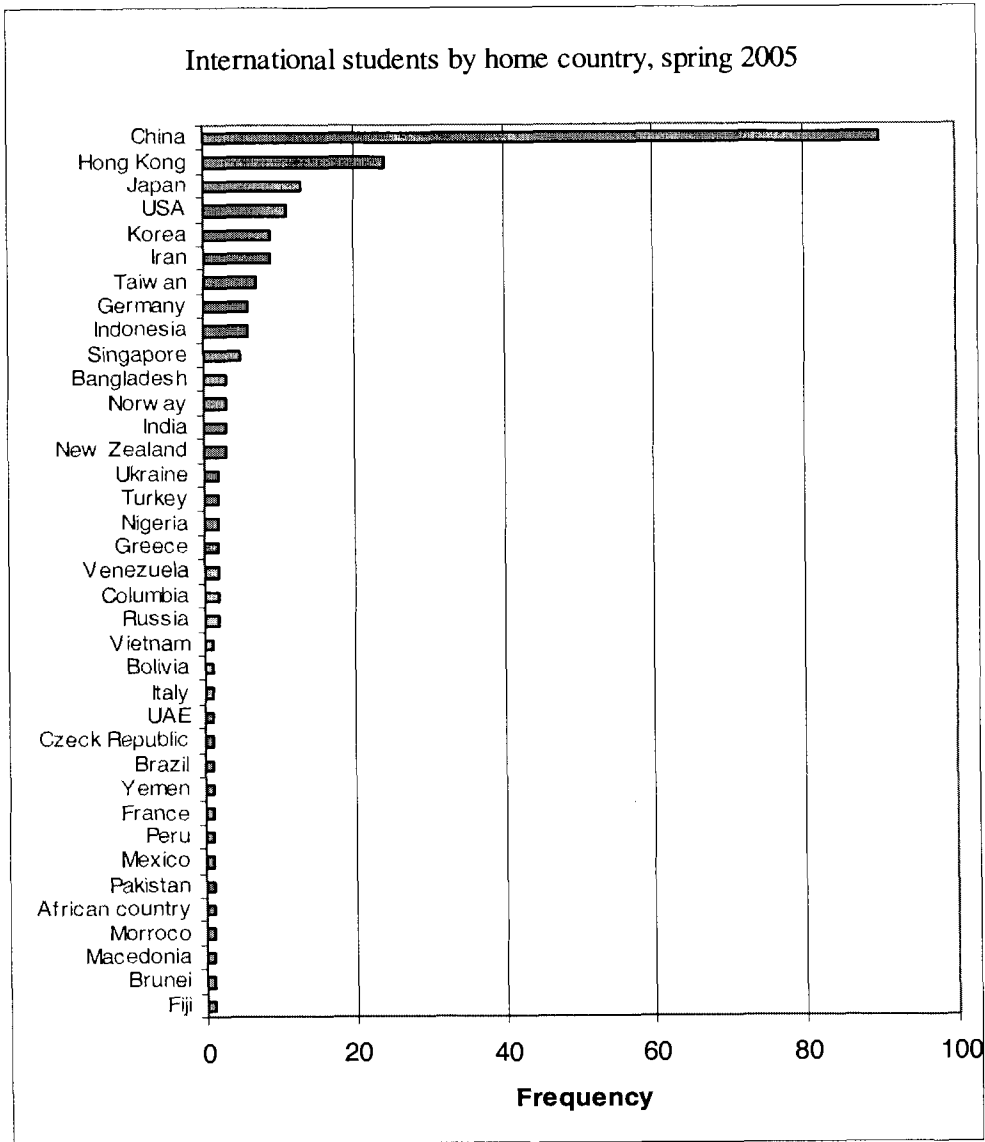
Figure 3-1: Undergraduate Visa Students at SFU



Source: SFU Office of Analytical Studies, 2005, by permission

For data reduction reason, national economies were combined into geographic regions (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea are all combined into “East Asian Region”) under the crude assumption that the cultural closeness will be more pronounced among the nations within each cluster.

Figure 3-2: Home Country



Source: Scratchley & Zhou, 2005

3.3 Measurement and Instrument

Survey data was downloaded from Zoomerang.com. Open-ended questions were analyzed manually and regarded as exploratory data to be confirmed in the future

research. We used SPSS to analyze the rest of the data. Questions were re-coded as necessary.

3.4 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on the results of focus groups done by SFU International circa November 2004. It consisted of four main parts (see Appendix A). Part 1 asked two questions about respondents' overall impression of SFU. Question 1 (3 items) asked about respondents' mood while filling out the survey, and respondents' overall satisfaction of SFU. Question 2 (9 items) asked respondents' overall ratings of SFU's characteristics, such as instructional qualities and resources available on campus. All questionnaire items in Part 1 were measured using a 5-point scale (Q1: 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree; Q2: 1 = poor, to 5 = excellent).

Part 2 asked respondents regarding their experiences and feelings of the first few weeks at SFU, including the helpfulness of the materials and/or services used to get familiar with new university (12 items on a 6-point scale, 0 = not applicable, 1 = not helpful, to 5 = extremely helpful), and how respondents feel about the effect of all the orientation activities after participating (10 items on a 5-point scale, 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree). There was an open-ended question at the end of Part 2 that asked respondents for further suggestions and comments about the process of freshman international students' getting used to SFU.

Part 3 asked how respondents rate all the assistance resources available when they have difficulties at SFU, including academic (5 items), social (3 items), SFU International (6 items), and other assistances on campus (7 items). All the above

questionnaire items in this part were measured in a 6-point scale (0 = not applicable, 1 = not helpful, to 5 = extremely helpful). At the end of this part respondents were asked whether they had considered dropping out of SFU program prior to completion, and some open-ended questions about respondents' further opinions and comments about the HELP SFU international students needed that was unavailable, etc. Part 4 of the questionnaire asked personal background questions including category, years at SFU, faculty, living on campus or not, self-evaluation of English level, CGPA, gender, and home country.

3.5 Measures -- Variables

Dependent variables. We identified two dependent variables in this study: overall satisfaction and intention to drop out. There were two satisfaction items in the survey. One was about respondents' opinions of whether attending SFU was a very good decision and the other was whether respondents' would recommend SFU to friends and family. As reported in Table 3-2, the Cronbach's Alpha value for the two-item overall satisfaction was .87. Therefore we computed a new dependent variable named Overall Satisfaction using the mean values of the two satisfaction items. There was one specific question that asked respondents whether they had considered dropping out of their SFU program prior to completion.

Independent variables. Because one of the purposes of this study was to find out which factors influence SFU international students' satisfaction and intention to drop out, respondents were asked questions about their opinions and experiences of SFU as international students. Respondents' attitude towards four types of opinions and experiences were assessed. These included (1) Ratings of SFU's Characteristics (9 items);

(2) Helpfulness of materials/services in first few weeks (12 items); (3) Effects of all participated orientation activities (10 items); (4) Assistancess available on campus, which included Academic Assistancess (5 items), Social Assistancess (3 items), SFU International (6 items), and others on campus (7 items).

Control variables. In order to control other factors that might influence students' satisfaction and intention to drop out, we also measured respondents' mood while filling out the survey and personal characteristic items such as category, years at SFU, faculty, living on campus or not, self-evaluation of English level, CGPA, gender, and home country. As our sample of students' home country is significantly skewed, it is regrouped into regions as follows (see Table 3-1)

In order to test whether living on campus or not plays a role in students' satisfaction and intention to drop out, this question was recoded into two dummy variables: Now (living on campus now) and Past (living on campus in the past).

Table 3-1: Recoding Countries into Regions

Code	Region	Countries
1	E Asia	China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea
2	SE Asia	Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei
3	S Asia	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh
4	W Asia	Iran, Yemen, UAE
5	Europe	Russia, Germany, Greece, Norway, Turkey, France, Macedonia, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Italy
6	SW Pacific	Fiji, New Zealand
7	S America	Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, Peru
8	USA	USA
9	Africa	African country, Nigeria, Morocco

3.6 Measures – Scale Development and Validity

Satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha values were found for all the scale reductions of the independent variables in this study. Respondents' opinions of SFU's characteristics and the helpfulness of materials/services scales had satisfactory internal consistency reliabilities with the Cronbach's Alpha values as follows: .76 for Instruction Quality scale (3 items), .83 for Resource scale (5 items), .66 for Printed Objective Information scale (3 items), .51 for Pre-arrival Assistance (3 items), and .78 for Orientation scale (5 items) (Table 3-2).

For respondents' opinions of the effects of all orientation activities after participating, the scale reliabilities were found to be very high: Confirmation scale had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, and Disconfirmation scale had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$ (see Table 3-3).

As shown in Table 3-4, the assistance scales were also found to have satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha values as follows: .68 for Academic Assistance scale (4 items), .62 for Social Assistance scale (2 items), .67 for SFUIN TL Advising scale (2 items), .72 for Communication Program scale (2 items), and .86 for Workshops scale (7 items).

Table 3-2: Scale Reduction A

Overall Satisfaction (2 items, $\alpha = .87$, $n = 243$)	
Attending SFU was a very good decision	I would recommend SFU to my friends and family
Ratings of SFU's Characteristics ^a	
Instruction Quality (3 items, $\alpha = .76$, $n = 243$)	
Quality of instruction	Approachability of professors
Fairness of grading practices	
Resources (5 items, $\alpha = .83$, $n = 236$)	
University library	Computing or science labs
Resources to support student transaction	Resources to support student learning
Quality of student life	
Helpfulness of materials/services in first few weeks ^b	
Printed Objective Information (3 items, $\alpha = .66$, $n = 241$)	
Application package	Information on the Internet
International Student Manual	
Pre-arrival Assistance (3 items, $\alpha = .51$, $n = 238$)	
Pre-arrival assistance (phone calls)	Friend/family member familiar with SFU
Pre-academic advising	
Orientation (5 items, $\alpha = .78$, $n = 236$)	
Campus orientation (2 day Burnaby)	Residence Orientation (6 day)
Mature orientation (1 day)	International Orientation (1 day)
Housing assistance	

^a There were 9 items in this question, one item was excluded in this scale: Availability of courses

^b There were 12 items in this question, one item was excluded in this scale: Buddy (mentorship) program

Table 3-3: Scale Reduction B

Effects of all orientation activities after participating

Confirmation (7 items, $\alpha = .85$, $n = 232$)

I clarified academic expectations of
being a student at SFU

I learned which programs and services
can teach me academic skills or
assist my academic success at SFU

I realized that for pretty much any
problem I may experience in the
future I can find help on campus

I felt positive about my choice to study
at SFU

I met new friends

I decided to express myself more
clearly and communicate more
openly with others

I thought about volunteering on
campus in the future

Disconfirmation (3 items, $\alpha = .70$, $n = 228$)

I began to feel very different from
others at SFU

I began to feel worried about my
future at SFU

I realized that if I get in trouble
nobody will help me out here

Table 3-4: Scale Reduction C

Assistances available on campus

Academic Assistance [Ⓢ] (4 items, $\alpha = .68$, n = 234)

Academic advisors-to register for first priority courses	Academic advisors-for students on probation
Academic advisors-for all other issues	Coop advising

Social Assistance [ⓓ] (2 items, $\alpha = .62$, n = 235)

Work out in the Gym	Pub for a beer
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SFU International [Ⓢ]

SFUINTL Advising (2 items, $\alpha = .67$, n = 240)

International student advising	Immigration advising – drop in
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Communication Program (3 items, $\alpha = .72$, n = 239)

Buddy (mentorship) program	Conversation club
International Exchange programs for international students	

Workshops (7 items, $\alpha = .86$, n = 230)

Communication workshop	Good study habits workshop
Time management workshop	Library workshop
Financial advising	Tax workshop
Health and Counseling Services (counselors or medical doctors)	

[Ⓢ] There were 5 items in this question, one item was excluded in this scale: Trusted Professor or TA

[ⓓ] There was one item excluded in this scale: Nobody – I will sort it out by myself

[Ⓢ] There were 6 items in this question, one item was excluded in this scale: Group immigration sessions

4 CHAPTER 4 -- RESULTS

4.1 Results of Correlation Analyses

In Order to evaluate the relationship between Overall Satisfaction and Intention to drop out, we conducted a Correlation analysis between the two variables. We found a negative significant correlation between Overall Satisfaction and students' Intention to drop out (see Table 4-1, $r = -.44$, $p < .01$). This coincides with our hypothesis that the higher students' satisfaction is, the less likely they are intending to drop out of SFU program prior to completion.

Correlation analyses were also conducted between students' mood while filling out the survey and Overall Satisfaction and Intention to drop out respectively. There was a statistically significant relationship both between Mood and Overall Satisfaction (see Table 4-1, $r = .43$, $p < .01$) and between Mood and Intention to drop out (see Table 4-1, $r = -.26$, $p < .01$). As students' Overall Satisfaction and Intention to drop out should not be affected by student's mood while completing the questionnaire, we needed to include Mood in further tests to control it.

Table 4-1: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Mean	s. d.	N	1	2
1. Mood	3.43	1.14	244		
2. Overall Satisfaction	3.48	1.03	244	.43**	
3. Intention to drop out	.24	.43	184	-.26**	-.44**

**Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ level (2-tailed)

4.2 Results of Regression Analyses

To understand the factors that influence the satisfaction of SFU international students, we conducted two regression analyses using Overall Satisfaction as the dependent variable (see Table 4-2). Model 1 was found to be statistically significant ($p < .001$) explaining approximately 58% of the total variance of Overall Satisfaction ($R^2 = .58$). A further analysis on the Coefficients table shows that Instruction Quality ($B = .42, p < .001$), Resources ($B = .28, p < .01$), Confirmation ($B = .29, p < .01$), Disconfirmation ($B = -.16, p < .05$), and SFUIN TL Advising ($B = -.09, p < .05$) are all statistically significant in predicting the Overall Satisfaction. Notice that Now (live on campus now) could also play a significant role ($B = -.25, p = 0.08$) in this model when $\alpha=0.10$, as our sample size of 245 is large enough to accept an error of 10% instead of 5%. We also noticed that Mood is successfully controlled and does not play a significant role in this regression model anymore ($p > .10$).

To further confirm those factors that have the most important influence on the Overall Satisfaction of SFU international students, a second regression model was run using Overall Satisfaction as the dependent variable, and the above found six significant

factors as the predicting variables. Similarly, this model was also found to be statistically significant ($p < .001$). Although Model 2 explained slightly lower ($R^2 = .55$) variance of Overall Satisfaction than the previous model ($R^2 = .58$), the Adjusted R^2 value of .54 is higher than the previous one of .53. Still Instruction Quality ($B = .44, p < .001$), Resources ($B = .34, p < .001$), Confirmation ($B = .29, p < .001$), Disconfirmation ($B = -.16, p < .01$), and SFUINTL Advising ($B = -.08, p < .05$) were found to be statistically significant predicting factors in regression Model 2 for Overall Satisfaction. Interestingly Now (living on campus now) is not significant any more in this model ($p > .10$, see Table 4-2).

Table 4-2: Results of Regression Analyses on Overall Satisfaction ^a

Independent Variables		Model 1 ^{***}	Model 2 ^{***}
Personal Background	Years at SFU	.04	
	Self-evaluated level of English	-.04	
	Current CGPA	-.10	
	Gender	.02	
	Past	-.10	
	Now	-.25 ⁺	-.19
	Mood	.08	
SFU Characteristics	Instruction Quality	.42 ^{***}	.44 ^{***}
	Resources	.28 ^{**}	.34 ^{***}
	Availability of courses	.04	
Helpfulness of material/services in first few weeks at SFU	Printed Objective Information	.02	
	Pre-arrival Assistance	-.00	
	Orientation	-.00	
	Buddy (mentorship) program	.03	
Effects of orientation activities	Confirmation	.29 ^{**}	.29 ^{***}
	Disconfirmation	-.16 [*]	-.16 ^{**}
Academic Assistances	Academic Assistance	-.03	
	Trusted Professor or TA	.01	
Social Assistances	Social Assistance	.01	
	Nobody – I will sort it out by myself	.01	
SFU International	SFUINTL Advising	-.09 [*]	-.08 [*]
	Communication program	.04	
	Group immigration session	-.02	
Others on campus	Workshops	.05	
	R²	.58	.55
	Adjusted R²	.53	.54

^a Unstandardized coefficients are reported

+ p < .10

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001

4.3 Results of Univariate ANOVA Analyses

Several Univariate ANOVA analyses were conducted in order to understand whether students' satisfaction of SFU is the same across some of the control variables such as Category respondents belong to, Faculty enrolled, and Home Country/Region, and test their influences on Overall Satisfaction.

The statistical analysis revealed that students' Overall Satisfaction were not statistically different from one another regardless of whether they just graduated from high school in their home countries, or they were transferred from a Canadian college/university, or they'd been out of school for more than 1 year and lived in Canada, etc (see Table 4-3, $F = .85$, $p > .10$). Students from Faculty of Education and Joint (enrolled in more than one faculty) had relatively higher means ($\mu = 3.88$, 3.75 respectively) of Overall Satisfaction, whereas students who did not disclose their faculty and students from Faculty of Business had relatively lower means ($\mu = 2.83$, 3.38 respectively). However, F-test showed that the mean differences of Overall Satisfaction among different faculties were not statistically significant (see Table 4-3, $F = .91$, $p > .10$). In our sample, students were from 37 different countries. Although Levene's test showed that the mean variance of Overall Satisfaction was statistically different among Home Countries ($p = .03$), F-test revealed that actually the mean differences of Overall Satisfaction among different countries were not statistically significant (see Table 4-3, $F = .99$, $p > .10$). This might be explained by the different sample size of home countries our respondents were from. For instance, we only had one sample for 16 different countries. Therefore we conducted another Univariate ANOVA test among Regions. The analysis showed that students from SE Asia (including Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam,

and Brunei) had the lowest mean value of Overall Satisfaction ($\mu = 3.31$), while students from SW Pacific (including Fiji and New Zealand) had the highest mean value of Overall Satisfaction ($\mu = 4.00$). Still there were no statistically significant differences of Overall Satisfaction among different regions (see Table 4-3, $F = .69$, $p > .10$). In other words, students' satisfaction of SFU was not associated with their enrolled faculties, the countries/regions they are from, or whether or not they had been studying and/or living in Canada before they came to SFU.

Table 4-3: Results of Univariate ANOVA Results on Overall Satisfaction

Variables	Levene's Test ^a	F Test ^b
Category	.24	.85
Faculty	.82	.91
Home Country	.03	.99
Region	.50	.69

^a p-values are reported

^b All Sig. values of F-tests > .10

4.4 Results of Discriminate Analysis and Cross Tabulations

In order to evaluate the factors that discriminate those students who intend to drop out of SFU program prior to completion from those who don't, we first conducted a discriminate analysis between Intention to drop out and all other independent variables and some control variables tested, leaving out all the nominal variables of Category, Faculty, and Home Country/ Region. The statistic result revealed that there was a statistically significant function ($p < .001$) which discriminated the two different groups of Intention of drop-out from each other. Specifically, Confirmation and Resources were the

two factors which had the largest absolute size of correlation within the function (.64 and .49 respectively, see Table 4-4). In other words, the reduction of feelings of dissonance upon students' participation in all the orientation activities and quality ratings of poorness/excellence of University Library, Computing or Science Labs, Resources to support student transition, Resources to support student learning, and Quality of student life were the most important factors that discriminated students between the two groups of intending and not intending to drop out of SFU program prior to completion.

Table 4-4: Results of Discriminate Analysis on Intention to Drop Out

Structure Matrix

Independent Variables	Function
	1
Confirmation	.64
Resources	.49
Mood	.37
Orientation	.35
Availability of courses	.33
Instruction Quality	.32
Disconfirmation	-.31
Printed Objective Information	.29
Workshops	.26
Buddy (mentorship) program	.25
Years at SFU	-.24
Group immigration sessions	.24
Communicate Programs	.24
Academic Assistance	.22
Trusted professor or TA	.16
Gender	.13
SFUINL Advising	.13
Social Assistance	.12
Now	.11
Pre-arrival Assistance	.11
Past	.05
CGPA	-.02
Consideration volunteering as a buddy/mentor	-.02
Nobody – I will sort it out by myself	-.01

Pooled within-groups correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical Discriminant functions Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function.

Furthermore, we conducted three Crosstabulation analyses between Intention to drop out and Category, Faculty, and Region respectively to see whether they were significant factors that separate students between different groups of intention to drop out. The results turned out that students' intention to drop out was not statistically

significantly different across Category or Faculty (see Table 4-5, $p > .05$), but Region was a significant predictor of students' intention to drop out (see Table 4-5, $p < .05$). Specifically, we found out that East Asian (including Chinese, Hongkongese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and South Korean) students were less likely to consider dropping out (see Table 4-6).

Table 4-5: Results of Crosstabulations on Intention to drop out

Variables	N of Valid Cases	Pearson Chi-square ^a
Category	182	.10
Faculty	183	.30
Region	175	.04

^a Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) and Approx. Sig. are reported

Table 4-6: Region*Intention to Drop Out Crosstabulation

			Intention to drop out		Total
			No	Yes	
Region	E Asia	Count	93	21	114
		% within Region	81.6%	18.4%	100%
		% of total	53.1%	12%	65.1%
	SE Asia	Count	4	4	8
		% within Region	50%	50%	100%
		% of total	2.3%	2.3%	4.6%
	S Asia	Count	6	0	6
		% within Region	100%	.0%	100%
		% of total	3.4%	.0%	3.4%
	W Asia	Count	7	1	8
		% within Region	87.5%	12.5%	100%
		% of total	4%	.6%	4.6%
	Europe	Count	12	6	18
		% within Region	66.7%	33.3%	100%
		% of total	6.9%	3.4%	10.3%
	SW Pacific	Count	1	1	2
		% within Region	50%	50%	100%
		% of total	.6%	.6%	1.1%
	S America	Count	5	3	8
		% within Region	62.5%	37.5%	100%
		% of total	2.9%	1.7%	4.6%
	USA	Count	3	5	8
		% within Region	37.5%	62.5%	100%
		% of total	1.7%	2.9%	4.6%
	Africa	Count	2	1	3
		% within Region	66.7%	33.3%	100%
		% of total	1.1%	.6%	1.7%
Total		Count	133	42	175
		% within Region	76%	24%	100%
		% of total	76%	24%	100%

4.5 Results of Descriptive Analyses

We also ran a one sample t-test to assess the level of SFU international students' Overall Satisfaction. The analysis showed that the mean value was 3.48, which was statistically significantly different from 4 ($p < .001$, 5-point scale, 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree; see Table 4-7). In other words, SFU international students' Overall Satisfaction was above average ($\mu = 3$ in a 5-point scale) but far lower than a good or excellent level. Specifically fewer than half of the respondents agreed that they made a good decision to attend SFU or would recommend SFU to their friends and family (42.7% of respondents with $\mu \geq 4$, see Table 4-8).

Table 4-6: One-Sample T-Test

	Test Value = 4			
	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Overall Satisfaction	244	3.48	1.03	.00 *

* $p < .001$

From the first regression model, we found that students' self-reporting CGPA and self-evaluated level of English were not significantly associated with Overall Satisfaction ($B = -0.10$ and -0.04 respectively, $p > .10$, see Table 4-2). Interestingly, some more Frequencies tests showed that 51.9% respondents thought that their levels of English were "good" or "exceptionally good" (see Table 4-9), and 57.8% respondents reported their current CGPA to be higher than 3.00 (see Table 4-10). It seemed that language and CGPA were not perceived as problems for SFU international students. When we looked at some answers to the open-ended questions, it indicated that different culture, different

teaching approach and learning style, and lack of availability of help could all make adaptability difficult for SFU international students.

Table 4-7: Descriptive Results of Overall Satisfaction

		Overall Satisfaction			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	6	2.4	2.5	2.5
	1.50	8	3.3	3.3	5.7
	2.00	17	6.9	7.0	12.7
	2.50	22	9.0	9.0	21.7
	3.00	52	21.2	21.3	43.0
	3.50	35	14.3	14.3	57.4
	4.00	47	19.2	19.3	76.6
	4.50	18	7.3	7.4	84.0
	5.00	39	15.9	16.0	100.0
	Total	244	99.6	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.4		
Total		245	100.0		

Table 4-8: Descriptive Results of Self-evaluated Level of English

		How do you evaluate your own level of English?			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not good	29	11.8	12.0	12.0
	Somewhat good	87	35.5	36.1	48.1
	Good	84	34.3	34.9	83.0
	Exceptionally good	41	16.7	17.0	100.0
	Total	241	98.4	100.0	
Missing	System	4	1.6		
Total		245	100.0		

Table 4-9: Descriptive Results of CGPA

How is your current GPA so far?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.0 – 1.49	4	1.6	1.7	1.7
	1.5 – 1.99	10	4.1	4.3	6.0
	2.0 – 2.49	34	13.9	14.7	20.7
	2.5 – 2.99	50	20.4	21.6	42.2
	3.0 – 3.49	63	25.7	27.2	69.4
	3.5 – 4.0	61	24.9	26.3	95.7
	4.0 & >	10	4.1	4.3	100.0
	Total	232	94.7	100.0	
Missing	System	13	5.3		
Total		245	100.0		

4.6 Summary of Open-Ended Questions

Statistics showed that students' actual participation in all the orientation activities was not high. Some answers to the open-ended questions indicated that it was either because of low awareness among the international students during the first few weeks or their late arrival at SFU. Nevertheless those students who did participate thought that the orientation activities were helpful, especially the International student orientation. Other factors such as high tuition fees, competitiveness at SFU, difficulty of enrollment in desired faculty, difficulties of adaptability, discrimination issue could all contribute to students' intention to drop out.

5 CHAPTER 5 -- DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

International students are an important source of revenue and diversity for SFU. However, the retention rates of international students at SFU are significantly lower than the retention rates of domestic students. The lower retention rate of international students is a symptom which is likely driven by a set of problems that we attempted to identify in this study. The British Columbia Universities Early Leavers Survey is a tool regularly used to evaluate reasons for drop out decisions carried through by domestic students. Yet, so far, there has been no equivalent research done to study international students' reasons for dropping out.

Based on literature findings, we hypothesized that satisfaction would be one of the factors mediating international students' decision to leave prior to completion. Literature on marketing of international education postulates that *satisfied* international students are much more likely to *complete* their own *studies*, and in addition serve as a *reliable referral source of new students* for their alma mater university. If SFU can increase the numbers of international students it can retain, it would maintain at a higher level its current international student enrolment, and would therefore not have to recruit as many new students to replace the lost ones. If SFU can increase the overall level of satisfaction of retained international students, it would decrease marketing costs per new international recruit and increase brand equity of SFU in the international education market.

Given the high costs of recruiting new international students and the higher targets SFU has set for its recruitment of international students, we have decided to explore what particular factors may be driving international students away from SFU prior to completion of their studies. Taking into account the standard statistical limitations, there were statistically significant findings that serve as the basis of our recommendations for SFU International staff involved in design and implementation of international student services.

5.1 Major Findings

The results of our study show that the higher students' *overall satisfaction* with SFU is, the less likely they are to express an *intention to drop out*. Specifically, the five most important factors that influence international students' satisfaction with their experience at SFU are: (1) *Instructional Quality*, (2) *Resources*, (3) *Confirmation*, (4) *Disconfirmation*, and (5) *SFUINTL Advising*.

Figure 5.1: Factors that contribute most to international students' feeling of satisfaction with SFU

F1 (+): Instructional Quality	approachability of professors, quality of instruction, fairness of grading practices
F2 (+): Resources	library, resources to support student transactions, resources to support student learning, computing or science labs, quality of student life
F3 (+): Confirmation	clarified academic expectations of being a student at SFU, learned which programs and services can teach me academic skills / assist my academic success at SFU, met new friends, felt positive about my choice to study at SFU, realized that for any problem I may experience in the future I can find help somewhere on campus, decided to express myself more clearly and communicate openly with others, considered volunteering on campus
F4 (-): Disconfirmation	began to feel very different from others at SFU, began to feel worried about my future at SFU, realized that if I get in trouble nobody will help me out here
F5 (-): SFUINTL Advising	international student advising, immigration advising – drop in

The first four factors are consistent with literature findings and our anticipation of results: i.e., the higher students rate the excellence of SFU's Instruction Quality and Resources, and the more students agree on Confirmation / reduction of feeling of dissonance concerning all the orientation activities, the higher their Overall Satisfaction is; the more students disagree on Disconfirmation / strength of feelings of dissonance from all the orientation activities, the higher their Overall Satisfaction is. However, a totally surprising factor to us is the negative association of SFUINTL Advising with students' Overall Satisfaction. It is evident from our data set that the higher students rate the

international student advising and immigration advising services, the more they likely they are to state that attending SFU was NOT a very good decision, and the LESS likely they are to recommend SFU to their friends and family. On the one hand, this finding could be explained by an observation that majority of students who come to SFU International for advising services tend to be already dissatisfied prior to their advising experience. In many cases, advising services were rated by those students as helpful. Yet, it did not help to reduce the feeling of their dissatisfaction. On the other hand, we speculate that, at the present time, there might be a disconnect between the content / form of SFU international advising and the impact of it on the overall satisfaction.

We also found that (1) *Instructional Quality*, (2) *Confirmation*, and (3) *Region* are the three most important factors that discriminate between groups of students intending and not intending to drop out. While *Instruction Quality* and *Confirmation* findings were consistent with findings from the 2000 BC Early Leavers Survey (Conway, 2000) and other studies, we did not anticipate the significant importance of *Region* in our study. Students from the East Asian geographic region are more likely to finish their degree program at SFU. We speculate that the reason that East Asian students are less likely to drop out is the culture norms prevalent in those countries. We speculate that students from that region do not want to disappoint their parents and cast shame on their family. As a result, regardless of their actual assessments of experience at and satisfaction of SFU, East Asian students are less likely to consider dropping out of the SFU program prior to completion, compared to students from other regions. Another unexpected result in our study – which was also inconsistent with the BC Early Leavers Survey findings –

is that CGPA, level of English, and prior experience studying in North America did not play a significant role in SFU international students' intention to leave.

5.2 Limitations

We are ultimately interested in finding out precisely which factors influence the retention rates of international students at SFU. The most desired method to test this would have been to survey the students who have carried through their decision to drop out. The main cause of dropping out for some of those students could have been dissatisfaction with one or more components of their university experience. However, there were numerous logistic difficulties that prevented us from going that route: i.e., time constraints, inability to obtain clearance to work directly with student records, and the complexity of administering such a survey, including cost, language constraints, and low-to-zero anticipated return rate. Therefore, we have chosen to use the proxy – SFU international students who may be dissatisfied but have not yet acted upon their dissatisfaction by dropping out.

Also, there might be some other factors with significant impact on students' satisfaction and intention to drop out that were excluded from our questionnaire, given the fact that factors in our models altogether only partially explained SFU international students' satisfaction with SFU. Furthermore, we had a convenience sample which was self-reporting their CGPA. The average CGPA in our survey was higher than the actual average CGPA of international students at SFU. Several explanations are possible: the majority of students who completed the on-line survey were among the better organized and/or better academically performing students. Alternatively, CGPA could have been

over-reported – a phenomenon frequently encountered in focus-groups and individual interviews. If it is the later case, the outcome of insignificant influence of CGPA on students' satisfaction and their intention to drop out would be unreliable.

Finally, some of our recommendations are based principally on findings from literature review and interpretations of open-ended questions. These recommendations can be tested in further surveys upon request from SFU International. For example, we recommend a parental liaison and predict that it will instantly position SFU favourably in comparison to the competitors.

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are divided into quantitative and qualitative findings based on the primary method used to derive them.

5.3.1 Quantitative Findings

Statistical analysis in our study confirmed that the statement “students' satisfaction is significantly related to students' intention to drop out” holds true for international students of SFU, just as it does for international students in other schools and other countries (literature analysis in Chapter 2). We have surveyed only international SFU students. However, the same parallel exists for domestic students in BC -- their drop out rate is positively correlated with their overall level of satisfaction as well (Conway, 2000).

5.3.1.1 Recommendation 1:

That SFU International design effective programs and activities to increase students' satisfaction in order to retain students who intend to drop out and thereby decrease the cost of recruiting new international students.

Satisfaction is a complex construct. Our statistical analysis revealed the most significant contributors to satisfaction of current international students at SFU. *Instructional quality, availability of resources* (e.g., library, labs, resources to support student transition and learning, quality of student life, etc.), the effects of all orientation and support activities (*confirmation* and *disconfirmation*), and *SFU International's* student advising and immigrant advising are the five most influential factors defining the overall satisfaction of SFU's international students (Figure 5.1). Whereas it might be difficult to influence such aspects as instructional quality and availability of resources within a short-term period, there are some areas where SFU International can clearly make improvements. For example, SFU International provides significant impact on international students at SFU via its services such as orientation, adjustment, and on-going advising. An alarming finding is that, at the present time, both international student and immigration advising *negatively impact* international students' satisfaction with SFU. Perhaps, the content or form of delivery (or both) do not provide *a realistic preview* of the SFU experience, and thus fall short of creating accurate expectations in international students while adding to their disconfirmation perceptions of SFU.

5.3.1.2 Recommendation 2:

That SFU International re-examine and re-adjust both the content and the form of its services such as orientation, adjustment, and on-going advising in order to eliminate suspected negative impacts.

If our speculation about the *disconnect* between *SFU International Advising* (SFU international student's advising and immigrant advising) and students' *satisfaction* (indicated by the negative relationship between the two) is true, we recommend that SFU International re-examine and re-adjust both the content and the form of its services such

as orientation, adjustment, and on-going advising in order to eliminate suspected negative impacts.

5.3.1.3 Recommendation 3:

That SFU International promote and advertise orientation activities proactively in order to improve the awareness of them among new international students.

The discriminant analysis revealed that the *confirmation* effects of all orientation activities and the *availability* of helpful *resources* are the two factors that discriminate most clearly between students who intend to drop out, and those who do not. There is also an evidence of low awareness about these activities among current SFU students. It is postulated in the field of marketing educational services that increase in awareness is achieved via repetitive (pulsing) advertising campaigns.

5.3.1.4 Recommendation 4:

That SFU International provide follow-up and on-going orientation and communication activities and programs for those international students who might have missed their first chance to participate or would benefit from a reiterated session.

Descriptive analyses showed that the actual participating rates in all the orientation activities among SFU international students were very low. There is evidence of the late arrival of some international students. Given the influential impact of all the orientation activities (*confirmation* and *disconfirmation*) on students' satisfaction, we recommend that SFU International provide follow-up and on-going orientation and communication activities and programs for those international students who might have missed their first chance to participate or would benefit from a reiterated session.

5.3.1.5 Recommendation 5:

That SFU International hire a dedicated person to work exclusively with the parents of its international students to effectively differentiate itself from both local competitors and other public North American schools.

Our literature findings confirm the statistically significant impact of their cultural norms on the behaviour of East Asian students' at SFU: both their strong commitment to persevere at SFU as well as the importance of parental decision-making. Given the actual large population size and equally large future potential of East Asian students at SFU, we recommend that SFU International hire a dedicated person to work exclusively with the parents of its international students to effectively differentiate itself from both local competitors and other public North American schools.

5.3.2 Qualitative Findings

In addition to the quantitative findings, our experience in interacting with international students and staff at SFU and UBC as well as our literature findings caused us to evaluate some of the responses to the open-ended questions. This evaluation led us to make the following additional recommendations.

Even though the overall satisfaction rating of SFU by international students is slightly above average, this rating is far below “good” or “excellent” scores. This rating is based on students' perceptions, and does not match the objectively high rating of SFU among comprehensive publicly funded universities in Canada. The key to reconcile the two – perceived and objective – ratings is in *managing students' perceptions*. “The service encounter and location assume greater importance for on-campus delivery, with

satisfaction influenced by interaction with the service providers, facilities and peers. Services must be transformed to tangible offerings for evaluation and comparison with competition. If the institution does not do this itself, students will form their own judgement” (Mazzarol, 1998).

5.3.2.1 Recommendation 1:

That SFU International view international students as its customers and concentrate its efforts on managing their perceptions. This will enable SFU International to improve its customer service focus, communication, and services.

5.3.2.2 Recommendation 2:

That SFU International re-position itself -- clarify and strengthen its own image and "brand" on campus and in the Greater Vancouver area -- in order to establish and maintain a competitive edge, and thereby reduce the risk of losing students to its local competitors.

Although, according to our quantitative analysis, English language proficiency is not perceived as a serious problem by SFU international students, open-ended questions revealed that there is a desire for more orientation programs introducing Canadian culture, and Canadian teaching and learning systems and styles, which would help international students to successfully adapt to their new university life at SFU.

5.3.2.3 Recommendation 3:

That SFU International continue to source and advertise to international students programs and activities relevant to: introducing Canadian culture, and Canadian teaching and learning systems and styles.

Comments regarding unhelpful behaviours (“rushed”, “unavailable”, “rough”, and “not friendly”) of SFU International staff towards international students are indicators that more serious attention should be devoted to how SFU International is perceived by its clients. A wish to see an increased overall “friendliness” from the frontline staff at SFU International is a common theme in the open-ended commentaries of our respondents. The importance of effective cross-cultural communication, perceptions of friendliness and “putting the client first” behaviours cannot be overestimated when it comes to the front-line communication with SFU International’s clients.

5.3.2.4 Recommendation 4:

That SFU International consider in-depth cross-cultural communication training as well as empathetic / active listening skills for its front-line staff.

The above discussion is perhaps partly derived from the current location space and layout of the current SFU International office. The space is hardly adequate for the numbers of students it serves. International students do not have a campus space which would give them a sense of belonging -- this fact is noticed and contrasted with the arrangements international students have in the International House at UBC. As one SFU student put it, it feels as if the office of SFU International has bad *feng shui*, and needs more free-flowing positive energy to enhance its effectiveness.

5.3.2.5 Recommendation 5:

That SFU International communicate to the university administration the fact that the lack of adequate office space is a serious problem which would prevent them from both providing satisfactory service and meeting their target of increasing international student enrolment. International

students must have their own space -- to socialize and to share useful information.

Certain campus means of written communications, such as the international students' list-serve, are found to be very useful. However, several international students we met were not even on the e-mail list of SFU International. As far as the current billboards of SFU International are concerned, they are not viewed as a positive source of information by SFU's international students. In fact, they are referred to as "ugly" by some respondents. Such perceptions might also hurt SFU International's image as a helpful, cheerful, welcoming place to go for assistance.

5.3.2.6 Recommendation 6:

That SFU International re-consider ways to utilize these billboards (e.g., add more lighting as the billboards are often in the darkest corners of campus, frame them in bright colours, etc.). The School of Fine Arts may serve as a good source of volunteer talent to help with this issue.

Finally, the importance of working with parents in the field of international education is increasing and is often a break point in the choice of school. The importance of the role of parenting and family is much higher in most foreign cultures compared to the North American culture. Finding the most effective balance between 'spying on students while they are at SFU', and addressing the ongoing concerns of their parents, could become the most positive and successful investment in branding SFU and instigating high quality service perceptions in current and potential future international students. SFU will greatly benefit from making small but significant steps towards

accommodating other cultural values, especially the typical Asian values of families and parents.

6 CONCLUSION

Retention of a larger portion of international students at SFU through discovering or confirming the key reasons that make international students dissatisfied is the core managerial task for this project. Using both quantitative and qualitative statistical tools, we have analyzed surveys completed by existing SFU students. Our findings were generally consistent with the key propositions found in international education marketing literature as well as in literature on personnel satisfaction and turnover. We suggest areas of potential improvement as well as further areas of research for SFU International.

The study originated from the SFU International managerial challenge to address the following problem: the attrition rates of international students at SFU are significantly higher than those of domestic students. The literature review suggested verifying positive correlation between satisfaction and retention. Also, the study evaluated the factors that contributed to SFU international students' satisfaction as well as the factors that were discriminating between students who were thinking of leaving and those staying. An opinion survey of existing international students at SFU was conducted as a part of this study.

Several managerial implications follow from the study. Some factors comprising the construct of satisfaction can be influenced via combination of marketing and communication tools used by SFU International. SFU enjoys the reputation of being the fourth best comprehensive university in Canada and is also highly regarded for its

continuous innovation. However, overall level of satisfaction expressed by international students does not match national ratings. Thus, managing perceptions and expectations of new international students at SFU is exceptionally important. Finally, a somewhat surprising quantitative finding of this study was that the extent to which satisfaction influences decision to drop out differs depending on student's country of origin.

7 FUTURE RESEARCH

When conducting future research into international students' issues, we propose to take into account the following suggestions. Firstly, SFU International can repeat our on-line Survey (or the BC Early Leavers Questionnaire) with the international students who have dropped out of SFU in order to confirm / augment the findings of this study. Significantly more time should be allowed for such survey administration due to the constraints outlined in our limitation (5.2) section.

Secondly, we believe that there are several applied areas for SFU International to focus on in the immediate future. They include:

- the most effective *forms of communication* with new and continuing international students;
- methods of *training staff* in cross-cultural communication.

Thirdly, study-related *anxiety* would be a useful construct to incorporate in future surveys of international students at SFU. One way of doing that is to adapt and expand on the Taylor scale of manifested anxiety using statements such as: (1) while at school I feel tense; (2) I lose sleep over my studies. Correlation of anxiety and disconnect is apparent; however, an unconfirmed relationship may exist between student anxiety and other factors used in this study which may further clarify solutions to retention problem.

Fourthly, focus groups and personal interviews with international students have to be used selectively and interpreted with great caution due to the current cultural composition of international student body at SFU. For example, Asian cultural norms preclude a person from expressing unflattering opinions of others – in order not to have their listeners “lose face” etc. Research methods offering anonymity of both respondent and recipient of comments is presently a more effective way to study SFU international student behaviour.

Finally, as our survey questions stemmed principally from the results of the focus groups and our study provided only a snap-shot analysis of the above factors as per spring term of 2005, further researches on exploring other factors that might significantly influence students’ satisfaction and intention to drop out, as well as ongoing longitudinal studies in the future would help us be more certain of the causal relationships between the two outcomes and greatly enrich our understanding of this research area.

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3

Remember your first few weeks at SFU? Which of the following did you use to make yourself more familiar with your new university? Please check and rate all that apply to you

1 2 3 4 5 N/A
not helpful extremely helpful

Application package

1 2 3 4 5

Information on the internet

1 2 3 4 5

International Student manual

1 2 3 4 5

Pre-arrival assistance (phone calls)

1 2 3 4 5

Buddy (mentorship) program

1 2 3 4 5

Friend/family member familiar with SFU

1 2 3 4 5

Campus orientation (2 day Burnaby)

1 2 3 4 5

Residence Orientation (6 day)

1 2 3 4 5

Mature orientation (1 day)

1 2 3 4 5

International orientation (1 day)

1 2 3 4 5

Pre-academic advising

1 2 3 4 5

Housing assistance

1 2 3 4 5

Thinking about all the orientation activities you took advantage of, how did you feel after participating in them?

1 2 3 4 5
strongly disagree strongly agree

I clarified academic expectations of being a student at SFU

1 2 3 4 5

I learned which programs and services can teach me academic skills or assist my academic success at SFU

1 2 3 4 5

I realized that for pretty much any problem I may experience in the future I can find help on campus

1 2 3 4 5

I felt positive about my choice to study at SFU

1 2 3 4 5

I met new friends

1 2 3 4 5

I decided to express myself more clearly and communicate more openly with others

1 2 3 4 5

I thought about volunteering on campus in the future

1 2 3 4 5

I began to feel very different from others at SFU

1 2 3 4 5

I began to feel worried about my future at SFU

1 2 3 4 5

I realized that if I get in trouble nobody will help me out here

1 2 3 4 5

Do you have any other overall comments about your process of getting used to SFU (e.g., things you learned, things you wished you had learned, things to ADD or REMOVE from existing list etc.)?

Text input area with a vertical scrollbar on the right side.

WHERE DO YOU GO FOR HELP....

There are several ways students get help when they have difficulties. Please check and rate all that apply to you: (1)not helpful – (5)extremely helpful

6

Academic:

1 not helpful 2 3 4 5 extremely helpful N/A

Academic advisors – to register for first priority courses

1 2 3 4 5

Academic advisors – for students on probation

1 2 3 4 5

Academic advisors -- for all other issues

1 2 3 4 5

Trusted Professor or TA

1 2 3 4 5

Coop advising

1 2 3 4 5

Social:

1 2 3 4 5 N/A
not helpful extremely helpful

Nobody -- I will sort it out by myself

1 2 3 4 5

Work out in the Gym

1 2 3 4 5

Pub for a beer

1 2 3 4 5

8

SFU International:

1 2 3 4 5 N/A
not helpful extremely helpful

International Student advising

1 2 3 4 5

International Exchange programs for International Students

1 2 3 4 5

Buddy (mentorship) program

1 2 3 4 5

Immigration advising – drop in

1 2 3 4 5

Group immigration sessions

1 2 3 4 5

Conversation club

1 2 3 4 5

9

Other on campus:

1 2 3 4 5 N/A
not helpful extremely helpful

Communication workshop

1 2 3 4 5

Good study habits workshop

1 2 3 4 5

Time management workshop

1 2 3 4 5

Library workshop

1 2 3 4 5

Financial advising

1 2 3 4 5

Tax workshops

1 2 3 4 5

Health and Counselling Services (counselors or medical doctors)

1 2 3 4 5

10

Tell us of a time when you as an international student needed HELP that was UNAVAILABLE for you on campus:

11

Have you considered DROPPING OUT of your SFU program prior to completion? If yes, why? And what made you change your mind?

YES NO

Comment

12

If there was one thing you found useless and think it should be cancelled next year, it would be:

To understand your comments, we need to ask you a little about yourself

CLASSIFICATION INFO -- VERY LAST SECTION !!!
YOU ARE ALMOST DONE !!!

13

Which category best described you prior to your arrival at SFU? (please check all that apply)

- Just graduated from a High School in my home country
- Just completed Grade-12 in Canada or in a Canadian school abroad
- Transferred from a Canadian college
- Transferred from a college outside of Canada
- I've been out of school for 1 or more years and lived in Canada
- I've been out of school for 1 or more years and lived outside of Canada
- Visited family or friends in Canada in the year before joining SFU
- Other, Please Specify _____

14

How long have you been a student at SFU ?

- less than 1 year
- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 or more years

15

Which faculty are you currently in? (please check all that apply)

- arts
 - business
 - science
 - applied science
 - education
 - undeclared
-

16

Do you live on SFU campus?

- Never
 - In the past
 - Now
-

17

How do you evaluate your own level of English?

- not good
 - somewhat good
 - good
 - exceptionally good
-

18

How is your current GPA so far?

- 1.0-1.49
- 1.5-1.99
- 2.0-2.49
- 2.5-2.99
- 3.0-3.49
- 3.5-4.00
- 4.0 & >

19

Gender

male

female

20

What is your home country?

21

Have you considered volunteering as a buddy/mentor for one of the new international students next year? Can you think of one of your friends who may do a great job in this position? If yes, please email intl_advising@sfu.ca

Thank you for your feedback. ALL TOGETHER, OUR OPINIONS COUNT!

