Voices Beyond Borders: The Experiences and Challenges of International Students

by

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Abstract

With the growing number of international students in higher education institutions, understanding the experiences and challenges of these students is an essential step in facilitating their academic journey and enhancing the quality of global higher education. Drawing on qualitative interviews with five Iranian graduate students at Simon Fraser University (SFU), I found that although studying at SFU was a generally positive experience for these students, they faced significant challenges in several areas. These included relationships with supervisors, different educational systems, financial problems, housing, finding jobs on campus, language barriers, health and counseling, and emotional/social adjustment. Additionally, participants reported problems accessing academic and non-academic information. Visa and immigration challenges were also highlighted as significant concerns of Iranian students. The students shared their strategies to overcome challenges and provided recommendations for the university to support them better. These insights are valuable for improving the experiences of current and future international students at SFU.

Keywords: international students; challenges; experiences; strategies; recommendations

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my lovely daughter. You were so brave and patient at age 5 to remain home due to a delayed visa. You let me spend my first term of studies miles away from you in Canada. You are the pure delight of my life!

I am deeply grateful to my mother for her endless sacrifices and love and to my spouse for his unwavering support.

Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Acronyms

BC	British Columbia
CAL	Center for Accessible Learning
GSS	The Graduate Student Society
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
MRI	Magnetic Resonance Imaging
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PR	Permanent Resident
RA	Research Assistant
SFU	Simon Fraser University
TA	Teaching Assistant
TSSU	Teaching Support Staff Union
WURI	World's Universities with Real Impact

Introduction

My experiences and challenges as an international student in Canada provided the main incentive for me to get to know about other international students' experiences and challenges and to search for ways to make this journey less challenging for them. The most difficult part of my experience was leaving my family (my 5-year-old daughter and spouse) and traveling to Canada alone to begin my studies. The late visas of my family members forced me to make one of the most challenging decisions of my life! I will never forget the night I said goodbye to my daughter at the airport. I can remember her worried eyes searching for me in the crowd. After boarding the plane, I was filled with feelings of guilt. My throat was choked with emotion, and tears streamed down my face throughout the flight. I had to do it for her and me, but I could not explain that to a young child. After arriving in Canada, I did not have a place to go. I only had one friend here who agreed to give me a room for a few days. To stop being judged by people for leaving my family for my studies, I minimized socializing with people. This lack of connection with people made my situation even harder. Due to the significant time difference between Canada and Iran, I had to stay awake at night to be able to talk to my family, but my daughter was so sad that she could not talk to me.

Those days, I was not aware that there were other similar cases or that some student parents were struggling with numerous emotional challenges after leaving their families. While searching for studies on international students' challenges, I found an interesting study by Harvey et al. (2017), who explored adult international students' experiences of leaving their families (spouses and children) for their education abroad. The authors concluded that hidden challenges such as emotional problems and negative thoughts interact with students' ambitions and expectations to cope and lead to students' struggles in their new context. Therefore, while being an international student is a valuable experience, leaving home and entering another country may be demanding. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) stated that studying overseas brings opportunities and challenges. Research on international students seems crucial to identifying and addressing these opportunities and challenges.

International education and students have become indispensable parts of this modern globalized world, and the number of international students has increased in

1

many countries in recent years. According to the Statista Research Department (2023), the three top host countries for international students in 2020 were the United States with 1,075,496, the United Kingdom with 551,495, and Canada with 503,270 international students. While many students are interested in studying at international higher education institutions to improve their academic and cultural experiences, some may also have personal goals like increasing their self-esteem and confidence (Sherry et al., 2010). Higher education institutions also seek to attract international students to improve their economic, intercultural, and academic credibility (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International students increase diversity in their classrooms and campuses with their different cultures, languages, and ethnic backgrounds, and they also provide considerable financial contributions to the host universities (Wu et al., 2015). Many host countries and their higher education institutions greatly attempt to attract international students. Based on a literature review study on the challenges of international students, Khanal and Gaulee (2019) assert that host countries and institutions should attend to these students' challenges while preparing to begin their studies, during their study abroad, and after graduation. Due to the importance of international education and the contributions of international students to the host institutions and societies, these students' needs must be carefully considered.

According to the Government of Canada, the study permits of 548385 students from various countries became effective in Canada in 2022 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). Although Canada hosts many international students, the number of studies focusing on the challenges of international students in Canadian universities is small compared to other top-receiving countries like the US and Australia. Moreover, the existing literature on international students' challenges in Canada focuses mainly on the challenges of students from countries like China. For example, Preston and Wang (2017) documented the positive and negative experiences of Chinese students who were enrolled in a Master of Education program in Canada. They stated that Chinese international students had unique issues and problems such as different cultural traditions and learning styles.

International students come from various cultural and academic backgrounds. Students from different nationalities may experience different challenges. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) stated that students' nationalities can determine the kind of entry point challenges they encounter. There is a need for further studies that focus on specific

nationalities and challenges. Moreover, Yu and Peters (2019) stated that in some higher education institutions, faculty and staff are unaware of the many difficulties that international students face. As a result, teaching and education are incompatible with learners' needs. Each higher education institute must be aware of the general and context-specific challenges that international students confront to provide them with positive experiences.

I decided to investigate this issue in the context of Simon Fraser University. In the 2022 calendar year, this university hosted more than 8640 international students from 132 countries worldwide (Simon Fraser University, 2023). Research on the experiences and challenges of international students from different nationalities will aid the university in improving its international education programs based on students' backgrounds, needs, and challenges.

Iran is one of Canada's top countries of origin for international students. With 13,450 study permits, that became effective in 2022, Iranian students ranked 6th amongst the number of study permit holders to study in Canada in 2022 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). Although many Iranian students are studying in Canada, little is known about their experiences and challenges because this issue has not received enough attention from researchers. My present status as a graduate Iranian student at Simon Fraser University in Canada, my experiences and challenges as an international student, the importance of internationalized education in this globalized world, and the gaps I have found in the existing literature on international students have made me enthusiastic about investigating this issue.

Literature Review

Some studies highlighting the challenges of international students in their host educational and social contexts focused on specific challenges, such as Harvey et al.'s (2017) study of student parents who left their families. Other studies have investigated the challenges holistically. For example, Khanal and Gaulee (2019) took a comprehensive approach to find the challenges of international students in three phases: pre-departure, post-departure, and post-study. They believed all these phases were critical and examined the challenges of students from different nationalities in these three phases. In the pre-departure phase, they found acquiring information, financial

issues, and visa problems as essential challenges. In post-departure, culture shock and racism, financial and psychological problems, and academic issues were challenging. International students also had significant concerns about their post-study phase. They were uncertain about their future, worried about immigration policies and reverse culture shock. Gao (2021) also focused on higher education students' experiences holistically. She identified five domains for doctoral international students' challenges: academic, social, cultural, psychological, and economic. She stated that these five domains interact collectively. They affect each other mutually to shape the experiences of doctoral international students. Among the studies that investigated multiple challenge domains, many identified language barriers as the most difficult issue for international students (Heng, 2019; Gao, 2021; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Preston & Wang, 2017; Samanhudi, 2021; Yasin et al., 2020). In addition to language barriers, the relationship with supervisors was another frequently mentioned difficulty in Gao's (2021) literature review study of international students' challenges.

Although all the above studies contributed a lot to identifying the issues that international students confront, only a few studies have focused on solutions or strategies to meet these challenges. A study by Sherry et al. (2010) stated that raising the profile of international students through on-campus activities or events like considering a week for international students, publishing their stories in the university newspaper, and holding free seminars for international students to talk about their cultures is an excellent way to help them present themselves. Moreover, activities that enhance cultural exchange and student involvement in different communities were recommended in this study. Another study by Wu et al. (2015) demonstrated that faculty and staff should recognize international students' needs and offer necessary campus services and resources to help them meet their academic challenges. They suggested holding some orientation sessions to introduce the host country's and the university's educational culture. The authors also emphasized the value of providing counseling and tutoring sessions to reduce international students' academic and psychological tensions. In a study by Rao (2017), international students recommended that faculty create a supportive learning environment and help them progress academically. These students asked for detailed instructor feedback and requested informal feedback before their final exams. Overall, all these studies emphasized enhancing cross-cultural understanding, involving international students in university community activities, increasing language,

financial, and instructor support, and providing counseling services for international students.

Studies on international students in Canada

Howe et al. (2023) explored two dimensions of international students' experiences at a Canadian university: barriers and support. Barriers included financial, linguistic, academic, adjustment issues, finding a job, and racism. The support systems students used to improve their experience included creating positive relationships with faculty, instructors, and friends, talking to international student advisors at the university, attending orientations and activities, and pedagogical strategies.

Considering language barriers and academic challenges, studies on international students in Canada show that even students with high English proficiency may have language and academic difficulties studying in a new context. McGregor et al. (2022) compared international and domestic students' grades in an Ontario college and found a gap in their academic performance. Fifty percent of faculty indicated that additional English training courses were needed to improve international students' language difficulties in their classrooms. Preston and Wang (2017) examined the academic and personal experiences of Chinese students in a Canadian Master of Education program. These students had difficulties doing assignments in English and working with the confusing theoretical aspects of their program.

Regarding financial and residence challenges, Calder et al. (2016) found that housing and financing were significant stressors for international students in Canada. Expensive housing in Canada forced some students to leave their children with families in their home countries because they could not afford accommodation and childcare services. Moreover, these students stated how currency fluctuations in their home countries affected their student lives in Canada.

Concerning socialization and adjustment to the new environment, some international students had difficulties socializing with local people (Preston & Wang, 2017). Some students could not form close intercultural friendships with their "host nationals" because they believed the costs of this friendship, such as "potential rejection from host nationals," were more than the benefits, such as "acculturation" (Robinson et

5

al., 2020, p. 64). In another study, Didehvar and Wana (2023) explored existential experiences among Iranian students in Canada. Most of the participants experienced feelings of isolation from being separated from home and their loved ones. Moreover, feelings of not belonging and meaninglessness were shared among these students. However, they used different ways to cope with these existential concerns.

Finally, some studies investigated internationalization policies in Canadian higher education institutions. They considered neoliberal approaches a danger to internationalization and warned against the gaps between policies and international students' experiences (Anderson, 2020; Guo & Guo, 2017; Heringer, 2020). The significance of internationalization and the lack of scholarly investigations concerning international students' challenges in Canada (Calder et al., 2016; Howe, 2023) underscores the necessity for further research.

After reviewing the research on international students, I realized that few studies have focused on the experiences and challenges of Iranian international students in Canada. As the literature shows, the nationalities of international students can affect their experiences and challenges in different phases of their journey (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This made me curious about Iranian students' stories.

The Research Questions

Three questions that I aimed to answer through my research were:

1. How do Iranian graduate students describe their experiences and challenges at Simon Fraser University?

2. What strategies do they use to cope with these challenges?

3. What do they recommend that the university provide (in terms of resources and services) to help them meet these challenges?

Methodology

I adopted a qualitative approach for my study, which enabled me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of international students' experiences and challenges. This qualitative approach helped me explore the meaning that participants attributed to problems and issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I conducted semi-structured

interviews and asked open-ended questions from the participants to let them talk freely about their experiences and challenges. They did not feel "constrained by predetermined scales or instruments" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 257). The positive collaboration between the participants and me allowed me to collect effective meanings. Moreover, the in-person interviews enabled me to consider participants' verbal and non-verbal communication and ask them for clarification when needed (Preston & Wang, 2017).

Researcher Role/Positionality

Researchers must reflect on their roles and positionalities in a qualitative design because these roles and backgrounds can shape how researchers interpret data and make meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My present status as an international graduate student at SFU has given me better insights into the situation, people, and context under study. This deep knowledge and awareness can lead to more accurate interpretations, results, and conclusions.

When the participants were telling their stories during interviews, I could identify with them and visualize all those moments before my eyes because I had similar experiences as an Iranian international student. However, I kept quiet and listened carefully without adding my own perspective. I was aware of how my mindset, personal experiences, and challenges may affect interviews or how participants interpret and answer the interview questions. I am trying to improve this awareness through ongoing reflection during all stages of my research.

Research Site and Participants

I chose SFU as my research site because I am currently a graduate student there. Moreover, SFU is one of Canada's leading universities in terms of the number of international students. In 2022, it hosted more than 8640 international students from 132 countries worldwide (Simon Fraser University, 2023). As reported on the SFU News website, SFU ranked Canada's number one university in innovation and the world's number one for entrepreneurial spirit in the World's Universities with Real Impact (WURI) 2022 rankings (Simon Fraser University, 2022).

I have not seen studies in the literature on graduate international students' experiences and challenges at SFU. These students may have unique experiences and challenges compared to their undergraduate peers, and there is a need to study them more. I hope the findings of this research will help SFU improve its successful international education programs.

The inclusion criteria for choosing the participants were being an Iranian student at Simon Fraser University and studying as a graduate international student there. To select the participants who met the inclusion criteria for my study, I decided to inform Iranian students at SFU about my research project through a Telegram (an instant messaging application) group. This Telegram group consists of Iranian students studying at SFU, and I am a member of this Telegram group, too (Appendix C: Recruitment Message). I asked these students to email me if they were interested in participating. After receiving their initial emails, I followed up with more details (Appendix D: Follow-up Message) with interested students and included a written consent form (Appendix A: Interview Consent Form). I provided information about the study, the objectives, the interview process, what the participants needed to do during the interview, confirmed the participants' right to withdraw at any time without any negative outcomes, and assured the participants that their information would be kept confidential and anonymous (Harvey et al., 2017). After receiving all the required information, five Iranian international graduate students participated in this study. Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants. Even after the interview sessions, I assured the participants that they would come to no harm or disadvantage by participating (Weiss, 1994). I received SFU Ethics approval for participant selection and recruitment and the interview consent letters.

Table 1.   Demographics of Participants

Pseudonyms	Semesters at SFU	Gender	Marital Status	Degree in Progress at SFU
Maral	8	Female	Married	Masters
Tara	9	Female	Married	PhD
Bita	3	Female	Married	PhD
Kimia	2	Female	Single	PhD
Sahar	3	Female	Married	PhD

Data Collection

I used a qualitative method for data collection to answer my research questions. I collected data from participants by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews in a supportive environment. I tried to cooperate well with the participants to gather valuable information for the research project (Weiss, 1994). Semi-structured interviews allowed me not only to get the participants' answers to primary interview questions but to probe deeply into more specific details based on their answers to those questions (Preston & Wang, 2017). I used Persian (Farsi), the native language of most Iranians, to facilitate communication and expression of feelings and ideas. I asked participants to choose a day/time at their convenience. I held in-person interviews, which helped me gain deep insights into their emotions while talking about their experiences and challenges. The interviews lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. I conducted the interviews in their offices for the participants who worked as teaching assistants (TAs) at SFU and had private offices. However, I held the interviews in private study rooms in the Research Commons on the 7th floor of Bennett Library (SFU Burnaby) for the rest of the participants—this increased concentration and privacy. Before starting the interview, I asked them to read and sign the consent form and assured them that their information would remain confidential. I audio-recorded all the interviews with the participants' permission. In addition, I took detailed notes about participants' answers during each interview session. The notes were beneficial for the analysis. Following the interviews, I asked for the participants' permission to contact them in the following weeks if I needed supplementary information. I stored the audio recordings and transcripts/ translations on SFU OneDrive. I kept the written consent forms in a locked drawer in my home office.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, I conducted interviews in Persian (Farsi) to let my participants talk about their experiences, challenges, and feelings more freely and avoid language barriers. However, I had to write my research report in English, so I listened to the audio files, transcribed them, and translated them into English on my own. This helped me to review and remember the audio files very well and to have a good mastery over the recorded and written data. After transcribing and translating all the audio files, I went through them to check for accuracy while listening to the audio files again. Then, I gave

the transcripts/translations to the participants to ensure they were accurate and ultimately reflected the participants' points of view. I analyzed the interviews to find out themes related to the three research questions about students' experiences and challenges, their strategies to cope with challenges, and recommendations for SFU to help students meet the challenges. I used both deductive and inductive analysis. For the deductive analysis, I tried to find the existing themes in the literature in each interview. However, I read through the interview texts several times for the inductive analysis and used color coding for similar answers to develop new themes. After finding the themes, I wrote all of them in a Word file, extracted as many excerpts as possible from the interviews, and put each excerpt under the related theme.

Trustworthiness

Translating all the details of the Persian culture and language into English was not easy work; however, I conducted the interviews in Persian (Farsi) not only to avoid language barriers (van Nes et al., 2010) but also to facilitate communication, information, and emotional exchange during interviews.

After I transcribed and translated the interviews, I returned them to the participants to ensure they were accurate and reflective of their ideas. They read the translations and provided their feedback. This reduced the likelihood of my personal biases in translating and analyzing the data. In addition, to ensure consistency in the coding and interpretation of the themes, I asked a friend to review and comment on my analysis. Moreover, I kept a reflective journal to record everything I had done and found during different stages of my research process.

Findings

Most of the participants described having a positive experience studying at SFU. They agreed that SFU was a good university with good professors and an academic atmosphere. They were positive about the educational facilities, especially SFU libraries. Moreover, everyone felt delighted about the enchanting natural beauty of the Burnaby campus. The participants liked the multicultural context of SFU and confirmed that creating good relationships with their classmates and other international students resulted in good opportunities and experiences. However, they had significant

challenges. Before discussing these challenges in more detail, I provide the narrative portraits of my research participants to shed more light on the experiences and challenges of these students.

Narrative Portrait 1: Maral

At the time of the interview (May 2024), Maral was a student mom studying in the eighth semester of her master's program. She entered Canada with her husband and son, and she believed that studying was more difficult for married students with kids. Although she tried many times to find a student job at SFU Temporary Pool, which provides temporary clerical/secretarial/technical job opportunities at SFU, she was unsuccessful. She stated that finding a job on campus was a great challenge for international graduate students. Finally, she could apply for a TA position at the university as a part of her admission, but she did not receive enough information and support from SFU on how to work as a TA. She explained that the educational, cultural, social, and political backgrounds that students from the Middle East came from were different from the Western countries. Therefore, the challenges these students confronted were multiplied.

In 2023, when she was waiting for her new study permit, she was informed that her mom was hospitalized and waiting for Maral to return to Iran and see her. The long processing time of her new study permit did not allow her to exit Canada. If she did so, she could not return to her studies in Canada. Unfortunately, her mom passed away, and this caused a lot of mental health and emotional problems for her. She decided to use SFU Health and Counselling services to reduce these pressures. Although the waiting time to receive counseling services at SFU was long, there was an Iranian counselor who helped her very much. Maral believed only an Iranian counselor could help Iranian students.

> I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me. You know what I mean? That is your country, your blood, your family… For our mental health, we need Iranian counselors at SFU. They must be familiar with the specific culture that we come from and know how our culture defines our gender roles and the expectations in society and family.

She believed that language and cultural differences affected how she created relationships with her supervisors. There were many misunderstandings in her communication with her previous supervisor, which is why she changed her supervisor.

Narrative Portrait 2: Tara

Although Tara got admission and a full scholarship from a European university, she decided to attend SFU for her PhD studies. To her surprise, her student visa and her husband's visa applications for Canada were rejected. They were very sad about losing the opportunity to study in Europe and having their visas for Canada rejected. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and their rejected visas, she started her studies online in Iran. There was a great time difference between Iran and Canada, so she had to stay awake during the night to be able to attend her classes. This was not an easy thing to do.

> I don't remember anything from when I attended my classes [online] from Iran. Because of the significant time difference, I had to stay awake at night to attend my classes and was under much pressure. I only remember a few pages of the books I read then and the materials presented in classes.

Finally, she could get her visa and enter Canada with her husband. They had difficulties finding a place to live. Their friends helped them book a hotel and then rent an apartment. She felt homesick and could not find a cure for her homesickness. She also felt like an outsider while communicating with people here.

She believed she was lucky to come here with her husband because he could work and manage the life expenses to some extent. However, she believed managing expenses in Canada was very difficult for graduate students because they could not find an on-campus job easily.

After beginning her studies in Canada, Tara came into a health problem, but she could not ask for a medical leave. She waited a difficult and long time to receive medical services in Canada. This affected her academic progress, and she could not follow the preset academic schedule because of her medical issues, language barriers, and different educational contexts. She had problems establishing a good relationship with her supervisor, but she could communicate very well with her classmates. She believed that if she could receive her visa on time, she would not confront many academic problems.

Narrative portrait 3: Bita

Bita had a PhD in communication from an Iranian university when she came to Canada. She had a great job after receiving her PhD in Iran, but because of some social/political changes in her workplace, she did not want to continue working there and decided to study abroad. She chose SFU because many of her friends studied there and told her it was a good university. She did not like cold weather, so SFU in BC was a good choice. After entering SFU, she had difficulties getting familiar with the university. She believed that getting the information she needed from SFU was not an easy thing to do.

One of her most challenging experiences was communicating with her program coordinator. She believed that this coordinator prioritized students from developed countries over students who came from the Middle East.

> This coordinator is fascinated by the power. She is fascinated by the opportunities that white students can see, but I cannot. White students can see these opportunities because they usually do not encounter many obstacles. But, I cannot see opportunities because I have confronted many obstacles in my life… She [the coordinator] cannot blame me for this. She blames students who are not responsible for their backgrounds. It is not their fault; it is something in their society. It refers to their political and social backgrounds.

Although she had problems with this coordinator, she liked the academic atmosphere of SFU. She recommended that SFU faculty and supervisors open the doors to all SFU students, not only their assigned students. In her opinion, it was not fair that only graduate students who had supportive supervisors and instructors could achieve Teaching Assistant (TA) or Research Assistant (RA) positions at SFU. This hindered the academic and career progression of students who could not connect with these supervisors.

Narrative portrait 4: Kimia

Kimia was a single student studying for her PhD degree at SFU. She could not start her studies in September 2023 because of her late visa. She believed visa processing was difficult and time-consuming for Iranian students because there was no Canadian embassy in Iran. Iranian students had to travel to Turkey or another country to give their biometrics so that the IRCC would start processing their applications. After receiving

their visa approval letters, they had to send their passports to Turkey or another country again to receive their visa labels. Due to these lengthy procedures, she had to defer her studies to Spring 2024. When she arrived here, she realized that her supervisor had left SFU. She had a tough time and could not access information easily without a supervisor. She thought SFU needed to hire more faculty and staff to meet the needs of all students.

She had problems finding a place to live. She had neither a credit card nor a reference to rent a place. After waiting for a long time, she could enter the SFU residence. She made many new friends in the SFU residence and felt happy about it. She used to be an English teacher in Iran. Contrary to some participants who confronted language and cultural barriers, she thought that linguistic and cultural differences were great opportunities to learn and communicate with people.

She explained how low-value Iranian currency caused financial problems for her and other Iranian students. She did not know how to apply for financial support at the university, and no one explained it to her.

> It was time to apply for awards, but I did not have a supervisor, so I could not apply for it. Nobody tells them to you… The most critical challenge is financial because it affects other things as well. It will affect the food you eat and the place you rent, which is a great challenge in itself.

Kimia believed that academic transition was more difficult for students who came from different educational systems like Iran. She had problems writing reflective journals or memos because she had no prior experience writing them in Iran. However, she believed the program she was studying at SFU was unique because it focused on using technological innovations to support learning.

Narrative portrait 5: Sahar

Sahar got admission from other Canadian universities but decided to come to SFU because it was in BC, which has a better climate and beautiful nature. She came here with her husband. They also had difficulties finding a place to rent because they neither had international credit cards nor a letter of reference. SFU could not provide them with a residence because all the units were full.

While talking with her, I realized that she had little information about the facilities for students at SFU. For example, she did not know about the health and counseling clinic at SFU. She was unaware of the international student advising team that supported international students at SFU. Like other participants, she had many challenges studying in a new educational system with many language barriers and with some instructors who did not care very much about international students. She believed the orientation session at SFU was insufficient in providing the necessary information to students.

> In our department's orientation session, they only showed us different rooms and did not say anything specific. There were some explanations about student organizations and TSSU, but they used so many abbreviations that I was confused. For example, I did not know what GSS or TSSU was. They use abbreviated forms for everything, and it is a challenge. You have to search and find what they stand for.

Challenges

On the surface, each of these narratives tells a different story; however, the challenges these students confronted had much in common and were all interrelated. The themes that emerged from my analysis are compatible with the existing literature. Regarding research question one, "How do Iranian graduate students describe their experiences and challenges at Simon Fraser University?", relationships with supervisors, financial issues, finding a job on campus, language and cultural barriers, educational transition, housing, health and counseling issues, emotional and social adjustment, and visa and immigration issues were all crucial challenges that Iranian international students had. However, a theme that emerged from the inductive analysis was "challenges in accessing the information." All the participants mentioned difficulties accessing the necessary information at SFU. I considered three main categories to classify the challenges: Academic, Non-academic, and Access to information. Each of these broad categories includes other sub-categories.

Table 2.   Challenges

Academic Challenges	Non-academic Challenges	Challenges with Access to Information
• Relationships with Supervisors • Different Educational Systems • Language Barriers	• Housing • Financial • Career • Mental and Physical Health • Visa and Immigration	• Information Broadcasting • Orientation Sessions • SFU Canvas

Academic Challenges

The relationship with supervisors is very critical for graduate students. It can influence their academic progress, research outcomes, and future career paths. In a literature review study on the challenges of doctoral students, Gao (2021) concluded that the relationship with supervisors was one of the crucial factors in the academic lives of these students. Some participants in my study experienced positive, equal relationships with their supervisors; however, others had tensions due to their supervisors' lack of support and understanding. The problems were partly related to students' language and cultural barriers and partly due to the supervisors' lack of knowledge about the conditions of international students.

> I wish supervisors and professors treated international students with a more open mind because this is not only my problem. I have other friends who are struggling with the same problem. After three years of being a student at SFU, I still feel that my previous supervisor had a bad feeling about me. I want to go and tell him: It is not what you think. (Maral)

Another crucial academic challenge was the different educational systems in Canada and Iran. Because these international students were unfamiliar with Canada's educational system, they did not know what their professors expected of them. For example, writing research memos and reflections was very difficult for Kimia. Moreover, language barriers prevented Sahar and Tara from keeping up with the class pace. They had to spend more time than their domestic classmates to finish reading the coursebooks and preparing for class discussions.

We had an important course, and the instructor was so strict in the first term. I found myself having a trauma. From the beginning of the term, we had to read five or six articles every session. We had to discuss them in class. This was a theory-based discussion, and it was tough for me to discuss it in another language. During the first three months, I did not even have time to go out and see Vancouver. (Sahar)

Non-academic Challenges

One of the biggest concerns of the participants was financial issues. Because of the low value of the Iranian Rial compared to the Canadian dollar, Iranian students were not able to afford tuition and living costs using their financial resources from home. Moreover, accessing bursaries and scholarships was very competitive at the university, and there were not enough financial resources to support them. Financial pressure became worse for students with kids. As a result, they needed to find a job to be able to pay for expenses in Canada. Finding a job off-campus was a challenge without prior Canadian work experience. The only remaining solution was to find on-campus jobs. Despite submitting many applications, none of the participants could find a job in the SFU Temporary Pool. As graduate students, they had the option to work as TAs or RAs on campus, but except for the participants who had the support of their supervisors and instructors, the others could not find TA or RA positions at SFU.

I applied for many research positions, and my applications were all rejected, although I was sure about my research abilities… I applied for TA positions, but professors only took their own students. They preferred to work with the ones whom they knew. I applied for some positions in residence and housing. I applied everywhere, but they did not hire me. When they do not mean to hire new students, why do they advertise then? I spent so much time writing cover letters and resumes. (Kimia)

All five participants mentioned problems in finding and renting a place to live. After a very long flight from Iran to Canada, they did not have a place to go. Some were lucky and could go to a friend or relative's place for some days, but others were not. They needed a credit history, a reference letter from their workplace, or prior landlords to rent a place, but neither was available. Moreover, they could not use SFU residence and housing facilities because the units were all full, and they had to wait on the long waiting lists.

Renting a place to live here is more difficult for Iranians. People from other countries can connect their international banking accounts to

Canada, but we Iranians do not have this option because of the sanctions against Iran... Imagine you enter a new country, and you want to rent a place, they ask for a reference, and they ask for a letter from your workplace. How can we provide a letter from the workplace? (Sahar)

Leaving home to study abroad caused many emotional and mental health problems for the participants. They talked about feelings of homesickness and lack of belonging. Some felt guilty for leaving their parents and not caring for them. They confirmed they needed to speak to an Iranian counselor who was familiar with the specific culture and family roles they came from. Maral believed the long waiting time to visit a doctor or counselor was a big challenge. Tara had a physical health issue, and she could not walk for months. She was waiting for an MRI for nearly six months, which was a very long time compared to the norm in Iran. These emotional, mental, and physical health issues affected the academic progress of these students.

Regarding immigration and visa problems, at least two of these five participants had rejected or late student visas. Although participants had access to SFU International Student Advising services, they believed they needed to talk to an Iranian immigration advisor due to the complexities of Iranian visas.

The IRCC immigration rules are different for each country. They are difficult for Iran. I believe that having Iranian immigration consultants at SFU will be a great help to us. We, Iranian students, find solutions to our visa and immigration problems through Telegram [an instant messaging application] groups and some trial and error. It takes a lot of time; it is frustrating and a new challenge for us. (Maral)

Challenges with Access to Information

Accessing academic and non-academic information was challenging for all the participants. They believed the orientation session at the beginning of the school year was not informative enough and did not familiarize them with the various stages of their academic path. Therefore, holding only one orientation session was not a good source of information for their numerous questions. Furthermore, they pointed out that the only source of information for these students was the official SFU website and asked for more information-dissemination resources.

Getting the information, you need from SFU is very difficult. It depends on how smart you are to get the information you need. It is a bad

18

experience to feel you were not smart enough to get the information. It was one of my challenges. (Bita)

Surprisingly, in all the interviews, participants mentioned that they did not know much about "Canvas," a platform for accessing course materials, syllabi, grades, and assignments at SFU, and how to work with it when they started their studies. Some of them did not know about it for the whole first semester. They stated that the university and their instructors did not guide them on how to use Canvas.

> In the beginning, I did not even know what the Canvas was. I thought it was something for painting! It was not only my problem, but other students also thought similarly. (Sahar)

> I asked a friend to explain it to me. I requested that she have a Zoom video conference with me to explain it to me. Even now, I do not know many things about Canvas. (Bita)

> I did not know what Canvas was and how to work with it. Even when I entered Canvas, I did not know where the files were… Domestic students knew how to work with Canvas, but instructors did not explain it to international students…Iranian students need to explain everything verbally to each other, so we should look for another Iranian student to explain Canvas to us. I understood how to work with Canvas just at the end of the term. It was so complicated. (Maral)

Students' Strategies to Meet Challenges

Regarding the second research question, "What strategies do these students use to cope with the challenges?" Iranian students confirmed that building support networks, improving language and cultural understanding, enhancing academic progress, financial management and support, improving emotional and mental health, and learning how to present themselves well to supervisors and others helped them overcome some challenges.

The best strategy for these Iranian students to overcome their challenges was building support networks. Participants emphasized the importance of being a member of Iranian communities both inside and outside the university. Most of the information and support they received was from their Iranian communities. Some participants tried to be members of non-Iranian communities to have more academic and career opportunities. Moreover, they asked their supervisors, faculty, classmates, and friends to help them.

> When I was in Iran, I did not ask for help from anybody, but my brother told me that when I entered a foreign country, I had to do this. You must learn how to ask for help. I tried to learn this skill, although it is hard to ask somebody to do something for me. (Kimia)

To overcome language barriers, they attended some language classes and communicated with native speakers to learn more from them and boost their self-confidence. One participant's strategy was writing down every new vocabulary word and expression she heard and using them in her speech. For their academic progress, they tried to get more familiar with the educational system in Canada, know their professors' expectations, read multiple articles, use various academic resources, and submit their assignments on time. One participant used the Center of Accessible Learning (CAL) at SFU after confronting some health and educational issues. She mentioned that this center's advisors help students catch up with their academic paths. For financial management and support, they tried to apply for TA and RA positions or to the SFU Temporary Pool; however, they were unsuccessful in getting a job through the SFU Temporary Pool. They also applied for some bursaries and scholarships. To improve their mental and physical health, they used SFU Health and Counselling Services. Maral emphasized how a counselor helped her after she lost her mom.

> The most significant support that SFU gave me was the Iranian counselor who helped me cope with the problems I had with the loss of my mother. All my colleagues and friends noticed the positive changes in my mood after the counseling. (Maral)

One strategy that some of these students wish they had was learning how to present themselves well. They mentioned that people from other cultures presented themselves very well. They emphasized that Iranian students needed to learn this to be successful in their academic and career journeys.

> Another critical point is that Iranians behave modestly here [in Canada]. We do not have enough confidence to talk about our abilities. We should not be humble here but present ourselves as much as possible. It is tough for me to learn this. They [other nationalities] present themselves very well, but we Iranians do not. (Kimia)

Students' Recommendations for the University

Regarding the last research question, "What do these students recommend that the university provides (in terms of resources and services) to help them meet these

challenges?" They recommended that SFU consider the social, cultural, political, economic, and educational backgrounds that international students come from and pay attention to the unique needs of these students. They requested more support and guidance from faculty and staff for academic and non-academic issues.

> SFU has to familiarize international students with its educational methods because international students come from different backgrounds. Domestic students have been here since childhood and know how to work with different materials and assignments. The case is not the same for international students. We do not know how to do all these. (Tara)

> As an International student, I need to talk about my feelings, my mental health, and my emotions before starting to do any academic work. We need somebody to allow us to talk about our emotions and feelings. It is important to have some supportive instructors. (Bita)

Regarding financial challenges, participants recommended that SFU consider more bursaries, scholarships, and on-campus job opportunities for international graduate students. They also requested that SFU allocate TA and RA positions to more international graduate students instead of limiting these opportunities only to students with supportive supervisors who provide recommendation letters and other requirements. They also emphasized the importance of receiving support from the university when they do not have any other supporters in Canada.

> We international students are alone here. We have to manage everything. We have to start our lives from zero here. The financial problem is significant. It would be great if SFU supported international students more to overcome financial problems. (Sahar)

Considering career services, most participants needed help writing resumes and cover letters based on Canadian standards and preparing for job interviews. Although SFU provided these services, they expected to receive more detailed and case-specific support for their career paths during their studies and after graduation.

> We need instructions on writing cover letters and resumes and preparing for interviews because each country has a different system… I tried to improve the cover letter through trial and error. I reserved an appointment to learn how to write a cover letter, and they only showed me a site and read the guidelines for writing a cover letter. I needed them to help me write a cover letter based on my background. (Kimia)

For the health and counseling services and international advising services, they requested shorter waiting times and easier access. They preferred to talk to Iranian

mental health counselors and immigration advisors to communicate more efficiently and achieve better results. Moreover, they requested more support for navigating the Permanent Residency (PR) path.

> Temporary visas mean we are not on solid ground. It means we must be worried about our visas and permits every second. I know this has much to do with immigration policies, but it would be great if SFU helped us navigate the PR path more easily after graduation. (Maral)

Since most participants confronted significant challenges in finding a place to live, they emphasized that SFU consider more housing facilities for international students, especially the ones with no credit records or references. They also requested shorter waiting times to receive housing services. Only one participant could find a place at SFU housing after two terms of applying for it. She mentioned that living in SFU residence and housing provides better opportunities for international students.

> When we live on campus, we can use the facilities more easily. For example, we can use the library and gym. It took me a long time to go to the gym and return home when I did not live on campus. Now that I live in SFU housing, I can save more time commuting to campus. I spend more time with friends here. It is more comfortable for me. (Kimia)

To receive more support and access to information, they requested that SFU hire more staff, faculty, and employees and diversify its information broadcasting services. They believed that holding more orientation sessions and meetings and using posters, brochures, and flyers to introduce different services and facilities at SFU could be good complementary aids to the SFU website to transfer information. One participant recommended that SFU change the orientation session's date so that more international students could attend.

> I missed the first orientation held at the university. The term started on September 6 and the orientation was on September 4. I arrived here [in Canada] late. I think it was held very early. SFU can hold it in the second week of the term when more international students have arrived. (Sahar)

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, although SFU provided some support services to international students, many students were unaware of these services or lacked understanding of when and how to utilize them. As I realized from the interviews, this

challenge was partly due to the university's limited use of diverse information broadcasting methods, such as brochures, posters, pamphlets, meetings, seminars, and verbal explanations. Information was predominantly provided on the university's website, which some international students were unaware of. I recommend the university employ multiple information dissemination methods and conduct more orientation sessions with comprehensive explanations about the various academic and non-academic support services available to international students. Additionally, posters, brochures, and pamphlets could be written in multiple languages to enhance inclusivity. I recognized that another factor contributing to this challenge was cultural differences. In Iran, people commonly use verbal explanations to convey information, whereas in Canada, there is a tendency to provide fewer verbal explanations. Consequently, several participants reported that when they sought assistance from staff, they were often directed to online resources without accompanying verbal explanations. Given this cultural context, Iranian students preferred in-person verbal interactions over online information retrieval.

One crucial area where all the participants expressed the need for support was the SFU online learning platform, Canvas. Consequently, I recommend SFU provide orientation sessions to teach international students how to navigate and utilize Canvas. Even participants who worked as TAs at SFU lacked proficiency in using Canvas effectively, such as entering grades and managing content. As a result, inclusive instruction on this platform is critical for students to ensure that they benefit effectively from this online platform.

Regarding the TA and RA positions and on-campus job positions at SFU Temporary Pool, all the participants expressed a need for a more equitable distribution of these positions among all graduate students. They recommended that the Human Resources at SFU consider new policies to hire more international graduate students. Moreover, participants mentioned that securing an RA or TA position was highly contingent upon graduate students' relationships with their supervisors because faculty and supervisors preferred to work with students they knew and trusted. To promote fairness and inclusivity, SFU could prioritize other criteria, such as students' academic performance and financial needs, to allocate this opportunity to more international students.

Creating positive relationships with supervisors and staff was a significant concern for participants. To address this, SFU could implement training programs for faculty and staff to enhance their cultural understanding and familiarize them with the diverse needs of international students. Faculty and staff should be encouraged to use simple and clear language during classroom sessions and interactions with these students, clarify the overall academic expectations of the program and the specific requirements of each course, and offer more detailed explanations regarding how to do assignments and research. These actions would facilitate international students' academic and social integration by fostering a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.

SFU offers various services to students, including health and counseling services, international student advisors, residence and housing, and financial aid and awards. However, all participants expressed the need for shorter waiting times to access these services. To address this issue, the university could hire additional staff to better meet the needs of these students in a shorter time. Specifically, employing Iranian mental health counselors and immigration advisors would be highly beneficial for Iranian students, who often come from complex social and economic backgrounds and have unique needs. Additionally, providing more bursaries and financial support for international students would significantly facilitate their academic journey abroad.

Finally, these Iranian students had difficulties finding accommodation upon arrival. Although SFU may not be able to provide long-term residence facilities for all students, it could offer temporary residence areas where international students can rest after their long journey and then search for more permanent housing options. This temporary accommodation would provide them with immediate support and allow them to have a more comfortable transition into their new environment.

Implications for Future Studies

Through this study, I realized that despite many similarities in participants' experiences, the socialization patterns of married and single participants with other university members, such as classmates and community members, varied. Soylemez-Karakoc et al. (2024) found that married international graduate students significantly differed from single graduate students and undergraduates in forming social networks. Married

international graduate students had fewer interactions with university friends and colleagues, leading to social exclusion. Consequently, future studies may focus on the experiences of married international graduate students, married with children, and single students to better address their specific needs.

According to Heng (2019), factors such as the field of study, year of study, and gender may influence the experiences of international students. Heng's study revealed that first-year students experienced severe anxiety when participating in class due to the rapid speech of native speakers. In my study, only female Iranian graduate students volunteered to participate. Future research should incorporate criteria such as age, gender, year of study, and field of study to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of international students.

Now that we have gained insight into the perspectives of international students, future studies may focus on the perspectives of policymakers, educational leaders, faculty, staff, and domestic students. Research should explore how these stakeholders perceive international students, their challenges, and the resources and services needed to support the growing number of international students effectively. Moreover, each higher education institution may conduct this research to identify the specific strategies and interventions to enhance its international students' overall experience and success.

Conclusion

Studying at SFU was a positive experience for Iranian international graduate students; however, they confronted some challenges and used different coping strategies. According to the challenges and recommendations discussed in this study, utilizing multiple information dissemination methods, offering detailed training on using Canvas, equitable distribution of TA and RA positions, providing temporary residence upon students' arrival and long-term residence during their studies, enhancing multicultural understanding among faculty and staff, hiring culturally informant counselors and advisors from different nationalities, and increasing financial supports would improve the experiences of these international students at SFU.

Higher education institutions must implement more inclusive policies and adopt comprehensive approaches to effectively address the diverse needs of international

students, who come from various academic, cultural, social, political, and economic backgrounds. Such measures not only benefit the international students but also enrich the institutions themselves, fostering a vibrant, internationalized university environment. Moreover, these efforts enhance global exchange and understanding, contributing to a more interconnected and equitable world.

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Appendix A. Interview Consent Form

Thank you for considering participating in an interview about international graduate students' experiences and challenges. Before you decide whether to participate, please take time to review the following information. If you have any questions or need additional information, please ask! If, after reviewing this information, you are still interested in participating, then we will go forward with the interview.

I, SEDIGHEH MOUSAVIZADEH, am conducting this interview as part of a research project exploring the experiences and challenges of Iranian graduate students at SFU. I am a graduate student, and this project is a requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership Program at SFU. This research is being supervised by Dr. REBECCA COX, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR in the Faculty of Education. I will write up the results of this research in the form of a research report, and I will present and share them in the form of a public presentation at SFU during the summer of 2024.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences and challenges of Iranian graduate students who are studying as international students at SFU, to learn about the strategies they use to overcome the challenges and to learn what these students recommend that the university provides (in terms of resources and services) to help them meet the challenges. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a 40–50-minute interview to explore your perspective on this topic. We will abide by the latest provincial health guidelines concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, and we can meet in person in a private room at SFU or virtually via Zoom.

During this interview, I will ask you to talk about your experience of being an international student at SFU, the challenges you have confronted, the strategies you used to overcome the challenges, and your recommendations for SFU to help you overcome the challenges. You may choose not to answer any of my questions, and you may also end the interview at any point during the scheduled time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone. There are no negative consequences for withdrawing your participation, and I will erase/destroy any information already collected from you.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you by participating in this research.

The interview will be recorded. Any information you share during your interview **will remain confidential**. I will ask you to choose a pseudonym for use in the research study. I will ensure that the confidentiality of all participants will be preserved by not revealing their names and identities in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. I will transcribe the interview myself, using that pseudonym, and the resulting transcript will not include any information that could be traced back to you. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on SFU OneDrive, a secure password-protected file hosting program, and the written consent forms will be stored in a locked drawer in my home office.

The list matching participant information and pseudonyms will be stored separately on SFU OneDrive. Upon completion of the project, the list will be destroyed.

In reporting on my findings from this project, I will continue to keep your identity and participation confidential. I will be using the interview data to write a report for my MEd program. I will also share the findings at a public presentation at SFU in July. In addition to producing the final report and presentation required for my M.Ed. program, my report will be made available upon request to those participants who would like to read it. I can provide an electronic copy via email or a paper copy to those who like one. I may also present the findings in an academic conference or academic journal.

Once I complete all my MEd degree requirements, I will destroy the audio recordings, and I will keep the anonymized transcripts for no more than five years after the completion of the project.

I can be reached by email and phone. If you would like to talk to my faculty supervisor, you can reach Dr. Rebecca Cox by email.

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, please contact the director, SFU Office of Research Ethics.

Signing this consent form indicates that:

- You agree to participate in this research and to have the interview audio recorded.

- You understand that you are free to stop participating in this research project at any time.

- You have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date (MM/DD/YYYY)

_____

Printed Name of Participant

<div align="right">Version Date: January 30, 2024</div>

Appendix B. Interview Questions

1. Please tell me how you ended up at SFU.

2. Please tell me about your experiences at SFU in general.

3. Please describe the most challenging experiences of being an international student at SFU.

    • Could you rank these challenges according to their difficulty to overcome?

    • Could you give me an example of the challenges you have described?

    • What were your feelings and thoughts at that time?

4. What strategies did you use to cope with these challenges?

    • Please give me an example of your strategy to meet a challenge.

    • Do you think this strategy helped you meet the challenge effectively?

5. How can educational leaders, administrators, instructors, and staff at SFU help you meet these challenges?

    • Did you receive any help from SFU?

    • Please give me an example of a time when they helped you meet a challenge.

    • How have you been supported by SFU?

    • To what extent have you been supported?

    • How did you feel/think at that time?

    • How might SFU do better at supporting you?

Version Date: January 14, 2024

Appendix C. Recruitment Message

Participants Needed for Research

Research Topic: The Experiences and Challenges of International Students

Participants: Iranian Graduate students studying as International Students at SFU

Interview Time: Approximately 40-50 minutes

Where: SFU Burnaby Campus or Virtually via Zoom

Please contact me by email or message me on Telegram private chat if you are interested in participating and for additional information about this research.

Please note that posting to comments sections, liking, or sharing on social media or other forums about this study may identify you as a participant. We therefore suggest that if this study was made available to you via a social media site or other online forums, you refrain from posting comments to protect your anonymity.

Thank you!

Sedigheh Mousavizadeh

Version Date: January 14, 2024

Appendix D. Follow-up Message

Dear [Name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. The attached document provides a few details about the goals of my project, and what would be involved if you decided to participate. Once you have a chance to review it, please let me know if you have any additional questions, and whether you are willing to schedule an interview.

Regardless of whether you decide to participate, I will keep your decision confidential; and if you do decide to participate, you are welcome to stop participating at any time.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Sedigheh Mousavizadeh

Version Date: January 14, 2024