

The Canadian Dream: International Students and Cruel Optimism

**by
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Abstract

Canada is a top destination for international students globally. Research on obtaining an undergraduate degree and its influence on future employment and fulfillment post-graduation often focus on current international students. I explored the less researched experience of international students who have chosen to remain in Canada post-graduation. Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews from three participants provided insights into the challenges they faced and how their perception of the “Canadian Dream” has changed. This research could be beneficial for post-secondary administrators as well as prospective, current and prior international students in Canada.

Keywords: International students; international student experience; goals; cruel optimism; post-graduation; Canadian dream

Dedication

I dedicate this to all prospective, current, and past international students of Canada. May you all one day fulfill your version of the Canadian Dream.

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Introduction

For me, being able to come to Canada as an international student was a privilege. Being able to remain post-graduation and pursue a career in post-secondary was a dream. The decision to attend university was a non-negotiable expectation set by my parents. They constantly reminded me of the value of education and how an undergraduate degree was the key to a better future. Canada was always my dream destination, as I remember fond memories from my childhood, visiting my grandparents who resided here. Taking in the beautiful scenery and fresh air-a very stark contrast to the heavily populated and polluted Asian cities I grew up in, such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. When I did arrive, ready to begin my undergraduate university experience at the University of British Columbia, I vividly remember stepping out of the airport in Vancouver, filled with optimism and anticipation for educational experience ahead. That all came to a screeching halt as I concluded my first term, when I failed a course required for my intended program. The transition into university left me confused and scared at the possibility of having to withdraw from university and leave Canada. Having lived in globalized international cities and going through various educational curriculums such as the British International General Certificate of Secondary Education and International Baccalaureate in English, I thought the transition into university would be manageable. Once admitted, I realized even among other international students, each of our circumstances varied greatly and there can be many barriers that are not easily overcome. With the limited time I had to improve my grades, I had to face the reality of having lost thousands of dollars in tuition to remain focused. In addition, I struggled adjusting to the new style of learning and teaching which really hindered my ability to succeed academically despite my efforts to do so. As I got closer to graduation, the thoughts of gaining job experience and post-graduation life became prominent. One day, I was sitting in my “sociology of the workplace” class, and I will always remember the discussion on workplace discrimination, and how anglicized or shortened names may lead to more job opportunities. After weeks of unsuccessful job applications, I decided to shorten my legal name and started to get responses. It was only much later as I began my professional life;

did I begin to question the ethicality of that practice and how discrimination is not limited to the workplace.

As I began to reflect on my journey so far, the experiences and challenges were difficult to put into words, and it soon became just part of the “normal international student experience.” As I began to look at it through the lens of my personal and professional background, it is slowly beginning to make sense, though there is still so much to learn. It is like a cluster of successes, challenges, dreams and goals that were all seemingly muted in the background as I pursued my long-term goal of graduating and working towards a better future. I believe that the value of a university degree is in the experiences and opportunities that hopefully build towards a better future. Post-graduation, I chose to remain and work in Canada and the entirety of my career has been within post-secondary education. All my roles have been among various student-focused capacities, where my goal is to work with students through their successes and challenges towards degree completion. I have witnessed the number of resources invested in attracting international students, including scholarships, guaranteed on-campus residences, being part of a global community, and numerous resources and supports available. In comparison, there are significantly fewer resources invested in the transition for students’ post-graduation. The extent of resources usually consists of welcoming them into an alumni community, job search workshops and governmental application workshops.

Working in post-secondary institutions has allowed me to gain insights into different aspects of university administration and the student life cycle through undergraduate studies. From working at a smaller college, to a university with one of the largest international student populations in Canada, I believe that every student experience is unique. Universities are continuously increasing the amount and depth of resources they provide to better the student experience. Student life challenges such as counselling, academic/career planning, adjusting to life in Canada, accessibility needs and building a sense of community are all answered for. Having worked in various student-centric roles within post-secondary, I share a special connectedness with international students. Working within a university, administrators and staff across

different departments will often be able to provide an answer for questions asked by international students. Such as, a question around residences on campus, would be directed to the campus Housing services. Though without directly following up with these students, the extent to how satisfied these students were with the answers they received remains unknown. The lack of research and supports in place is particularly true for international students' post-graduation life. Once they graduate, it is significantly more difficult to stay in contact due to the unpredictability of the future and for international students, the added unknown of whether they decide to remain in Canada. Better understanding the experiences of international students, especially those who remain in Canada after graduation will benefit future international students and better prepare them for post-graduation in Canada.

For many students living around the world, being able to attend university in Canada as an international student is a dream come true, just as it was for me. The decision to pursue this dream comes with high costs, sacrifices and numerous barriers to overcome. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), a dream is defined as thoughts, goals, aspirations or anything that occurs in our minds during sleep. An individual who has a dream, will eventually wake up and what was dreamt often remains as just that, a dream and not reality. The international student journey towards obtaining an undergraduate degree, gaining employment and working towards a better future in Canada is such a large task that it can seem unattainable – just like a dream.

According to Laberge (2013, p. 397), “the American Dream is the belief that anybody has the chance to succeed in the United States, no matter what his or her background is.” Based on this concept of the American Dream¹, I draw on the similarities to how international students from diverse backgrounds pursue an undergraduate degree in Canada. These students are working towards their version of a “Canadian Dream” which is the dream that an undergraduate degree in Canada can lead towards a better future in Canada post-graduation.

¹ Coined in a best-selling book in 1931 titled “Epic of America”, by James Truslow Adams, who was an American writer and historian (Adams, 2017).

It is not just international students who have this dream. Their parents are often the very ones who help make the decision due to the large financial requirement. For many parents of international students, including my own, the hope is that there are increased opportunities to build a better future compared to if they remained in their home country.

I will always be grateful for being able to attend university as an international student. For every international student here, there are many others who were not afforded the same privilege. All this comes with significant amounts of expectations and pressures to one day achieve the “Canadian Dream.” As Da Silva and Ravindran (2016) pointed out, the combination of Canadian qualifications, such as a university degree and work experience often lead to a significant proportion of international students settling down in Canada after their studies. Da Silva and Ravindran (2016) highlighted the positive educational, career and immigration expectations, as well as a desire for new experiences, as major reasons cited by international students for choosing to study in Canada.

Before describing my own research inquiry, I review the existing research to provide a better understanding of the topic and landscape within Canada. I begin by providing a historical timeline of international student policies since the 1970s, then discuss the present-day challenges and policy changes affecting current international students and post-secondary institutions. Next, I shift the focus towards the international student perspective, the challenges they face and the dreams they have towards building a better future by pursuing a post-secondary education here in Canada. The gaps in this literature set the stage for my own research project, where I conducted semi-qualitative interviews with participants who remained in Canada post-graduation. I then analyzed the gathered data and identified themes to better represent my findings followed by concluding my research project.

Literature Review

The Canadian government's perspective on international students has gone through significant changes over the past few decades, from widespread recruitment of international students, to placing a limit on the number of international students coming to Canada. This shift in international policy reveals the change in perspective and the complex motivations across all the parties involved from various levels of government, institutions and the students themselves.

To better understand this shift, I briefly highlight key developments that McCartney (2021) identified in his historical review of international student policy in Canada over the past few decades. McCartney's (2021) historical review draws on archival sources from public post-secondary institutions across Canada, government policies at both the provincial and federal level as well as other scholarly research from the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*. From this review, McCartney (2021) identified four distinct eras in international student policymaking, all of which have shaped current practices and discussions around international students in Canada.

According to McCartney (2021), in the 1970s, international students consisted of about 5% of all students within Canadian post-secondary institutions, which would explain the lack of discussion around international students, both in terms of governmental policies and scholarly discussions. One of the first key policies introduced was for international students to pay higher tuition and fees compared to domestic students. This set the stage for an era distinguished by viewing international students as financial revenue. At the same time, international students were not allowed to seek employment due to government restrictions. International students were considered visitors to Canada for the sole purpose of studying and were required to leave after the completion of their studies.

During the years of 1985 to 2001, McCartney (2021) notes, across Canada, international students became highly sought after by post-secondary institutions as they began to recognize how the increased tuition and fees could benefit all students and help

fund university operation costs (McCartney, 2021). Interestingly, with the growing discussions around international students, scholarly interest examining the effects of such policies increased as well. According to McCartney (2021), during this period, even though the institutional pressures to increase international recruitment efforts may be financially motivated, there was also discussion around the value these international students would bring to campus. As society became more globalized and students around the world were offered more opportunities to study abroad, both the Canadian government and post-secondary institutions alike adapted to best capitalize on the situation. For example, in British Columbia, the University of British Columbia (UBC) launched the International Student Initiative (ISI) department, with the initial goal of increasing the international student population by over four times in size.

In the era he terms “International Education as a Vital Canadian Export Industry” McCartney (2021) identifies another key policy development between the Canadian government and post-secondary institutions. In 2001, international students now had the possibility of remaining in Canada post-graduation for employment and an eventual path to citizenship (McCartney, 2021). This marked a significant shift in how the Canadian government began to see international students as not just an immediate short-term benefit for the economy but increasingly saw how these university educated, and highly skilled students fit a new category of an ideal immigrant and the long-term benefits of them remaining post-graduation (Brunner, 2017). This possibility of permanent residency post-graduation soon became a prominent benefit to pursuing a post-secondary degree in Canada and further attracted international students from all around the world. More than half of the international students who decided to come to Canada, intended to immigrate, with more than two-thirds aspiring towards work opportunities in Canada post-graduation (Stein, 2018). International students who studied at an eligible designated institution for four years, would be granted a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) upon graduation if they decided to remain in Canada to work. The number of PGWP holders grew more than 13 times in size, from 10,300 in 2008 to 135,100 in 2018. Almost three-quarters of all PGWP holders became Permanent Residents (PR) within five years of obtaining their PGWP (Crossman et al., 2022).

In 2014, the Canadian government invested heavily in international education, launching the country's first-ever *International Education Strategy* as a blueprint to attract talent to Canada and prepare it for the 21st century (Scott et al., 2015). As the Canadian government realized that international education can be directly linked to the long-term domestic economy. Recently graduated international students were viewed as ideal candidates to pursue skilled employment and permanent residency within the domestic workforce (Scott et al., 2015). This strategy involved the Canadian government working with provinces, territories, Canadian educational institutions, and other stakeholders. As documented by the ICEF Monitor (2019), in 2011, there were 239,131 international students in Canada and by 2017, there was a total of 494,525 international students, which showcases the significant increase.

Today, obtaining an undergraduate degree at a Canadian university is becoming increasingly common. The university student population at Simon Fraser University is the largest and most diverse it has ever been. The number of international student population in Canada has increased considerably by 185% from 2010 to 2019, amounting to 642,480 in total (Baghoori et al., 2022). This increase in population alongside the growing list of global issues, such as social, political, economic, or environmental further complicates an already complex student population within universities. According to Guo (2017), in 2012, international students spent an estimated \$8.4 billion, which generated over \$455 million in government tax revenues. This reaffirms the significant financial contributions international students bring to both Canada and post-secondary institutions.

Given the significant changes regarding international student policies as outlined by McCartney's (2021) historical review as well as more recent policies such as the *International Education Strategy* as outlined in Scott et. al.'s (2015) study, it is evident that the international student growth within Canada has been much greater than anticipated. This rapid growth has placed pressures on many other aspects of Canadian society. Therefore, the Canadian federal government's announcement in 2024 to place a limit on the amount of international student permits may not be come as a surprise for many. The significant increase of international students in Canada has been deemed unsustainable by the Canadian federal government, having acknowledged the pressures

placed on essential aspects of society that impact Canada as a whole, such as housing, health care and other services. Compared to 2023, this new policy in effect as of 2024 January, is estimated to result in a 35% decrease in approved study permits from the government (IRCC Government of Canada, 2024). The immediate short-term effects such as a decrease of overall spending and revenue contributed by international students should not be understated. However, it is the long-term effects that are difficult to predict.

To provide a brief context on this new policy, the federal government now requires an additional government-issued documentation before an international student can begin their journey at a Canadian institution. This additional document is known as a Provincial Attestation Letter (PAL), which the federal government determines how many each province can receive. This additional step provides yet another administrative and governmental barrier for international students hoping to pursue a Canadian post-secondary education and may very likely cause Canada to lose part of the allure it previously had over other countries in terms of the immigration expectations mentioned earlier (Graeme, 2024). This renewed spotlight on international students has brought about uncertainty in the future of international student policies in Canada, and many of the circumstances that may arise remain relatively unknown.

To begin to better understand the international student perspective, Chirkov et al. (2008)'s study explored the role of self-determined motivation, and the goals international students have for studying abroad. By surveying international students, they found that often the motivations to study abroad would come from avoiding conditions in their home country and to improve future career opportunities through better education. As international students, their primary support structures, such as family and friends are often not easily accessible, and the importance of self-determined motivation begins to become apparent. When international students decide to move to a foreign country to study based on self-motivation, the chance of succeeding is higher compared to those who were force/controlled to make the decision to study abroad (Chirkov et al. 2008). One's motivation can also have different factors that may either encourage or hinder their personal/professional growth. As students who strive to get a better education and expand their career opportunities tend to be more motivated to do so, as compared to those who

are less motivated which will hinder their own growth. Cultural environment and parental influence on various aspects of their lives also tend to be important factors as students who are more educated about the host countries culture, will tend to be more open to accepting the new culture and better adjust into the various aspects of student life.

Transitioning into university is an arduous journey for many students, filled with challenges and adjustments. For international students, there is an added layer of complexity such as, cross-cultural adaption (Scott et al., 2015). Research relating to international students transitioning into a new country, environment and society often mentions factors that affect that transition, such as language ability, the degree of international students' identification with the host countries culture and their extent of intercultural exposure. In Robertson et al.'s (2000) study of international students, learning environments and perceptions, the researchers found that many professors still believe that English language proficiency was a primary challenge faced by international students, followed by cultural differences, unfamiliarity with host country educational systems, and modes of instruction.

As the world becomes more globalized, international schools around the world have increasingly adopted Western curriculums taught in English, such as, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, A-Levels and General Certificate of Secondary Education. International students who have gone through these programs begin university with a more proficient level of English compared to students who are just beginning to learn English as a second language closer to when they decide to study abroad. Recent studies have noted that English language proficiency is no longer the main challenge faced by international students in Canada, instead, financial support, career services, academic advising, and campus-life activities were listed as top concerns (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

To provide some perspective on the financial strain faced by international students at Simon Fraser University, in 2016, according to Simon Fraser University (2024) tuition for international students was \$1005.71 per unit. Today, international student tuition is \$1,167.61 per unit, which amounts to at least \$140,113 in just tuition for

an undergraduate degree. When compared to domestic student tuition, which is \$212.04 per unit, and \$25,444 for an undergraduate degree, we can see that international student tuition today is over five times more than domestic tuition. This significant difference in tuition fees further emphasizes the importance of recruiting international students as a source of financial benefit for both Canada and post-secondary institutions.

Studies specifically focusing on international students have shown that there is an added layer of complexity, such as cultural values and beliefs that causes them to be more hesitant to seek out mental health resources. According to Da Silva and Ravindran (2016), compared to domestic students, international students are not only more likely to experience psychological distress but also less likely to seek help due to factors such as stigma and denial due to cultural influences. Though as Da Silva and Ravindran (2016) highlights, certain ethnic groups can be more at risk, which further emphasizes the diversity within international students and how some may be more likely to seek help depending on their cultural and parental influences. An interesting example is that of American students at a Canadian university, which problematizes the binary classification into administrative categories – domestic and international, which have different fee structures and specialized services and resources as well (Kenyon et al., 2012). This clear separation between domestic and international students, despite being administratively, can potentially lead to growing neglect surrounding the diversity among international students. For example, for an international student who is fluent in English and is well-adjusted to a Westernized educational curriculum compared to one who is learning English as a second language and unfamiliar with the curriculum here. All this adds to the increased difficulty of university administrators providing tailored and personalized support for these students.

As international students continually pursue their version of the “Canadian Dream,” they face a pivotal crossroad as they prepare to graduate and must decide whether to remain in Canada or not. By implementing policies such as the Post-Graduate Work Permit, the Canadian government sees international students who have graduated from a post-secondary in Canada as the ideal immigrant. This forms an assumption that these international student graduates would be more culturally aligned and well-

positioned to transition into the local workforce post-graduation. As compared to an individual who enters Canada from another country solely for the purpose of work, and did not graduate from an undergraduate degree at a Canadian post-secondary institution.

According to Nunes & Arthur's (2013) study, many international students struggle to obtain employment in Canada post-graduation. Despite this challenge, the participants in this study, who were all within one year of graduating, maintained the dream that Canada was able to provide a better future for them. I briefly highlight key recommendations identified by Nunes & Arthur's (2013) study, based on data gathered from their participants. These recommendations may be helpful for future international students and those who work within post-secondary institutions. The hope is for Canadian employers to recognize the value of candidates who have an international experience and to not discriminate based on their international status, perceived poor English proficiency and different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, for international students who are hoping to remain in Canada post-graduation, the importance of beginning preparations to increase employability sooner rather than later. Examples such as being aware of work environment/culture, building networks within local industries and engaging with various resources and services during university.

For researchers such as Arthur & Flynn (2011), who focused on international students completing their studies and transitioning into employment and permanent residency in Canada, the participants in the study were all current students from various levels, ranging between undergraduate, master's and doctoral. This may reflect the difficulty in finding recently graduated participants who have entered the workforce in Canada, and further reinforces the need to contribute to literature in this area. For many international students, the decision to remain in Canada post-graduation is often influenced in part by their parents, indicating the importance of maintaining such relationships (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). The amount of financial investment made by parents for these international students to be afforded this opportunity, which in turn, causes them to attribute more value to their parents' thoughts on their future.

International students choosing to remain in Canada post-graduation has continually increased, as government policies has allowed for that possibility. Most research on international students in Canada, is often based on current students. There is significantly less research on those who may be conflicted as to whether their decision to pursue the “Canadian Dream” was worth it. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object (Berlant, 2011). In this case, the object that international students may form an attachment to is their “Canadian Dream.” As they progress through their undergraduate degree, they may realize they have different interests in mind. Though because of this attachment, it may become detrimental to their physical and/or mental well-being. I draw upon parts of this concept as it relates to how international students are pursuing the “Canadian Dream” in the sense of attaching optimism to a university degree from Canada and the promises of a better future having attained it. Decades ago, international students would have had to return to their home countries post-graduation, but that is no longer the case today as many choose to remain in Canada. There is limited research on those who choose to remain, as this is a relatively new development. By contributing to this area of research, there are potential benefits for post-secondary institutions and international students in Canada.

The Research Questions

The research questions guiding this research were: How do international students who have recently graduated from Simon Fraser University reflect on their undergraduate experience? Building upon the previous question, my second question was: How has their experiences prepared them to transition into post-graduation in Canada?

Methodology

Through qualitative research, I aimed to better understand how the meaning international students ascribe to their experiences built towards their overall goals. Creswell's (2018) constructivist or social constructivism worldview as a perspective closely aligns with my qualitative research approach. I relied on my participants' views of the situation and seek to better understand the world in which I live and work in.

Researcher Role/Positionality

As a researcher and a former international student who progressed through the commonly trekked pathway towards long-term residence in Canada, this topic is one that resonates across various aspects of my life. My positionality and personal connection further reinforced the empathy I feel towards the challenges and barriers faced by international students. I previously worked at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and worked with international students in various capacities and formed professional working relationships. While interviewing my participants, I had to be aware of my own bias and limit information of my personal experiences as an international student to not influence my data collection or interpretation of a question. This is to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of data gathered. This reflects the social constructivist worldview Creswell (2018) mentions, as having reflexivity as a researcher is to recognize my own background and experiences and how they shape my thinking. During and after the interview, I noted down my ideas, to allow myself to later reflect on my notes and whether my personal experiences may shape my interpretation of the data. During the interview, I utilized open-ended questions, to allow the participant to share their personal experiences. As part of the holistic nature of my research, I encouraged my participants to explore various topics outside of my immediate scope of research, as it allowed me to better understand the complexity of the topic and their personal experience.

Research Participants

Simon Fraser University (SFU) is one of the largest universities located in British Columbia, Canada and has one of the most diverse international student populations, with 8290 international students from 133 countries in the 2023 calendar year (Simon Fraser University, 2024). It is evident that significant resources are invested into retaining these students. For example, an entire “International Student Advising and Programs” team within Student Services provides resources and advice on the international student experience as well as guidance on immigration and transition related issues. There are also funds and scholarships available for international students to help lessen the financial strain.

My inclusion criteria for participants in this research project were as follows: participants need to be an international student who graduated from SFU in the past five years and remained in Canada after graduation. The intention of selecting participants who recently graduated was to provide the most up-to-date analysis on what international students are experiencing.

Post-graduation, when these students attempt to enter the workforce, employers can recognize their status as being on a temporary work permit, as one criterion to receiving a post-graduate work permit from the government is to have previously been an international student. It is important to begin to understand the complexity of such a label, and that even though they may seem to neatly fit into all the prescribed themes and subthemes I am going to mention, it is not possible to quantify it all.

Using publicly available information, such as, networking platforms (LinkedIn), online websites via a Google search that displayed contact information, I reached out to international students who I had previously had professional connections with and asked whether they knew individuals who had met my inclusion criteria and were interested in participating in my study. I decided to select three participants as they were of different backgrounds, and I felt would provide a small snapshot into my research topic.

All selected participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. For my first participant, Bou, graduated about a year ago and is currently pursuing a master's degree and hopes to eventually pursue a job related to her field of studies. My second participant, Bon, graduated about a year ago and is currently working full-time with the hopes of applying for permanent residency soon. My final participant, Bam, graduated about two months ago and has been searching for a job, it has been a challenging period but remains hopeful of securing a job soon.

Data Collection

I engaged in a conversational style of interview, where I welcomed my participants to interpret my questions in their own way and allowed them to guide me to different areas/topics they wanted to explore. Due to the nature of my constructivist research methods, during the interview, participants could choose whether to fully answer, partially answer or entirely skip the question. I provided additional prompts to further understand the perspective of my participants. If the conversation deviated too far from my research relevancy, I steered the conversation back or suggested moving onto the next question.

I structured my interview questions (appendix B) with the intention of best capturing the journey an international student embarks on when they decide to study in Canada, which aligns with both of my research questions. The interview questions are grouped into three main sections, general questions, during university and after university. The general question section was to build an overall profile of each participant. During university captures the entirety of the participants university experience and after university to better understand their post-graduation goals and future aspirations. This structure would help better inform my eventual data analysis and findings as I began to build participant profiles and similar and different themes that were present. With these interview questions, I also engaged in peer review to ensure they were clear and concise.

I conducted semi-structured interviews based on the interview questions protocol (appendix B) where I intentionally included questions that were open-ended as according to Weiss (1994), for a researcher to be able to gather a fuller development of the information provided by participants, they will have to “sacrifice uniformity of questioning”, which is what I aimed to achieve with open-ended questions as compared to for example, a multiple-choice question.

Participants chose their preferred location to have this interview, such as from their own home, which reduces any costs or stress associated with commuting to an interview location. To achieve this, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom as it is a readily available, convenient, and free. While these interviews took place via Zoom, they were audio recorded on Zoom as well as with a physical recorder to ensure that if there were technical difficulties, I would have a back-up of the recordings. With these recordings, I was able to transcribe them and replay them if necessary to ensure accuracy while analyzing the data for areas relevant to my research. In addition to the interviews being recorded, I also made brief notes of when the conversation veered off on a tangent, which were very helpful at the later stage of my data analysis. These notes were particularly helpful when I compared how different participants interpreted the same question differently and allowed me to draw connections to other areas that I was previously unaware of.

Data Analysis

My audio-recordings and automatically generated transcripts of all interviews were obtained from Zoom. Within 24 hours of each interview concluding, I re-listened to the audio-recordings and began the process of transcribing. I began transcribing by correcting the spelling and punctuation from the generated transcripts. I did this to ensure the accuracy of my data and for each sentence to not be misinterpreted. Next, I made notes on interesting points made by the participant, and possible themes were identified and could potentially become a point of discussion. At this point, my goal was to identify areas that would relate well to my research topic.

I approached the interview transcription as not a singular point of interpretation of my data, instead see it as being a tool used alongside my audio-recordings, which allowed me to begin to unpack the complexity of certain topics mentioned. By analyzing my data as a representational process, as the analysis of data represented as a transcript often entails reading the transcript in the presence of audio or video data, field notes, or other forms of head notes (Green, 1993). I analyzed the transcript in conjunction with the audio recordings to have more than one individual data point. By re-listening to the audio-recordings as I transcribed the transcripts, I was able to pick up on pauses in speech, shift in tone and other subtleties that can add depth to my data analysis for the purposes of gaining further insights into my participant's responses and thoughts. I also noticed similarities and differences between my transcripts by reviewing my previous notes made as well as highlighted sections.

I engaged in simultaneous procedures, where I began working on editing the transcriptions of each interview soon after. This ensured that with each interview, my insights and notes remained accurate by disallowing extended durations of time to pass or any possible influence of subsequent interviews to affect my data. The responses that I gathered were more complex than I had anticipated and did not all easily fit into distinct categories/themes and often belonged to more than one. Even though all my participants are unique and have their own backgrounds and lived experiences, they interpreted and responded to identical interview questions differently and I was able to explore areas I had not thought of previously.

After completing the transcription of all three interviews, I began the process of theme identification, which is an essential technique for analyzing textual data. Ryan (2003) notes the importance of discovering themes in qualitative data as without thematic categories, as researchers, it is not possible to describe, compare, or explain what is gathered from the data. I used various techniques to identify my themes. I began by organizing text segments based on the different colored highlights I had on my transcripts. While doing this, I also reviewed my notes and made additional notes on how each segment can further contribute to the themes I placed them under. For those that were mentioning another interesting idea/topic within the same theme, I created

subthemes to place them under. During my process of transcription and listening to the audio-recordings, I noted transitions in topics or shifts within conversations. By doing this, I attempted to identify possible emotions the participant may have towards the topic of conversation and made a note on whether it would be an interesting point to re-visit at a later point of time. Lastly, I looked for similarities and differences between my three participants, by comparing different parts of my transcription and ensuring that my classifications of themes and subthemes were rationalized.

During my interviews, all my participants discussed their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though this was not part of my interview questions. COVID-19, also known as Coronavirus 2019 is a contagious disease that began in 2019 and soon became a global pandemic. In 2020, Canada recorded its first case of the virus and the amount of uncertainty and unknown placed an immense amount of pressure on all companies, universities and every individual who would soon be affected. The pandemic restrictions were largely in place between 2020 – 2022, which meant that all my participants were at university during this period. Universities had to make tough decisions, as they navigated this for the first time and all my participants reflected on their experiences during this time. During my analysis, I decided that this collective experience would likely have lasting impacts and is worthy of discussion in my findings.

I built a narrative profile for each of my participants with the goal of honoring my participants' individual experiences. This aligns with my decision to pursue semi-structured interviews to give a voice to my participants, who may not represent every international student who remains in Canada post-graduation but provides a brief and small sample into how their experience may be applicable to many others in similar positions based on relatable experiences. Through each of these narrative profiles, I provide a summary of their journey so far and a snapshot at the value in continuing discussions around post-graduation transitions for international students. To build each of these profiles, I began by re-listening to the recorded audio of each interview and to really focus on their overall journey primarily based on three areas, prior to arriving in Canada, their time during university and their post-graduation experience. I chose to pay particular attention to factors such as their background, family/parental expectations and

lived environment prior to coming to Canada, which may contribute to the perspective of how an individual navigates through university and beyond.

I created three main themes that would best represent topics I will be discussing: the Canadian dream of parents, not quite the dream and remaining optimistic towards the dream. Within some of these themes, I created subthemes to further explore topics that could better describe my findings based on the data gathered from my research.

Trustworthiness

For increased trustworthiness, I ensured that I was aware of any potential bias I may bring to the study by being clear with all my participants about my positionality of previously being an international student and now working in a university setting. This is one of many validity procedures that Creswell (2018) mentions which should “enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy” (p. 314). I allowed the conversations during the interview to be guided by the participant’s responses and withheld any personal opinions or guided follow-up questions I may have had. I also kept a journal noting down the process and steps I have taken from the initial contact with my potential participants till the conclusion of the interview to be accountable for all the touchpoints I set out for myself and to continually check-in with my participants throughout the entire process and allowing for clarifications as needed.

I transcribed and re-listened to the recorded audio within 24 hours of each interview concluding. During this process, it was essential to correct any obvious transcription mistakes, while the interview was still relatively recent, I relied on the audio-recording to re-confirm my assumptions or recollection of words to ensure accuracy. I also engaged in member checking of transcripts among my peers, to gather feedback as to whether the transcription was accurate and easy to understand. One example of where the automatically generated transcript mislabelled acronyms used during a conversation was when the initial transcript stated “SMU”, which I corrected to “SFU.” I also scheduled all three interviews within the span of one weekend to provide a

more accurate and concise timeline for myself as a researcher when I began to identify themes, similarities, and differences among the three participant responses.

Limitations

During my study, I encountered unexpected limitations. For one of my participants, their video camera remained off throughout the entire interview, which may have impacted how I perceived certain responses due to the lack of visual cues or body language. This was unexpected, as I had assumed the participant would understand an online Zoom interview meant a conversation and as my video was on, the participant would naturally turn theirs on as well. In reviewing my recruitment messaging and follow ups with potential participants, beyond the mention of the interview location being on Zoom, I did not indicate preference on having the video camera turned on for both interviewer and participant, to best simulate an in-person conversation. Another limitation was when a question I asked was perceived entirely different from my expectations, so much that I deemed it not relevant to my research. This could have been minimized by having had pilot/test participants prior to the actual interviews, to see how my interview questions would be interpreted. Though a pilot test may also not have yielded a different response, due to the amount of interpretation from each participant based on the wide variance of their background and other factors involved to be an international student.

For some of my open-ended questions, I had prepared follow-up questions as an effort to either steer the conversation towards my research topic or further understand the participants interpretation and the topic they wanted to explore if it still aligned with my research. When I encountered these questions with participants, after attempting a few prompts, I moved onto the next question. This could have been a great opportunity to better understand how they have interpreted the question so differently and maybe a chance to better improve on my questions as well as follow up prompts.

Another potential limitation would be if I had included participants who were towards the other end of my inclusion criteria, having graduated five years ago, as most

of my participants graduated within the one-to-two-year range. This may have brought about different perspectives to my topics and provided a broader overview within my findings on post-graduation life in Canada.

All three of participants identified as Female, this was not intentional, though I do acknowledge that without the presence of other genders among my participants, this could possibly be a limitation for my research and findings. For future studies, I would intentionally include participants of various genders as a possible point of comparison and further analyze the data from that research to better conclude as to whether the gender of participants is relevant to the research topic of discussion.

Findings

All the participants in my study had enrolled at SFU as an international student, graduated within the past five years and chose to remain in Canada post-graduation. I defined an international student as one who does not have Canadian citizenship or permanent residency status and has likely come from another country for the purpose of pursuing an undergraduate degree. Reflecting on their time at SFU, all my participants indicated that overall, they had a positive experience. They all faced various challenges, some similar and others quite different from each other. Their perception of the Canadian Dream has also changed from when they first arrived in Canada. There is also an overall sense of optimism as my participants continue their post-graduation journey in Canada.

I begin with narrative profiles of all three of my participants from my study to showcase the uniqueness of everyone. Then, with these narrative profiles in mind, I discuss three key themes that I found while analyzing the interviews with participants: the Canadian dream of parents (parental influence and motivations to pursue studying abroad in Canada), not quite the dream (challenges faced, discrimination and the connectedness between international students) and remaining optimistic towards the dream (discussion of experiences during university and post-graduation).

Participant Profile 1: Bou

Bou described herself as having had quite an “international” upbringing. Bou had the opportunity to live in many different countries around the world, and had friends of diverse cultures, and backgrounds. Though for Bou, the answer to the question, “so, where are you from?” was not entirely straightforward and seemed to have been a complicated question as there wasn’t an immediate answer, such as a specific country or city. With a perceptible shift in body language and tone, she explained that the answer differs depending on who asks the question. In this case, Bou listed Lebanon as home, but also identified two other locations that are possible answers based on her perception of the individual asking and whether she wanted to further explain her life story. Bou’s parents’ personal experiences solidified the perception that a “Western”

education/university degree is more valuable than one from the Middle East and leads directly to better opportunities post-graduation. Having been through educational systems that were set up with the primary purpose of pursuing further education after high school, such as post-secondary and universities, it was the norm to attend university as an international student as well, as many of my classmates and their parents had similar expectations. For Bou, she noted that her overall experience was good and that she did manage to pursue various opportunities and explore her interests. Though, she also mentioned that it took her almost two years to begin to explore these opportunities and had faced numerous challenges transitioning into university. At the time of the interview, Bou was pursuing further education as a graduate student in a Master program and was hoping to secure a job in her field and accomplish her long-term goal of permanent residency in Canada.

Participant Profile 2: Bon

From a young age, Bon was certain that attending a university overseas was in her future, though this was not due to her personal aspirations or goals. Bon shared that this was a non-negotiable expectation that was set by her parents, and it applied to everyone in the family, herself and her two siblings. She shared that back home, in Vietnam, culturally it is very important to respect elders and especially parental figures, and the value of education, particularly a “Western” education is the absolute top priority. Bon went through the local education system back home, and upon completion of high school, she had initially wanted to take a break from studying to explore her other interests. After significant pressure from her parents, she did not take a break from studying and attended university immediately after high school. She noted that Australia is a popular destination for many international students from Vietnam, but after attending a university fair, Canada and Simon Fraser University became a possibility.

As Bon further explained:

Canada has always had a good reputation among my parents and their friends. Even if you look at the global news, there is often not too much negativity about Canada.

Ultimately, the deciding factor for choosing a university in Canada rather than one in Australia was the more welcoming government policies (at that time) and the clear pathway and possibility towards remaining in Canada post-graduation, to pursue better career opportunities than those back home. During university, Bon was grateful to have her tuition fully covered by her parents but knew the sacrifices they made to afford the high tuition costs and spent most of her time focused on academics. She enjoyed her university experience overall but felt that she missed out on many opportunities due to not wanting to fall behind academically and disappointing her parents. Post-graduation, Bon secured full-time employment after a very difficult six-month search and expressed her hope of one day fulfilling her dream of permanent residency in Canada.

Participant Profile 3: Bam

Bam left her home in Vietnam to pursue university in Canada and admitted that she had arrived in Canada without any prior knowledge or assumptions of what to expect. Bam was heavily influenced by her parents to pursue a university degree in Canada. She noted that in comparison to other countries, a primary draw was the overall affordability of a university degree in Canada, especially compared to countries such as the United States and United Kingdom. Bam was particularly drawn towards the School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT), which is a specialized program at Simon Fraser University that offers a blend of technologies, artistic and design elements that was not found elsewhere.

As Bam explained:

At the time, I had a specific field that I wanted to study and work in as well. I really wanted to study graphic design and found a specialized program at Simon Fraser University that really aligned with my interests.

Bam's first experience upon arriving in Canada was not what she had expected. Like many international students, it was her first time leaving home and her parents decided to enroll her into a homestay arrangement due to her being too young to enter university. This meant that she would live with a local family during her studies prior to university and her parents believed this was a great way to ensure her safety and better

adapt to the new culture and lifestyle. Bam mentioned that the overall experience was not what she had expected, and even though the family were nice, they had busy lives working and young children of their own to take care of. She began to bond with another international student who was also in a similar arrangement, and they were able to connect on various levels including preferences of food choices that reminded her of home. This relationship she has formed with a fellow international student, only grew and many years later, they have remained close friends and shared a level of connectedness through similar challenges and experiences at university as well. At the time of our interview, Bam had just completed her undergraduate degree two months prior. Post-graduation, Bam hoped to secure full-time employment as pursuing further studies was not possible due to the financial constraints.

The Canadian Dream of Parents

All three participants in my research shared similar sentiments that transitioning to university life in Canada was a lot more challenging than they had expected. As they shared their personal journeys, it was evident how they all shared the dream of remaining in Canada post-graduation to build towards a better future, even though they may not have known what exactly what this future in Canada post-graduation would entail.

Initially, the Canadian dream may not necessarily be shared by my participants, instead, it was their parents who had this dream of a better future in Canada for their children. Bou, for example, noted specifically, “my parents have local degrees, and they have been told a Western degree will lead to increased salary.”

Similarly, Bon noted the prevalence of this dream held by her parents as well as her friends’ parents:

All my parents’ friends also sent their kids to universities all around the world, all are Western countries such as United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Canada. They all sacrificed so much to afford the international tuition fees because they believe it is better than getting a local degree.

Participant three, Bam also explained how she chose to attend Simon Fraser University in Canada:

It was not really a discussion, as my parents have always planned to send me overseas for a university degree. I went to a university recruiting fair with my dad and compared tuition fees between US and Canadian universities and Canada was significantly more affordable.

Overall, all my participants described very positive perceptions of Canada among their families, friends, and communities.

Bou, for example, stated:

In my country, it is common knowledge that if you obtain a Western degree, there will be better work opportunities and salary as compared to remaining back home. Additionally, it is also known that working overseas in larger countries, such as Canada would mean a better life and future.

Likewise, Bam noted:

Canada was being advertised as a safe, beautiful and stable environment. There also seems to be quite a diverse population that was open to people from all around the world.

The concept of the Canadian Dream started to become more attractive and believable to Bou, Bon, and Bam. With the perceived increased value of a Canadian university degree, more affordable tuition compared to other countries, and overall positive sentiments among their friends and family, it was a clear choice for them. The decision to remain in Canada after graduation seemed like a natural expectation.

As Bon put it:

I was expected to remain in Canada post-graduation, find a job and begin to build a future. After all, this life overseas is seen as “better” than living a life back home, where there is less opportunity for both personal and professional growth.

For Bon and Bam, the idea of going overseas to pursue post-secondary and to become an international student were the dreams of their parents and not their own. Just as Bam’s parents took her to attend the international recruitment fair in her hometown,

these institutions from all around the world are heavily invested in increasing international student enrollment. Parents have all become part of this dream, this dream for their children to have the opportunity to build a better life than what they had. For most of my participants, their parents have not been to a university in Canada, yet they are willing to invest such large amounts of money and sacrifice so much for a better education for their children. This places increased pressure and expectations on students to excel while at university and for many, their success directly links to their sense of self and chasing the Canadian dream.

Especially during this transitional period of high school to university, not all international students share the same starting point. For example, participant one (Bou), had an “easier time transitioning” due to having been an international student throughout their life, in the sense of living among different countries, cultures, school systems and diversities. When compared to participant 2 (Bon) and 3 (Bam), this was their first time leaving home and everything they were about to experience was unfamiliar and they had little to no insights from family and friends.

Not Quite the Dream?

During their first year of university, reality quickly set in, for all the participants in my study. International students come from different backgrounds as evident even among my three participants, though there is a mutual bond where they often share similar aspirations, hopes and understanding towards certain goals. Another bond that they have is a mutual understanding of specific challenges that they have faced or experienced.

Discrimination

To discriminate is to treat someone differently, or less favorably for a specific reason that may or may not be explicitly stated. All the participants in my study shared having experienced various forms of discrimination, from those who have more authority/position of power (staff/professors) and those of similar positions (other

students). They also concluded that some situations were a directly related to their status as an international student.

Participant 1, Bou:

I think my experience was way better than other international students because I already went to an international school back home, my accent is quite international and honestly, I could be considered “Western” too. I identify as a racially White individual, so I am often assumed to be a domestic/local student.

For Bou, her transition into university was easier compared to some of her other friends. She mentioned a large part of this was due to having gone through a Western curriculum before attending university, this meant that she was encouraged to participate in a classroom setting and engage in active learning instead of a more passive learning style that a lot of her friends were more used to. The topic of her accent was also discussed as being a significant contributor to her ease of transition. She recounted that in many situations, she was perceived as “almost” sounding like a domestic student, and only those who may be of similar geographic background as her, would be able to identify her pronunciation of certain words, which could be identified as a “foreign sounding” accent. Additionally, most of North America would be happy to assume labels such as “multi-cultural” but a racially White individual may be less likely to be assumed as an international student, according to Bou’s personal experiences over the years.

The focus here is not the assumed discrimination that my participants may have experienced, but more importantly, the lack of compassion and understanding for these unique circumstances. There should be a level of understanding and empathy, especially when in a position of power, though it can be recognized that the balance between equality and equity can be difficult to manage.

Participant 1, Bou:

During the pandemic situation, we (international students) were all worried about our families back home, with everyone going on in the world. I don’t think many professors or staff here understood the complexity of our situations. Once a bomb went off due to a war back home, it was very close to my family, and I was so nervous to ask my professor for an assignment

extension. I had my friend help write the email, and the professor ended up only giving me an extra 12 hours. I felt terrible afterwards and decided to never ask for another accommodation from professors, as there is a disconnect and/or lack of compassion.

For Bou, she tried so hard to not be seen differently due to her “international student” status and was mostly successful in doing so. Though, during the pandemic, after gathering the courage to request an assignment extension, the response really hurt, and she felt misunderstood and knew there was nothing she could do.

Participant 2, Bon:

I was in the middle of searching for a co-op work position, and then the pandemic happened and there were basically no more jobs available. I mean, there were still jobs available, but they clearly indicated that you had to be a Canadian/Permanent Resident to apply. I could understand the reasoning but also, it was really frustrating for me, because I tried my very best and the chance to secure one of those jobs was basically zero.

For Bon, from her first day of university, it was all about making the very best of her time and looking for opportunities to upgrade herself. She did this by volunteering, joining student clubs and attending numerous professional development workshops.

Participant 3, Bam:

A lot of times, students who aren't quite as good at English yet, they have a hard time communicating with the professor. A lot of professors, sometimes they don't really try, and it must feel bad for students to try and communicate and not have people understand what you mean. I was also quite reserved, personality wise, I'm kind of introverted, so I didn't really participate too much.

Bam recognized that her English was not as fluent as that of a native speaker, and there were times where she would rather not participate to avoid negative feelings like embarrassment. This may have led to her pursuing fewer opportunities while at university.

The Connectedness between International Students

Among all the participants in my study, despite their differences, they all share a mutual understanding, almost like an unspoken rule that they understand certain struggles and challenges only experienced by international students. Through these shared experiences, there is a stronger connection formed between fellow international students, whether it is during a group project or within a student club.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were shared challenges among every society and individual, yet there were ones specific to international students.

Participant 1, Bou:

During most of the pandemic, domestic students would go home, and those who remained in residences were all international students, it was very isolating. While everything was going on here in Canada, there was also a lot happening back home and I felt only other international students were able to understand how it was like, to feel so helpless.

This shared understanding among international students, especially through this tough time, can be especially isolating and further contribute to the disconnect between international students and others within the community. While everyone was impacted socially, and had reduced job opportunities, international students particularly felt they were further disadvantaged.

Participant 2, Bon:

Before the pandemic, I had an amazing experience, volunteered a lot and was really involved in many different aspects of university life. I also managed to make a lot of friends. Once the restrictions began, all that came to a stop and it felt like my progress was all being erased.

With the isolation and lack of opportunities, there is an increased sense of urgency to become employable and compete in the job market post-graduation.

Participant 1, Bou:

Global politics/unrest and watching the news that impacts our family. I keep watching not because I enjoy it, but because I must, because it directly

affects me. I feel like the only people who could understand me were my friends (also international students) who also had family all around the world.

Understandably, international students are not the only group of people who have family elsewhere in the world. Domestic students could have experienced these challenges as well. For Bou, it was more so, a combination of various other factors and circumstances that made this one challenge much more difficult. As she noted, the only people remaining in the residences were international students, as all the domestic students at least had some family to go home to (mostly locally).

Participant 2, Bon

When I was back home in my country (Vietnam), I didn't care about the news or politics. I was not afraid of anything, like it didn't affect us. But now I am in Canada, all by myself and I see Canada supports a lot of foreign countries, so I should better understand what is going on in the world.

For Bon, there is a clear association between having to endure the negativity of the news and global unrest to feeling more connected to what is happening back home. This may be part of an assumption that has been developed possibly before coming to Canada and even further reinforced due to the isolation sometimes experienced as an international student in a foreign country.

Participant 2, Bon

We prioritize building friendships because we have no other family here. As international students, we bond over similar challenges and can understand each other.

As individuals in a society, we all have our own support structures. This participant sums up one key difference for most international students, that is, they are away from home and their support structures are different from most students and often they rely on their friends as family. Across all my participants, the sense of community among international students and the bond they share is one that is special and as individuals, we also find comfort in those who are like us and can further strengthen relationships through mutual understanding.

Remaining Optimistic towards the Dream

Among the participants in my study, it is evident that they all had their own versions of the Canadian dream as they began their studies. Throughout their undergraduate journey, there were certainly changes and additions that continued into post-graduation. It is also possible that there are external factors beyond our control that may have impacted the shift in goals, such as, having gone through a global pandemic, and the unpredictability of unrest within the global political landscape.

Parental Expectations During University

While in university, most of my participants shared goals that were academic related, connecting to parental expectations/pressures.

For example, for Bon:

To my parents, getting good grades were always seen as the most important indicator of success and happiness. If I got an average grade (B) for an exam, I would not tell them as I did not want to upset them. I would work hard to get a good grade (A), so that I could tell my parents and make them happy, which would make me happy as well.

In contrast, Bou had a more permissive parental figure, who Bou described as highly supportive and not very demanding, allowing her to decide what she wanted to do at university.

My parents allowed me to study what I wanted and choose to pursue any opportunities based on my preferences. They would just check to make sure I was doing fine and listened to what I wanted to share. Regarding post-graduation, whether to pursue work or further studies, my parents allowed me to decide on which path I wanted to take.

It is certainly possible that there are parental expectations and pressures faced by Bou as well, but perhaps not as easily identifiable as compared to my other participants. There may have been a self-expectation placed on Bou from her parental upbringing that did not need reinforcing during their time at university. According to Bou, her parents were

supportive of any path they would choose post-graduation, whether employment or more school.

Bon highlighted a disconnect between their parental assumptions of the current job market and the reality:

My parents still believe that good grades alone will get you a good job, but I keep trying to tell them that is not the reality today. In my first year, they encouraged me to just study and don't spend any time working.

This caused Bon additional stress during the already difficult transition period from high school to university. She became very discouraged to even learn about the various career related resources available on campus and only began to learn about them towards the end of the second year of university. Bon does wish that she began exploring possible opportunities to build her resume earlier rather than later to increase her chances of employment post-graduation.

Indeed, each participant described various opportunities they pursued while in university, whether it be joining a student club, looking for (co-op) work opportunities, volunteering, teaching themselves a new skill or obtaining online certifications.

For Bon:

Even though I did not pursue co-op or other work opportunities in first year, I chose to volunteer and join student clubs that related to my interests. When I was not able to find work opportunities, I took online courses that gave a certificate to add to my resume.

All participants noted that everything they did was to contribute to the long-term goal of obtaining a Canadian Permanent Residency (PR) status. As post-graduation, even though international students can obtain a post-graduate work permit, which allows them to remain in Canada to work, there is no guarantee of a job. This meant that it was necessary to build their resume while they are in university, or risk not being able to obtain a job post-graduation. Increasingly for many international students in Canada, permanent residency status with the eventual intention of gaining citizenship is a common goal after all the time, effort and financial investment.

As Bou mentions:

My parents did not have many expectations in terms of what opportunities I pursued while at university or what program I studied, though they did expect me to remain in Canada post-graduation and at least work towards obtaining a Permanent Residency (PR) status in Canada and possibly Canadian citizenship in the future.

This shows that even though parental expectations of university life among my participants varies the long-term goal of pursuing work opportunities in Canada post-graduation remains the same.

Post-graduation

Shifting the conversation to post-graduation, I heard a collective sense of uncertainty among all my participants. They all mentioned the mental fatigue of how they could put in their best effort in all that they do, but there would always be circumstances beyond their control. They all noted that throughout their university experience, the attachment placed upon obtaining an undergraduate degree remained intact. With each year, all the struggles are quickly forgotten and just seen as a rite of passage for all international students as they work towards their undergraduate degree and hopefully a better future.

Participant 1, Bou:

Due to the current situation with the limits on study permits and negative spotlight on international students in Canada, there is concern towards my future here. With the current permanent residency (PR) application point system, it is even harder to get the necessary points. It would have been a bigger risk to work immediately post-graduation, so I decided to pursue a graduate program, which will also increase my chances.

Bou was able to pursue further studies after completing her undergraduate, largely due to the support of her parents (especially financially).

Participant 2, Bon:

I have worked so hard to graduate and reach this point, and I honestly felt so discouraged. I was unemployed for almost six months, trying so hard to

find a job but I could not find anything. Luckily, I had savings because I really did not want to ask my parents for more money. Before I got my current job, I already began the process of wanting to leave Canada.

For Bon, it was evident that this conversation brought up some difficult emotions, through her change in tone and body language. She had almost given up on her “Canadian Dream” and I could really empathize with how she felt as I had a sense of just how much it takes for any student to complete an undergraduate degree in a foreign country.

Participant 1, Bou:

For now, yes, I do want to find a job in Canada related to my field. Having studied both an undergraduate and graduate program, I don't want all that effort to go to waste. But hearing from my friends about how bad the current job market is in Canada is discouraging, hopefully it will improve by the time I graduate and start looking for a job.

Participant 3, Bam:

My parents didn't want me to go back home because they spent so much money for me to study abroad, and I might as well get a job there (Canada) and give it a try. But also, I am starting to think if I even want to be here in Canada. But I will have to give it a try and see for now.

Even though it was part of their long-term goal to remain in Canada post-graduation, all the participants expressed doubts as to whether it was still worth it. They have all experienced cruel optimism, in their own ways; some have worked so hard to remain optimistic, while others have accepted that the life here in Canada post-graduation may not be suited for them in the long-term. How then has the undergraduate experiences prepared these participants to transition into post-graduation life in Canada? It has certainly allowed them to gain a better understanding of whether they too, share the Canadian dream that their parents initially had for them prior to arriving.

Conclusion

Many international students often arrive with their own version of the Canadian dream, which is often shared by both the student and their family. In both the literature reviewed and, in my findings, there is a clear indication of strong parental influence and motivations that contribute to this decision. The Canadian dream of pursuing post-secondary education in Canada as an important step to building a better future is one that was only made possible through significant changes within government policies. Since the 1970s, there have been numerous international student policy changes that have contributed to the current landscape we are in, for example, the implementation of differential tuition fees between domestic and international students. For international students, the financial strain of affording tuition and other expenses is very much front of mind. The general age of a student graduating high school and applying for university is between 16-18, which would explain how it is common for parental figures to heavily influence decisions. For international students, to be able to afford university abroad is financial support from their parents. Today, international student tuition costs over four times more than tuition for domestic students. This significant financial investment only furthers emphasizes the expectations and pressure placed on international students. The sense of urgency to constantly pursue various opportunities to ensure employability post-graduation whether within or outside of Canada becomes a dominant narrative.

In comparing the current literature and my findings, it is evident that finding a job post-graduation is often a top priority and a difficult endeavour for all graduating undergraduate students. There is discussion around an added layer of difficulty for international students who choose to compete in the job market in Canada post-graduation. Contributing factors such as lack of work experience, temporary resident (non-citizenship/permanent residency) status and a lack of networks/connections. Some employers may also not recognize international experience as an asset and can even be seen as a detriment with assumptions of a lack of cultural awareness in the workplace.

Overall, the perceptions of Canada and pursuing a university degree are largely positive and highly valued. As for the international student experience, there are clear

positive interactions, though it is often the negative experiences that may often have a more lasting impact. All students who experience a negative interaction with the university in any capacity will be less likely to seek out that same resource. Therefore, it is important for those who work within post-secondary institutions to understand the fragility and importance of creating positive interactions for long-term student success. To me, being able to work in a university is very much a privilege, and recognizing how impactful our interactions can be on students as they go through this pivotal once-in-a-lifetime journey is mutually beneficial. As universities continually invest into various resources and hire new teams, it may be beneficial to remind ourselves that we all play an integral part of building a better future.

As a qualitative researcher, I learned the importance of allowing my participants to share their experiences through their own interpretation of the situation. With the globalized society that we live in today, even with all the research on international students in Canada, it is important to acknowledge that the future is constantly changing and there should be an emphasis on continually contributing to the current literature. The first step in tackling discrimination is to better understand the unique situations international students may find themselves in. I hope that this research can serve as a starting point to allow part of that process to happen.

How then do international students reflect on their undergraduate experiences? Throughout the interviews I conducted, the presence of parental expectations and influences shaped participants' stories. For many international students, parental figures will likely always remain as a primary motivator, due to the number of resources and financial requirement needed to attend university as an international student in Canada. During the discussion around goals, participants spoke a lot about the involvement and influence of parents at the beginning of their university journey. Participant one, Bou, noted a shift later in their degree program as her parents allowed her to choose what she wanted to do post-graduation based on the mutual understanding that it was working towards an eventual permanent residency status in Canada. The participants who experienced less parental influence later in their degrees placed more emphasis on building friendships as a support structure. Universities have certainly placed a lot of

emphasis on building a sense of community, but how do we assess the long-term benefits for international students, if most research focuses on current international students?

To be given the label of “international student”, that individual can be from anywhere in the world, including from Canada (for example, if they attended and graduated from a local high school but just do not have permanent residency or Canadian citizenship). This further showcase just how many individuals can fall within this category and the difficulty in having a one-size-fit-all solution for this group of students. From the Canadian government perspective, administratively, they are all identical. All international students are given a unique number on all their government documents, placing them in this category that has a long history attached to it. From the university’s perspective, administratively, they too, are all identical. They are given a student number, and a clear indication in the system that they are an “international student”, and perhaps the largest indicator is the amount of tuition fee they must pay each term.

With the shift in the global landscape, there is a clear indication that international students are increasingly hoping to remain in Canada post-graduation. A larger number of international students are hoping to pursue the Canadian dream and just as universities place a great emphasis on the transition into post-secondary, there should also be an importance placed on the continual preparation for transition into a life in Canada after post-graduation. I hope my research will inspire further efforts into further enhancing the international student experience among post-secondaries in Canada. One such area of importance is for employers to recognize the value in hiring an international student just as the Canadian government has shifted their policies from a focus on short-term benefits to long-term growth. The participants in my research all agreed that the challenges they faced throughout their undergraduate experience has caused them to either adapt or change what it means to achieve their versions of the Canadian dream. In my own case, through numerous adjustments over the years, I do believe that I have achieved my version of the dream. My hope is for continual contribution towards this area of research that will allow many others to live their versions of the Canadian dream and to be better prepared for what the future may hold.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Participant Email

Recruitment Participant Email



SUBJECT LINE: Invitation to Participate in an SFU MEd Research Study

Dear (____),

This email is an official invitation for you to participate in my research project for my Master of Education (MEd), Educational Leadership program at Simon Fraser University (SFU).

My research goal is to better understand how an undergraduate degree from SFU prepares their international student graduates for what is next post-graduation. By participating in this study, you will be making an immensely valuable contribution to the existing literature and research on the international student experience while at SFU as well as post-graduation, which will hopefully benefit both current and future students as well as administrators of the university to best support international student success.

The time commitment will consist of one session of a 1-hour interview that will be conducted online via Zoom. There will be open-ended interview questions which will form a general structure and will cover three sections/areas: general questions about the participant, specific questions about your time during university and specific questions about your time after graduating.

As a thank you for your time, you will be compensated with a \$30 Starbucks Gift card for contributing valuable data to this research.

Please note that you are not obligated to participate, all data gathered will be kept confidential and your anonymity will be guaranteed. My graduate supervisor is Dr. Rebecca Cox, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education (SFU).

If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email (___) confirming your interest and additional information about the study as well as a consent form will be provided. Please note that you can are able to ask additional questions and/or seek clarification at any point during this entire process.

(___)

Current role: International Student Advisor, University of British Columbia (UBC)

Previous role: Recruiter/Advisor, Simon Fraser University (SFU)

Appendix B. Interview Questions

Interview Questions

The questions will loosely follow three sections, each with their own goals to better guide the flow of the interview as well as the analysis of data once it has been collected.

- A) General questions to build an overall perspective of participant.
- B) Specific questions relating to experiences during university.
- C) Specific questions relating to experiences after university.

A) General questions

- a) Tell me How you came to be an international student at SFU What are some factors you considered?
- b) How would you describe your overall university experience at Simon Fraser University, especially as an international student?
- c) What were your main reasons for pursuing an undergraduate degree at SFU? Did they change throughout your time at SFU and after graduating?
- d) What were your short-term and long-term goals when you began studying at SFU?
- e) Do you feel that your undergraduate degree has prepared you well in terms of career/work/future study opportunities?

B) During university

- a. What are some services/staff you accessed and what was your overall experience with them?
- b. What career-related activities (volunteer, paid, indirect skills) were you engaged in?
- c. If you could change 1-2 university services to further enhance your university experience, what would they be and why?
- d. If you could restart your university life, what would you do differently?

C) After university

- a. Please provide a brief overview of your life post-graduation, beginning with whether you pursued further studies (e.g. graduate, professional certification/courses) or full-time employment.
- b. What factors helped influence your decision on what to do after graduating?
- c. What are your current short and long-term goals?