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# **A Study of the First Year International Students at a Canadian University: Challenges and Experiences with Social Integration**

## **Une étude des étudiants internationaux de première année dans une université Canadienne : Défis et expériences avec l'intégration sociale**

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### **Abstract**

An increasing number of international students come to Canada for their higher education. As a unique group on Canadian campuses, international students deserve our attention so that we can understand their special needs. Using Tinto's retention model as a theoretical framework, this study investigates the experiences of the first year international students at a Canadian university. It pays special attention to the challenges these students face in the process of their social integration into the new learning and living environment. Data were collected through surveys and focus groups. Data analysis reveals a comprehensive picture of international students' socialization patterns and challenges. Since student retention has been a central concern for many universities, the findings of this study are informative for higher education institutions to optimize their services to meet international students' preferences and needs.

### **Résumé**

Un nombre croissant d'étudiants internationaux viennent au Canada pour leurs études supérieures. Représentant un groupe unique sur les campus Canadiens, les étudiants internationaux méritent notre attention afin que nous parvenions à comprendre leurs besoins particuliers. En utilisant un cadre théorique basé sur le modèle de rétention de Tinto, cette étude enquête sur les expériences des étudiants internationaux de première année dans une université Canadienne. Elle porte une attention particulière sur les défis auxquels ces étudiants sont confrontés dans le processus de leur intégration sociale dans un nouvel environnement d'apprentissage et de vie. Les données ont été recueillies à partir d'enquêtes et de discussions de groupe. L'analyse des données a révélé un tableau complet des tendances et des défis de socialisation des étudiants internationaux. Étant donné que la rétention des étudiants représente une préoccupation centrale pour de nombreuses universités, les résultats de cette étude peuvent informer les établissements d'enseignement supérieur afin qu'ils optimisent leurs services pour répondre aux préférences et besoins des étudiants internationaux.

**Key words:** international students, retention, language and culture barriers, social integration

**Mots-clés:** étudiants internationaux, rétention, barrières linguistiques et culturelles, intégration sociale

Over the past few decades, an increasing number of international students came to North America for higher education. For instance, during the 2008-2009 academic year, the number of international students in post-secondary institutions in the United States increased by 8% to a record high of 671,616 students (Institute of International Education, 2009). According to a recent media release by the Associate of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2011, Oct. 25), for the 16<sup>th</sup> straight year, the number of international students in Canadian colleges and universities is on the rise. Full-time international enrolment has increased by more than 11% since 2010 to 100,000 students, a four-fold increase since 1995. Students coming from around the world enrich the educational experiences of North American students by bringing global perspectives, new cultures and languages to their campuses. They also generate financial benefit to their host countries. As far as Canada is concerned, international students contributed

more than \$8 billion to its economy and created 81,000 jobs in 2011 (Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc., 2012).

The number of international students will continue to grow in the context of globalization and financial shortages for higher education. Many post-secondary institutions have seriously considered curriculum internationalization in order to keep their programs competitive (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Also, they have considered taking more international students as an avenue to balance tight budgets (Mullens, 2006). Federal and provincial governments reflect increasing interest in the global education market (Tamburri, 2008). Recently, the Canadian government had close contact with the Indian government and signed agreements for collaboration in many areas including education (Canada Prime Minister's Office, 2012). The Ontario provincial government set up scholarships to attract more scholars from China (Ontario Premier's Office, 2010).

While universities are ambitious in their quest to admit more international students into their campuses, they realize that it is not financially wise to admit more students only to lose them before graduation. In the university where this study took place, a recently released five-year strategic plan clearly states the significance of attracting and retaining the best international students. However, this strategic goal will not be achieved until the university clearly understands how satisfied these students are with their study experiences. Such information may directly affect the admission and retention of international students. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of the international students who were in their first year of study in a Canadian university; the focus was on the challenges these students faced with social integration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

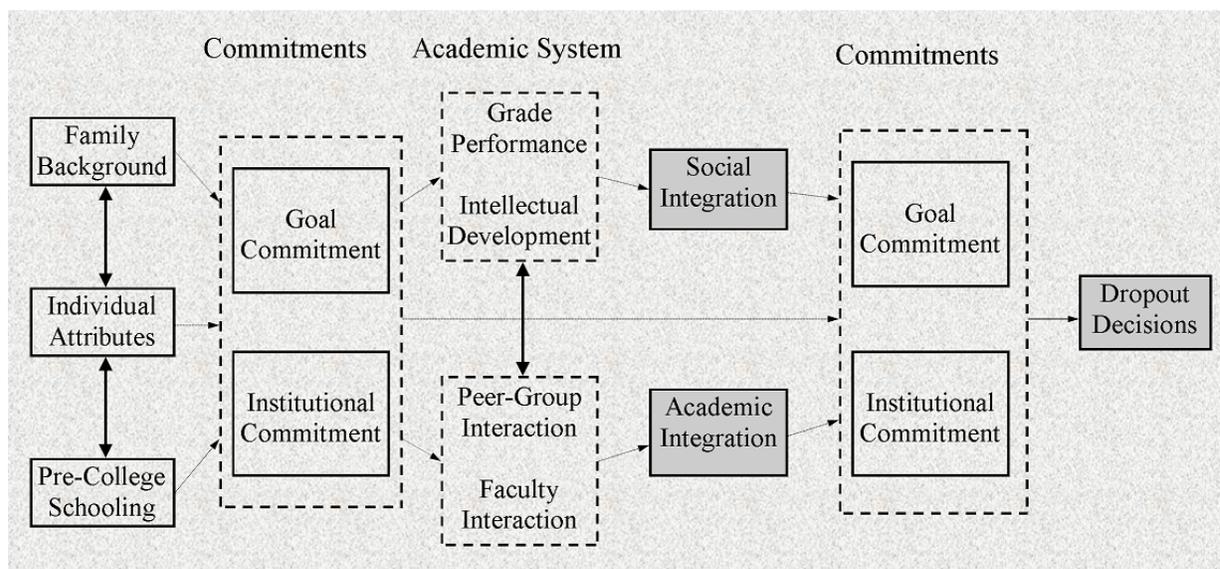
The issue of student retention has been prevalent in North American post-secondary institutions (Scoggin & Styron, 2006). About 50% of the freshmen who enrolled in colleges and universities drop out before completing their programs (Brawer, 1999). Roughly 20-25% of all first-year students do not proceed to a second year of study (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Finnie and Qiu (2009) found out that persistence rates differ between universities and colleges: roughly 22.6% of college students drop out after the first year compared to 15.1% of university students. Individual institutions do not bear the cost of student attrition alone (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Grayson & Grayson, 2003); the issue also generates significant problems for society. Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004) wrote:

In the face of changing workforce and educational requirements, the need to retain more students will only intensify. Low retention rates waste human talent and resources, jeopardize our nation's economic future, and threaten the economic viability of our postsecondary institutions and our country's democratic traditions. (p. 2)

According to Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1993), whether a student persists or drops out is quite strongly predicted on their degree of academic and social integration (Figure 1). Academic integration refers to the congruence of a student's academic attitude, performance, and commitment with his or her university's academic climate and policy. Indicators of academic integration may include grade performance, intellectual development, comfort with university academic policy, etc. Tinto points out that although college performance is the most significant factor to predict a student's decision to leave or stay, social integration will influence a student's goal of degree completion and commitment to the institution. Social integration entails that a student fits into the social environment on

campus; it is determined by factors such as informal peer group association, interaction with academics and staff, and semi-formal extracurricular activities. Tinto believes that social interaction does not only provide comfort to a student to stay with the institution; it also has a positive effect on grade performance when students establish friendships with persons who have strong academic orientations. In short, according to Tinto, a higher degree of integration into the social and academic environments contributes a great degree of educational and institutional commitments of students and therefore leads to lower dropout rates.

**Figure 1. A Conceptual Schema for Dropouts (Tinto, 1975, p. 95)**



### Literature Review

Since the decision to drop out or persist is a result of a longitudinal interactive process between an individual and the institution, research in student retention should address the challenges students face when adjusting themselves to the institutional social and academic systems. Also, the manner in which the institution addresses students' needs should be looked into. As a unique group of students on campus, the institutional experiences of international students deserve a closer look since they may have different attitudes, cultures, and learning habits compared with their domestic counterparts (Salvarajah, 2006). Studies have documented that international students face more challenges on campus than domestic students (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). A number of studies have investigated international students' adjustment or adaptation to North American campus life (Dillon & Swann, 1997; Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006) as well as their engagement in educational practices (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005). Frequently cited challenges that international students face include English language ability, cultural difference, and loneliness (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001).

For those students from countries where English is not the primary language, English proficiency is one significant challenge. Zhang and Zhou (2010) found out that limited English language proficiency impacts many aspects of their lives, including making friends with native English speakers, understanding the course materials, finding group work partners, etc. They reported a statistically significant correlation between their English language competency and confidence in successfully finishing their programs. Yang, Noels, and Saumure (2006) found out that language self-confidence is associated not only with psychological adjustment but also

with sociocultural difficulty. Kwon (2009) confirmed that the level of English proficiency has a strong impact on the feelings of isolation. The better international students perceive their English proficiency, the better they become accustomed to English classes without experiencing feelings of isolation or intimidation.

In the study of international education, cultural differences have drawn scholars' attention as well. It has been claimed that there exist socio-cultural differences between different parts of the world, and the United States and China were often cited as an example of maximum cultural distance (Hofstede, 1997; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Such cultural differences usually affect the relationships between teachers and students, and among students. For example, the studies on Chinese international students in the United States found out that the different cultural values between China and the U.S. led some Chinese students to view U.S. classrooms as lacking structures and proper behaviours from both teachers and students rather than being interactive, flexible, informal, and creative (Wan, 2001). Humbleness and modesty are stressed repeatedly in the Chinese way of life. Efforts to achieve individual goals are often regarded as inappropriate and attempts to show off a person's capabilities are normally perceived as presumptuous or arrogant (Greer, 2005; Li, 1993). However, once they were in the U.S., students reported that their habitual humbleness and modesty sometimes brought them undesirable consequences and that they were looked down upon (Yan & Berliner 2013). International students with different cultural backgrounds may perceive a learning environment differently (Koul & Fisher, 2005). For example, Asian students could be negatively affected by teachers who establish close physical proximity while teaching. Also, Yan and Berliner (2013) reported that Chinese international students' lack of knowledge about their host's culture amplified their language deficiencies since they do not have the background knowledge to understand the dialogue. Ward (1996) concluded that there is a robust relationship between the degree of cultural distance and the degree of psychosocial distress experienced in cross-cultural transition.

## **Methods**

This study took place in a Canadian comprehensive university in southern Ontario, which has a significant amount of research activity and offers a wide range of programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. The university has attracted an increasing number of international students in recent years. At the time of data collection, there were 1712 international students registered in the undergraduate and graduate programs. Among them were approximately 350 first year international students. Because the first-year experiences have a strong impact on students' perseverance in post-secondary studies (Barefoot et al, 2005; Wright et al, 2008), and particularly because the first-year experiences are crucial for most international students to get accustomed to the new culture, this study targeted first-year international students. As far as the authors know, there are far fewer studies particularly focusing on the first year international students among the numerous studies of international students reported in the literature.

The study employed a mixed-methods design with multiple data gathering techniques. An online survey was used to collect information about participants' perspectives and experiences of studying at the university. Tinto's model of retention (1975, 1993) was used to guide the design of the survey with a focus on social integration. Participants' overall perspective of studying in the university was measured using four parameters: self-reported satisfaction with their study experience, whether they were struggling with their current studies, confidence in successfully finishing their study programs, and intention to recommend the

university to their friends. Relevant questions used five scales from “not at all” to “very much.” As an indicator of social integration, participants’ association with peers was investigated through asking questions about where they usually studied after class, whether they studied alone or together with other students, whether they lived in a shared residence with other students, how they spent their leisure time, and whether they had native-English-speaking friends. Other examined indicators of social integration included international student’s contact with faculty and staff members and their participation in social activities. Participants were asked to report how often they personally contacted their instructors, how comfortable they felt approaching service staff members at various units on campus, how often they attended the events organized by the International Student Center (ISC), and who they would approach first for assistance (i.e. home country fellows, ISC staff, department staff, or their instructor). In addition, the survey also collected participants’ demographic data which include gender, age, study program, number of years of being in Canada, and the type of high school (public/private/international) they graduated from.

An email invitation was sent to all the 350 first-year international students asking them to complete the online survey questionnaire. Eighty two students submitted their responses; however, only 77 were complete and included in data analysis. The return rate was 22%. Participants came from 28 countries and spoke 21 home languages other than English. 14% of participants had English as their native language. Close to 44% were from China and India which represents two major international groups on the campus. Among the participants, 40% were females while 60% were males; 78% were under 21 years old. 96% of the participants were enrolled in various undergraduate programs while 4% were enrolled in the English Language Improvement Program designed for those students who need English upgrading before taking regular academic courses. 40% of participants graduated from public schools in their home countries while 60% graduated from private schools. Among those participants who graduated from private high schools, 36% reported that their schools were international schools where an international curriculum rather than the local one was implemented and instruction is often bilingual (native language and English). In terms of disciplines, 17% were enrolled in business and economics, 49% in engineering, 21% in sciences, and 13% in social sciences and humanities.

Eighteen participants of various nationalities, 12 males and 6 females, were recruited on a voluntary basis from different academic programs to participate in five focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were conducted to gain in-depth data to understand whether and how participants adjusted themselves to the new living and learning environments and how the university had facilitated or would have better facilitated this process. Special attention was given to the exploration of significant challenges they experienced and strategies they employed to deal with these challenges. The qualitative data collected from focus group discussions were used to increase the depth and breadth of the survey responses (Creswell, 2011). Each focus group had two to five participants and lasted about one hour on average. The focus groups were videotaped and the audio component was transcribed.

## **Survey Results**

### ***Association with Peers***

67% of participants reported that they had more than two native English speakers as friends, 25% had one or two, and 8% did not have any. On the issue of residence, about 58% lived in student residence while 42% lived off-campus. 9% lived alone while 91% shared a residence with others. About 30% shared a residence with students from their home countries, 24%

shared residence with students from other countries, and 37% shared residence with domestic students. Regarding what they usually did on weekends, 10% reported going out with domestic students, 38% went out with home country fellows, 25% went out with students from other countries, 4% went out alone, and 22% usually stayed in their own rooms. When asked where they studied after class, 21% reported that they studied by themselves in common places like the library and the student center; 38% reported studying in these places with other students; and 41% reported studying in their own rooms. When asked how often they communicated with their family and friends in their home country by mail, phone or online, 72% reported a few times a week or more, 15% once a week, 11% once every few weeks, and 2% a couple of times a semester.

***Contact with Faculty and Staff and Participation in Social Activities***

73% of participants had never personally contacted their instructors, 19% did so occasionally while 8% had a close contact with instructors. Their first resource for help was students from their home country (50%), followed by the ISC (21%), department staff (8%), instructors (11%), and others (10%). 63% of participants felt comfortable or very comfortable to approach service staff at various units for assistance, 22% felt somewhat comfortable, and 15% felt a little comfortable or not comfortable at all. Only one percent attended all events organized by the ISC for international students, 17% attended most of them, 69% just some of them they were interested in, and 13% none of such events.

***Satisfaction with Studying Experiences at the University***

55% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied, 34% somewhat satisfied, and 11% a little or not satisfied at all. Correspondingly, when asked about their feelings of studying at the university, slightly over 70% reported feeling “okay” with their current status, 13% felt at home, 16% were struggling, and 1% wanted to quit their programs of study. 64% felt confident or very confident in successfully finishing their programs of study, 27% somewhat confident, and 9% a little bit confident or not confident at all. In response to the question regarding their future plans, 38% planned to stay in Canada for further study after completing their current programs, 22% planned to stay and work in Canada, 8% planned to go back to their home countries, and 32% were not sure yet about what they would do after graduation. In response to the question whether they would recommend the University to their friends, 81% reported that they would while 19% would not. This means a lot since only 23% reported that the university was their first choice when applying for admission to universities.

Through t-test analysis, statistically significant gender differences were found regarding participants’ comfort level in approaching university staff members for help and confidence level in successfully finishing their programs (Table 1). Males felt more comfortable than females approaching staff members for help and were more confident in successfully finishing their program. However, no significant gender difference was found in their overall satisfaction with their study experience at the university.

**Table 1: Gender differences**

Variable	Group	Number of cases	Mean	Standard deviation	t-test results
Comfort approaching staff members for help	Female	29	3.31	1.039	t = 2.524, p < 0.014
	Male	44	3.89	.895	
Confidence for a	Female	31	3.45	.925	t = 2.607,

successful finish of the study program	Male	46	4.04	1.010	p < 0.011
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Chi-square tests were used to explore the association between gender and all other measured variables such as residence preference, friend making with native English speakers, contact with instructor, the first choice for help, feelings about their current study status, and whether to recommend the university to friends. No such association was detected. Comparisons between participants who graduated from public vs. private high schools revealed that private high school graduates were more likely to make friends with native English speakers than their public school counterparts (Table 2). 79% of private school graduates had two or more of such friends while 48% of public school graduates reported to do so.

**Table 2. High school vs. Native English speaker as friends**

<b>Cross tabulation</b>				
		High School		Total
		Public	Private	
Native English speaking friends	None or Less than two	13	8	21
	More than two	12	30	42
Total		25	38	63
<b>Chi-Square Tests</b>				
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	6.499	1	.011	
Likelihood Ratio	6.470	1	.011	
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.396	1	.011	
N of Valid Cases	63			

### Focus Group Results

A few themes emerged from the focus group discussion data including residence issues, challenges, relationship with domestic students, and suggestions for service improvement.

**Living On- or Off-campus.** In the university, students could choose to live in the on-campus residence or off-campus housing. Those participants who lived in residence reported that they liked it because of the opportunities to meet other students and the perceived safety and convenience. One participant reported that:

Residence life is the best part of my experience at the university because while you are living in residence you are more involved in the university. You are always involved in something in the residence lifestyle. People come up with events to keep everyone motivated and to get together and they socialize and [it] is great fun. (Bangladesh)

When some participants argued that living in residence was too noisy, the participant from Bangladesh responded, “Don’t care [about] the noise. Go to library when [you] want to study.” He strongly suggested that international students live in residence at least for the first year.

Beside the noise issue, the major reasons participants gave for living off-campus include lower cost, choice of food, and flexible schedule. One Indian participant stated, “Living off-campus is cheaper. I live [on a] tight budget and it was challenging. [Living] on-campus you

can't get the food you want. Off-campus you can eat whatever you want." Another participant (Pakistan) shared his reason for living off-campus, "Well I live off-campus. On campus they have restrictions like after this time you can't shower, you can't make noise, you can't enjoy."

**Initial Difficulties.** Many participants experienced some initial difficulties at their arrival. It seems that finding specific places they were looking for was a challenge to many of them. Where is the grocery store? Where is the bank? Where is the pub? Such ordinary things seem trivial for long-time residents, but ended up as quite significant for international students at their first arrival. Because they were new to the university and lacked knowledge about available services, some participants spent unnecessary time to get things done. For example, one participant reported his experience with name change:

When I first arrive[d] to school, I got a problem with my first name and last name. Because my first and last names I use daily are different from those printed in the passport...so that I ended up with two different student IDs. I didn't know how to solve it. I went to Registrar's Office [and] they told me I had to go to Computer Center. It took me two days but then I met one of the faculty advisors in Business administration and finally solved my problem. That was a big issue for the first week. (Chinese)

Another participant (Sri Lanka) wanted to change her major after a couple of classes. She reported her frustration doing this without knowing the existence of counselling service: "I had to switch majors...I didn't know there were counselling services; otherwise I would have loved to discuss what I should do to change my major. I had to go to three places to get one thing done, so yeah, it was very difficult to change majors."

**Independence and Loneliness.** Leaving and studying away from their home countries and families was challenging to participants. Participants reported their struggle to live independently from their parents and expressed difficulties balancing their academic life, personal living, and social life, as one participant (India) described: "I found it really hard to sit down and study along with cooking, along with meeting friends and trying to socialize." Another participant admitted that he was lost for the first term:

Parents get everything [done for you]. You just seat at home, do your studies, eat, sleep, [and] play around. But when you come here your life is totally on you. Just from the first day you have to be on your own, like you should wake up on time for your class...I was totally lost. I didn't know how to begin and how to go on about... my first semester ...was completely messed up. (Kuwait)

Participants frequently mentioned feeling homesick. Possibly because of the lack of social relation and their struggle with an independent life, participants missed their families. One Chinese participant considered homesickness as the biggest challenge she encountered in the first year:

I think the biggest challenge is [that] I really miss my home, my family a lot, homesick. The first several weeks it was okay, meeting some new guys, new environment, everything made me feel excited, but after[wards] I began to miss my family, I miss my parents. I don't know if I miss them or I miss what they did for me.

It is interesting to note that this Chinese participant did not want to reveal to parents that she was homesick. She continued: "I talk to them about once a week, sometimes twice a week. I tell them [about] my life. I only tell them good things, not bad things. I have never

told them bad things and I will not tell them I miss them. I think [it] is awkward to say 'Mom, I miss you.'"

**Different Education Values.** Some participants stated that it was a challenge for them to get adjusted to the new education environment which is different from what they used to have. One participant reported that Canadian universities emphasized knowledge application while their home education attaches more value to theoretical knowledge:

For me the greatest challenge was to get adjusted to the education system in Canada because it's pretty different from my country, the way professors expect you to work. In my country it is based on [what] you know, you are given tons of notes and then you go home, you study and you write exams on it. But here you have to apply them; [it] is more based on your application knowledge rather than conceptual. (Bangladesh)

Some participants reported that they had never expected to do so much essay writing, especially for science or engineering courses. One participant (Turkey) commented "[Back at home], we don't have that education, we have just... to write one page, that's enough. When you come here you have to write seven pages, ten pages. It's too much for us." Some participants thought Canadian university employed lots of group work, which could pose challenges to international students. One participant (China) reported: "Here there are a lot of group projects, and most of the time, if you are an international student, group members don't want to talk with you. You don't know what to do. You don't learn much."

Participants also observed that the emphasis at the university lies in the whole learning process while in their home country the most important factor for evaluation was the final exam. One participant (India) commented: "Here, you have to study from the first day of the semester. You have to study regularly, like the whole semester. In my home country, you have to study only when you have exams, and you study only to pass over them."

**Relationship with Domestic Students.** When asked about their relationship with domestic students, many participants said that they had Canadian friends but in most cases, they only worked with them on class projects. When hanging out for leisure, they went with friends from their home country or other international students "[Be]cause we are all missing home and trying to fit in here." When asked if they had domestic students as friends, one participant interestingly provided a yes and no answer depending on the definition of friends. His answer to the question would be yes if the term of friend meant knowing each other; but the answer would be no if the question asked about close relationship.

English language proficiency was a significant factor that influenced participants' contact with Canadian students. Some participants observed that the language difference stopped them from communicating deeper meaning with Canadian students. As one participant (India) stated: "Some things you can only understand when you talk in your own language. It is something that you can explain better because some things which you say in another language is difficult to understand how it happens." Another participant used his own case to support the importance of language in friend making. He reported that most of his friends were Canadian and he believed that was because of his English proficiency:

Most of my friends are Canadian. I feel it is because I have that language advantage, I mean I can speak fluent English, and I think it helps a lot in terms of making friends and I think that's really important but, sometimes I do wonder what if I wasn't really good at English? Would I have the same friends? (Sri Lanka)

While language was a factor that limited participants' relationship with domestic students, there were other factors that were significant. Those participants with adequate English language background still had difficulty making close friends with domestic students. For example, students from India usually have a better English proficiency compared with other major international student groups on campus (Education First, 2012); however, one Indian participant said "Is not that we are not interested [in making friends with domestic students] or anything like that, we enjoy being with them and it is pretty fun...but somewhere somehow ultimately you get out hanging with your own group itself, no matter how hard you try. It happens that way." Another Indian participant concurred:

It's very easy sitting there with one of my Canadian friends like "how is going?" and "yeah, my studies are going well", then some my friends comes, suppose is from India, and says "Oh let's go and have food", I would say "Okay bye, I am going to have food."  
(India)

**Participants' Suggestions for the Better Accommodation of International Students.** Many participants expressed their good experiences with the services provided by the ISC, particularly its orientation programs that provide newcomers with information about study and leisure on campus, a brief description on the rules and regulations of Canada, and how to meet people around. However, participants suggested that there was room for improving the awareness of these available services. They were of the view that there were some students who did not know about the ISC services as one participant from Bangladesh stated: "Most of the people I've met so far are like 'what's the ISC?' 'I'm studying [here] for three years. I didn't know that.' So I would say they should expand and create awareness among people that there is a body on campus called the International Student Center."

Due to the international students' unfamiliarity with the new environment and their financial constraints, some participants suggested that the ISC should provide international students with more information that goes beyond campus life such as things about car insurance discounts and locations to buy cheap goods. Some other participants thought that the ISC provided support mostly related to their social life and they hoped that assistance would also be available regarding their academic life. In the case that international students had issues with academic units or professors, one participant would like ISC to "come in between and intervene the things...at least, they should guide them." (India)

In regard to the on-campus residence, some participants suggested improving the experiences of international students living in residence. One participant (Sri Lanka) reported that international students were assigned bedrooms on certain floors and this limited their opportunities to mingle with domestic students. He suggested that international students should be spread out a bit in the residence. Food service was a great concern of participants who lived on campus. One participant described his difficulty getting himself fed in the following quotation.

Another thing is the university food services. The time should be a lot more flexible because like for Vanier [student residence] it closes at 7pm and we are up till 2 or 3 in the morning and by 10pm we are hungry again, and we have no place to go and yeah the food service times are really bad... Yeah for example during study week, everything was closed on-campus. I mean the students that decided to stay in town had no choice but walk outside of campus and grab something to eat. We were stuck here at the university and we had no place open. Market place opened for two or three days and still, the timing..., I mean the timing was very limited to till 5 in the evening I guess. (Bangladesh)

## **Findings and Discussion**

Our study reveals a mixed picture about international students' experiences on campus. On one hand, 55% of participants were satisfied with their experience at the university, 64% were confident to successfully finish their programs, and 81% would recommend the university to their friends. On the other hand, more than one third of participants were not fully satisfied with their study experiences and lacked confidence in successfully completing their programs. There were 17% of the participants struggling with their studies.

Participants' social integration patterns posed a more worrisome picture. Connection with academics and staff is a significant indicator of social integration in Tinto's model of student retention (Tinto, 1975 & 1993). Unfortunately, our study found out that 73% of participants had never personally contacted their instructors. For half of the participants, the first source for assistance was from their home country fellows, which is consistent with the previous findings reported in the literature (Yan & Berliner, 2013). 37% of participants felt uncomfortable approaching service staff members for help. This could lead to frustration and anxiety among this portion of international students. Participants' socialization with domestic students was quite limited since only 37% shared residence with domestic students and 10% reported going out with domestic students on weekends. There is no wonder that over 87% participants communicated with their family every week. This reflects their loneliness on Canadian campus as specified by focus group attendants.

Most international students experienced homesickness and mitigated the feeling by communicating with their families back home via the internet (Kelly, 2010). The potential drawback of this is that it could slow down the international student's process of adjusting to the new environment. In our study, many participants who shared off-campus accommodation chose other international students from their home country as their roommates. While some scholars noticed the benefits of such a pattern of socialization as these students have many things to share and they can help each other (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), other scholars have argued that staying together mostly with students from their home country may limit their communication with local and other international students (Jiao, 2006).

Students have an international education experience to make friends with local students, but for various reasons, it is not easy for international students and local students to work together smoothly, let alone become close friends (Jiao, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). It seems that the study participants got along well with domestic students in class and many of them had native English speaker friends. However, these friendships seem to be "superficial" (Jiao, 2006) as they reportedly spending most of their time out of the class with students from their home country.

Like findings from previous studies on international students (Kwon, 2009; Yang et al., 2006; Zhang & Zhou, 2010), our study found out that one of the important factors that affect participants' acculturation to the new learning environment is their English language proficiency. Participants who graduated from private high schools that usually had better English preparation reported to be more likely to make friends with native English speakers. During the focus group discussion, participants from countries where English was not the primary language reported that their inadequate English language skills limited their in-depth communication with local students and making close friends with them. Those of the participants who reported to have close domestic friends admitted that their language advantage helped them doing so.

However, language is not the only factor that contributes to the challenges international students face. For some participants especially those from countries where English is widely

used, they were fluent in English and felt comfortable using English for social and academic purposes; yet they still had a variety of problems adjusting themselves to the new school life in Canada including communicating with local students and actively participating in the learner-centered classes. Many of them still mainly socialized with home country fellows. Some participants indicated that they were getting along with Canadian students in their class but still felt that they had a closer relationship with other international students than with Canadian students.

It seems that culture is another factor that determined participants' socialization as reported by Jiao (2006) and Liang (2003). Yan and Berliner (2013) pointed out that the cultural difference amplifies the communication difficulty. International students who grew up in another culture usually possess different personal interests, ways of communication, sense of humour, daily routines, and perceptions on many things such as friendship, sexual relationships, and privacy concerns which will negatively influence their willingness and attempts to make close friends with domestic students. In contrast, although such differences may exist among international students from different countries, the same foreigner status makes them share similar challenges and face similar issues. Such similarity will pull their hearts closer to each other compared with their relationship with domestic students.

International students came with educational experiences which may differ greatly from what domestic students have. The training they received from high school may not meet the expectations of the university for its first-year undergraduates. During the focus group discussion, some participants who even had an educational background in which English was extensively used in their curricula admitted that their writing ability was not adequately developed to meet the expectation of Canadian classes. International students may also bring unique learning preferences which are different from the learner-center approach at the university. Edwards and Tonkin (1990) claimed that, influenced by their previous educational experiences, some international students may be more accustomed to listening and learning rather than speaking in class. In our study, some of the participants were used to learning by listening with a focus on theoretical knowledge and felt at odd with the instruction that values students' contribution in class and emphasizes practical skills. Because of their established values on instruction, international students may find interactive classes chaotic (Wan, 2001). Such resistance to Canadian way of instruction may limit their willingness and engagement in the process of teaching and learning. For those participants who came from a highly competitive education system, group learning was contradictory to their past school experiences. In high schools, they were not encouraged and prepared to participate in group learning. Such lack of prior experience with group learning coupled with language and culture barriers would cause international students to be in an awkward position in the context of education that emphasizes collaborative learning. These differences explain why participants suggested that the university should provide more academic services in addition to social services.

### **Concluding Remarks**

While universities are attempting to recruit more students from oversea countries, international student retention becomes a significant issue for them. The literature on student retention has concluded that students' decision to drop out or persist is affected by the degree of suitability between the student and the institution. In Tinto's student integration model (Tinto, 1975 & 1993), the pre-entrance characteristics including family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling contribute to the outcome of student and institution matching. For

international students, such pre-entrance characters are more complex than those of domestic students since they were educated in a foreign system, came from a different culture, and spoke a different language. Our study reveals that the first-year international students face many challenges at the university especially with regards to social integration. Possible explanation for poor social integration can be attributed to language barriers, culture shock, as well as the different instructional context and requirements.

Even though a large portion of international students have limited English language proficiency upon entry, limited knowledge about Canadian culture, different learning habits and education values and beliefs, most international students commit to the goal of obtaining a Canadian university degree. Such commitment will not easily drop since they are willing to leave their families to study in a foreign place and acknowledge the financial and emotional costs that their studying abroad causes their parents. Tinto (1975) acknowledges the significance of the commitment to the goal of degree completion on student persistence in university education. Students came to the university with initial goal commitment and institutional commitment to the postsecondary institution they are registered. These commitments will be influenced by their interaction with the academic and social systems of the institution. If their institutional experiences shake their goal commitment to degree completion, they will drop out from the postsecondary education. For those students who have a strong goal of degree completion, even though the institutional experience is at the low level of satisfaction, they may want to stay unless they are dismissed by the university due to their poor academic records or transfer to another institution. In their model of student attrition, Bean and Metzger (1985) correctly pointed out that the decision process of dropping-out from university is also influenced by outside factors such as financial issues and peer influence. Most international students have relatively limited opportunity to transfer to other institution due to visa issues and less freedom to drop out from the educational system because of various outside factors including parents' expectation and almost zero job possibility. The relatively high goal commitment and the dropout constraints set by outside factors could offer a good explanation for the fact that international students' retention rate is actually slightly higher than that of domestic students at some universities even though international students often face more challenges than their domestic counterparts (Kwai, 2009).

It should be noted that the current literature provides a mixed picture in regards to international students' dropout rate compared to that of domestic students. Contradictory to the finding of Kwai (2009), Zhou and Scratchley (2005) found that the retention rate of international students was lower than domestic students at one university. Such confusion may take place because researchers failed to distinguish between different types of dropout: "dropout resulting from academic failure" vs. "dropout which is the outcome of voluntary withdrawal" and permanent dropout vs. temporary leaving or transfer between institutions (Tinto, 1975, p.89). Finnie, Childs, and Qiu (2012) recently reported that the persistence rate in Ontario universities is higher than expected after considering students transfer between institutions and returning after temporary leaving. Students who drop out from the university where Zhou and Scratchley (2005) conducted their study might temporary leave the institution or get transferred to other institutions. The statement that international students have a higher persistence rate may still be a valid hypothesis although subject to verification by further research.

A possible high persistence rate is not a good reason for ignorance about international students' needs or undermining the effort to retain them. No institution is willing to lose any of their students to others. In order to provide international students with a pleasant learning

experience and keep more of them to the end of their study programs, Tinto's theory (1975 & 1993) reminds us of the need of university commitments since student education goals and commitment to the institution will be potentially modified by their institutional experiences. The following suggestions can be drawn from our study for the university to improve its services to international students.

Most participants chose to live in student residence when they first arrived but as they got themselves familiarized with the learning and living environments, many would move to shared rental apartments/houses because they are quieter and cheaper. The residence services of the university should find ways to improve the environment (e.g., mixing international and domestic students to give them more opportunities to communicate and providing more choices for food) so that these students may choose to stay in student residence. There, they could have more opportunities to communicate and work with international students of different origins and local students so as to enrich their international study experience.

Participants indicated that they benefited from service providers on campus but that there is room for improvement. For instance, better awareness of the service units could be made among international students; assistance should be provided to students to meet their needs in both academic and social aspects. What is more important is that the service organizations should be better coordinated so that students could get assistance more efficiently. University authorities need to make effort not only to provide services to international students but also encourage domestic students to get involved in events and activities organized for international students so that international students can get more opportunities to socialize with domestic students.

Social integration occurs through "informal peer group association, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Successful encounters in these areas will result in important social rewards (friendship support, faculty support, and collective affiliation) that modify a student's institutional and education commitments. In our study, while the university has some avenues such as the ISC to offer help, international students still approach their home fellows first for help and rarely contact instructors personally. Many of them studied alone and some experienced difficulty finding study partners or project team members from local students. Such challenges could be reduced if the university increases its awareness and appreciation of international students' unique situation and special needs at all levels: administrators, academic faculty, staff members, and domestic students. Given international students' unique educational background and learning preferences, university authorities and teaching staff need to consider the learning differences of international students in the curriculum design and course delivery at both course and program levels so as to best meet the needs of these students. This step is much harder to achieve compared with organizing social parties, orientation workshops, and other host services.

This study for the first time employed a retention framework to investigate the first-year international students' social integration on a Canadian campus. Although there is plenty anecdotal description of international students' social experiences scattered in different pieces of literature, this study for the first time measured their socialization using a wide range of parameters: friend making, residence sharing, study partner, study place, interaction with instructor, contact with staff, participation in social events, etc. It provides a comprehensive picture about international students' socialization. In addition, the study offered both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the issue of social integration. Therefore, we consider that this study makes significant contributions to the literature. Future studies may

employ a similar research design to explore international students' academic integration, which is the other significant aspect of student retention.

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