

Voices and Visions: An Appreciative Inquiry into International Master's Students' Ideal Learning Experience at a Southern Ontario University

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher used the Appreciative Inquiry's dream phase to investigate international master's students' ideal learning experiences at a Canadian university. The research question was, "How do international students describe their ideal experience in terms of quality and learning experiences in a master's program?" Findings revealed a strong desire for an education that blended theoretical knowledge with practical skills. Key themes included the importance of fair tuition fees, meaningful interaction with local students, and comprehensive career development opportunities. These conditions were identified as pivotal to a transformative educational journey. The study findings urge educators and policymakers to focus on international students' well-being and future employability and highlight the multifaceted benefits for students, institutions, and broader international relations. The insights gathered underscore the potential of a student-centered academic approach in shaping an educational landscape that responds to the aspirations and needs of international graduate students.

Keywords: Academic Integration, Appreciative Inquiry, Dream Experience, Educational Policy, Experiential Learning, International Students, Master's Programs.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I build on my previous work that explored the factors that made international master's students (IMS) happy and engaged, especially during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b). This study also uses data from the same doctoral research nested in the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodological and theoretical framework (Cooperrider, Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005). For this current paper, I focus on the *dream* phase of AI's 4-D cycle (discovery, dream, design, and destiny). Specifically, I explore the quality experiences IMS hope for in their academic journey. The key question I investigated was, "How do international students describe their ideal experience in terms of quality and learning experiences in a master's program?"

There has been a notable increase in international students relocating to Western countries, including Canada, for higher education (Guo, Guo, 2017; Hou, Lu, 2017). This trend has been growing since the start of the new millennium and over the last ten years (Knight, 2012; Li et al., 2012). The pull towards foreign education is strong worldwide. As a former international student, I, like the participants in this study, was drawn to the idea of obtaining a "prestigious degree" from abroad

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(Ammigan, 2019; Canadian Bureau..., 2018) and the opportunities for international work experience (CBIE, 2018). The chance to improve my English skills was also a big reason (Ankomah, 2022b).

However, this journey is not easy. International students face challenges like adapting to a new academic environment (Ammigan, Jones, 2018; Calder et al., 2016), dealing with academic uncertainties (Alqudayri, Gounko, 2018; Chen, Zhou, 2019), and overcoming language barriers (Burel et al., 2019; Chen, 2017). I know these challenges well because my first days in Canada were filled with culture shock (Ammigan, 2019; Burel et al., 2019). Financial issues (Stevenson, Bland, 2017), worsened by high living costs and limited job opportunities on campus (Calder et al., 2016), were big obstacles. My experiences echo what many studies show about the difficulties international students face.

Despite these challenges, there were also moments of victory and happiness. Some of my best memories include receiving a book award for excellence and a kind gesture from a domestic student who gave me warmer clothes for my first winter in Canada. However, such positive stories are often glossed over in academic studies, which tend to focus more on the problems international students face (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b). This shows a gap in the existing research. While there are some examples of positive experiences, like supportive supervisors (Gao, 2019) or finding a job (Ammigan, 2019), there is not much in the extant literature about international students being encouraged to dream. Some AI scholars (e.g., Cockell, McArthur-Blair, 2012; Cooperrider et al., 2008) emphasize the crucial role of positive dreaming in shaping future outcomes. They advise policymakers and practitioners to inspire the development of policies, programs, and practices that encourage positive dreams about the future, as these hopeful visions can drive the actions and investments needed to achieve meaningful and desired change. In my doctoral research, I wanted to fill this gap. Using AI, I aimed to give IMS a chance to dream about the kind of international graduate student experience they think is possible. This research sheds light on the hopeful views of these students, seeking to influence policies and programs at Canadian universities. By focusing on what motivates international students even in tough times (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b) and giving them space to dream and imagine a bright future, I aimed to find positive moments that are important for policy and practice, thus adding to the literature on international students. The main goal is to encourage institutions to consider the dreams and positive voices of IMS to develop policies and practices that support international students in their academic paths.

To sum up, my own experiences as a former international student greatly influenced my research. While recognizing the struggles international students face, I also want to celebrate their moments of joy, success, and the power of dreams. Through this study, I hope to improve our understanding of the international student experience, highlighting the importance of focusing on positive experiences, including the dreams these students have about what is possible in enhancing their schooling experience.

2. Literature Review

Some research has briefly mentioned the assistance that educational institutions offer to international students, such as providing airport welcome services or creating chat groups (Ammigan, 2019; Chen, Zhou, 2019; Klodt, 2019; Zhang, Zhou, 2010; Zhou et al., 2017). However, there is limited discussion about these students' positive experiences. This review focuses on four key positive aspects: enhanced thinking skills, job training, forming friendships, and enjoyment of classes.

Cultivating Critical Thinking Skills Through Engaging Learning

Many international students appreciate the innovative learning methods they encounter abroad, which often enhance their critical thinking skills (Alqudayri, Gounko, 2018; Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Clerehan et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2017). Research describes critical thinking as involving in-depth analysis, questioning, and understanding diverse perspectives to inform decision-making (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Sensoy, DiAngelo, 2017). For instance, Saudi Arabian students in some studies appreciated their courses for challenging and encouraging critical thinking (Alqudayri, Gounko; 2018; Clerehan et al., 2012). This experience was notably different from their previous education in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, participants from China studying in Canada appreciated these new learning methods (Zhou et al., 2017). They found them challenging but rewarding for deepening their understanding and enhancing their active participation in their own learning.

Career-Readiness Training

Although there is limited research in this area, some noteworthy studies are available, including an investigation of a unique course at a Canadian university designed to teach international students presentation and teaching skills, which participants appreciated (Guo, Chase, 2011), and another study that highlighted an international student who greatly valued a course that included work experience, which helped her understand the Canadian work environment (Zhou et al., 2017). These job-readiness courses can be crucial in preparing IMS for future employment and may provide opportunities to earn income while studying. The positive narratives from these experiences are crucial in advancing international education, and it is vital that scholars emphasize how students appreciate and feel about these programs to better inform policy.

Forming Friendships and Building Belonging

Relocating to a new country is challenging, but many international students manage to form friendships and find a sense of belonging abroad (Ammigan, 2019; Ammigan, Jones, 2018; Amos, Lordly, 2014; Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Gao, 2019). Simple acts like sharing meals can foster closeness and reduce homesickness (Amos, Lordly, 2014), thereby building strong bonds. Personal narratives, including my own, underscore the significance of these friendships. I argue that to advance international education and enhance the experience of IMS, researchers should adopt strength-based approaches like AI to reveal what keeps IMS excited and focused on their studies despite the challenges.

Embracing the Learning Journey

Many students pursue overseas education for a prestigious degree (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; CBIE, 2018). Yet, they often discover that they also enjoy the overall learning experience in a resource-rich academic setting, including access to quality library facilities, advanced research labs, and high-speed internet access. A study found that international students in Australia cherished the entire educational journey, not just the final degree (Arkoudis et al., 2019). This indicates that for many, the experience of studying abroad encompasses more than just the end goal; it is also about enjoying the journey with access to excellent resources such as state-of-the-art technology, diverse cultural programs, and supportive academic services (Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b).

Final Thoughts: Highlighting Positive Experiences

While many studies emphasize the challenges faced by international students, few acknowledge their positive experiences, which, unfortunately, are often overlooked. My previous research (Ankomah 2022a, 2022b) has shown that international students experience many joyful moments, including financial and emotional support from family, responsive instructors, employment opportunities, the satisfaction of learning, and engaging in extracurricular activities with colleagues and friends at university events. However, these positive experiences are not sufficiently discussed in the literature. This study aims to fill this gap. Using the AI approach and building on my previous work (Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b), this paper provides a platform for international students to share their dream quality IMS experience. Through this study, I encourage policymakers and practitioners to consider how they can incorporate participants' positive dreams into policies and programs, thereby enhancing the international student experience.

3. Methods

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study is part of my broader research, builds on a 2022 paper that explores the positive experiences of international master's students at a university in Southern Ontario, and employs Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as its methodological and theoretical framework. AI is a strengths-based approach that focuses on identifying and amplifying what works well within a given context. It was originally developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) and later refined by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) and many other AI scholars, including David Bushe (2011). AI was chosen for this study because of its unique ability to shift the focus from challenges to positive experiences, allowing for a deeper exploration of what motivates international master's students, even during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework's emphasis on envisioning an ideal future aligns with the study's goal of uncovering and highlighting the dreams and aspirations of these students, to inform policy and practice in international higher education. The study is guided by the research question: How do international students describe their ideal experience in terms of quality and learning experiences in a master's program?

Research Design

The research design follows the AI 4-D cycle: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2008). The discovery phase involves identifying what is working well; the dream phase, on which this study focuses, explores the ideal experiences that participants envision. Design is about co-creating actionable plans to achieve these ideals, and destiny involves implementing and sustaining those changes. While my previous work addressed the discovery phase, this study focuses on students' dreams. Future publications will discuss the design and destiny phases.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, where initial participants referred others with relevant experiences (Creswell, 2013; Tilley, 2016). This study, conducted at a Southern Ontario university, involved 17 international master's students from seven different programs. While snowball sampling was effective in reaching a specific group of international students, it posed a risk of selection bias (Cohen, Arieli, 2011). To mitigate this, efforts were made to diversify the participant pool by declining several interested applicants from a single program and encouraging referrals from underrepresented programs. Despite its limitations, snowball sampling proved to be an economical and efficient approach, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted online using the Microsoft Teams platform due to COVID-19 restrictions, providing flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and participant familiarity (Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b; Creswell, 2013; Salmons, 2012). Two primary methods of data collection were used: semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions.

Semi-Structured Individual Interviews: Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, each guided by open-ended questions designed to explore participants' ideal learning experiences. From the primary research question, the following secondary questions were asked: (1) *What would be your dream international master's student experience in your program?* (2) *What kind of educational experience should a Master's program offer international graduate students?* and (3) *How would you describe exceptional/quality learning experiences in a Master's program?* Prompts such as "Please, tell me why this experience will be important for the development of students" and "Please, tell me more about what you mean when you say that ..." were used to encourage participants to share their stories in greater depth. These questions were shared via PowerPoint during the sessions to ensure clarity and focus. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to member checking to ensure accuracy (Cope, 2010; Flynn et al., 2016).

Focus Group Discussions: Three focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 16 participants, including 13 who had previously participated in the individual interviews, and an additional 3 who joined specifically for the focus groups. Scheduling conflicts prevented the 14th individual interview participant from joining the focus group discussions. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The same questions used in the individual interviews were repeated in the focus groups to validate the consistency of responses across different settings and to foster a collaborative environment where participants could elaborate on their thoughts through group dialogue. These discussions provided a space for participants to build on each other's ideas, aligning with AI's emphasis on collective knowledge creation (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005; Flores, Alonso, 1995). Debriefing sessions followed each focus group to summarize discussions and address any concerns (Sim, Waterfield, 2019). During the interviews and focus groups, video cameras were initially used to establish rapport before being turned off to protect confidentiality. The consistent use of the same questions in both settings ensured that data was triangulated effectively, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and aspirations.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process involved several steps to ensure a thorough and systematic interpretation of the collected data. After each interview and focus group session, transcripts were downloaded from Microsoft Teams for editing. I reviewed and edited each transcript to ensure accuracy, particularly given the challenges posed by different accents and the limitations of automatic transcription software. The cleaned transcripts from the individual interviews were then sent back to participants for member checking. All interviewees participated in this process, with only one participant making minor corrections to two grammatical errors. Focus group transcripts

were not sent for member checking because the aggregated data were reviewed and refined during debriefing sessions, where participants provided necessary additions and revisions.

To organize and analyze the data, I used NVivo, a qualitative data management software. Familiar with the software, I coded the data to identify keywords, patterns, and similar terms (Cope, 2010; Welsh, 2002; Williams, Moser, 2019). NVivo was instrumental in managing and organizing the data efficiently, allowing for easy retrieval and merging of related codes. Through this process, six key themes emerged, which were then further refined and analyzed outside of NVivo in Microsoft Word. This approach aligns with a study which emphasized that while software aids the process, it does not replace the researcher's role in interpreting data (Basis, 2003). Throughout the analysis, I cross-referenced the themes with relevant literature and participant first-hand accounts to provide a rich, contextually grounded interpretation and to connect the findings with broader educational policy and practice (Bergmark, Kostenius, 2018; Kottler, Sharp, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a top priority in this study. Adhering to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018), I ensured that participants' confidentiality, privacy, and rights were protected at all stages of the research. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and the institution to maintain anonymity. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Research Ethics Board granted clearance for me to obtain verbal consent from participants. Throughout the study, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To further protect confidentiality, all personal data and audio recordings have been deleted, and paper documents have been shredded. The transcripts, marked only with pseudonyms, are being securely retained as electronic files on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. These electronic files will be retained for 7 years before being confidentially destroyed.

Researcher Reflexivity

As a former international student, my personal experiences have likely influenced my research focus, the way I interacted with participants, and how I interpreted their narratives. My background in navigating similar educational environments gave me insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by international students, which may have shaped the study's design and outcomes. I acknowledge that this positionality may have introduced biases, but it also provided me with a unique perspective to deeply understand the participants' experiences and aspirations. To control for potential bias, I employed strategies such as member checking, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Additionally, I engaged in continuous self-reflection throughout the research process, regularly questioning how my own experiences might influence the interpretation of data. These measures helped to ensure that the findings were grounded in the participants' voices, rather than being overshadowed by my own perspectives.

4. Findings

In this section, I present the findings derived from both the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Six key themes emerged, each corresponding to the research question, which sought to understand participants' ideal international student experience in terms of quality and learning.

Equitable Tuition and Enhanced Funding: A Stand for Justice

A significant concern expressed by participants was the disparity in tuition fees between domestic and international students. Many voiced a strong desire for more equitable tuition structures, reflecting the financial strain that these fees impose on them and their families. Sahas, an individual interview participant, shared, "the learning here is great, but the much higher tuition fees for international students feel unfair. We're looking for equal chances." This sentiment was echoed by participants in Focus Group 2, with one expressing their frustration: "to be honest, I don't really understand why we're getting the same kind of education as domestic students, but we have to pay tuition over and above what they pay. It will be a dream come true for many international students when they finally get the chance to pay what domestic students pay for the same quality education." In the same group, another participant articulated a similar aspiration, saying, "my dream would be for international students to pay the same tuition as domestic students. However, if that is not possible, the tuition should be reduced to lower the financial burden on students who are already far from home. The ideal situation or dream would be paying the same as domestic students."

The issue of funding was also a major concern. Amogha expressed her dissatisfaction: “many international students, including me, are not satisfied with the amount of tuition we pay in comparison to those paid by domestic students for the same service. With such higher tuition, I expected better care and assistance from the program and institution. Therefore, even if they will not reduce the fees, they should give us significant funding, scholarship, or bursary opportunities to help us cover food, rent, and other living expenses.” In addition to these concerns, participants also emphasized the importance of expanding scholarship opportunities. A Focus Group 3 participant captured the feelings and dreams of the group: “I wish that international students were given the same opportunity as our domestic counterparts to compete for external scholarships such as SSHRC and OGS. In some cases, international students don’t qualify at all, and in other instances, there are only one or two slots for international students.” The desire for equitable tuition and expanded funding opportunities was a consistent theme across all discussions. Participants called for an education system that recognizes their financial contributions and provides them with the necessary support to succeed. As Sahas succinctly put it, “it is a bigger challenge we face; hopefully, our leaders can hear our cry for financial support.”

Bridging Theory and Practice: The Pursuit of Experiential and Practical Learning

Participants consistently expressed a strong desire for a balanced integration of theory and practical application in their courses. They emphasized the importance of experiential learning, which they believed was essential for their academic and professional development. In an individual interview, Jaival, an MBA student, articulated this need clearly: “I wish the theoretical aspect of our instruction were matched with practical content. Things have to be hands-on, so we can graduate with knowledge and skills that will help us become productive from day one on the job.” This sentiment was shared across various disciplines, with participants expressing a common aspiration for more opportunities to apply their learning in real-world contexts. Education students, in particular, highlighted the gap between theory and practice in their program. A participant from Focus Group 2 shared her dream experience:

In my program, we don’t have co-op and internship opportunities, so my dream experience in this master’s program would be to receive better career development support. It doesn’t have to be complicated. My Master of Education program could arrange with local schools for us to visit to see how things are done in the Canadian classroom. There, we can observe how teachers are practicing some of the theories we have been learning in our lectures.

This need for hands-on experience was echoed by another participant, an MA in Sociology student in the same focus group, who added: “we need experiential learning to be very successful in our academic and professional development. The program should prioritize getting international students industry experience, which will compensate for the higher fees we pay.”

The stories about hands-on experience emerging during the dream phase of the data collection were rich and varied, with every participant sharing this aspiration. It was evident that international students, being new to the institution and the industries far and near, felt the classroom should always have a practical component to build their confidence and develop industry-ready skills for their future professional and educational endeavours within the Canadian context. Vihas, another participant in the MBA program, emphasized the importance of balancing theory and practice from the beginning of the program. In his individual interview, he stated,

My first dream is that the courses are challenging in both theory and practice. I found the first semester courses too theoretical, which did not help many students enjoy the program. I understand that the theoretical aspect is critical. Still, at the same time, it becomes boring when all that students are doing is trying hard to cram a lot of theoretical information with no practical component to stimulate the other side of the brain.”

Professional Development: A Call for Comprehensive Support

Participants highlighted the urgent need for enhanced professional development, particularly in acquiring soft skills essential for career success. In Focus Group 3, a participant emphasized, “developing comprehensive soft skills, including resume writing and interview preparation, in workshops sanctioned by the program and institution could be the key to helping international students compete effectively in Canada.” Many participants felt that the current support was insufficient, lacking depth and regularity. Another participant in Focus Group 2 expressed similar concerns: “I wish the program gave international students more soft skills training to help remove the fear most of us have in putting resumés and cover letters together. We’re often left with

unanswered questions, unsure if we'll succeed in interviews." This comment highlights the anxiety many international students feel due to unfamiliarity with the Canadian job market and the lack of tailored guidance. Deng, an interview participant from China, shared how a specialized workshop had boosted his confidence in speaking English, noting, "I wish such workshops were organized daily." This underscores the value of targeted professional development, particularly for non-native speakers. Amogha, another participant, stressed the importance of industry-related workshops, noting that these opportunities are often reserved for co-op students, leaving others without access: "It's painful for students who can't afford co-op fees to miss out on these critical opportunities. Employers are interested in hiring students familiar with their organizations through these workshops." Overall, participants stressed the need for more frequent, tailored professional development opportunities to better prepare them for the competitive Canadian job market and help them build valuable industry connections.

Extracurricular Activities: A Pathway to Inclusivity and Connection

Participants emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities in enhancing their sense of belonging and connection to the broader community. A Focus Group 2 participant shared, "I want to experience new things and share more of mine. Music, dance, sports—they're ways to connect, right? I want to use them to get to know Canadian students and share my world." The group suggested regular social events, like games and sports, to bring international and domestic students together and make international students feel more integrated into the Canadian community. In the individual interview, Abhas echoed this sentiment, saying, "My dream international student experience would be for the program to effortlessly organize social events that can connect international students to domestic students and local community members." He proposed activities like regular visits to Canadian families and cross-cultural events to foster deeper connections and mutual understanding. Participants also highlighted feelings of social isolation. One participant from Focus Group 1 noted, "Even though we're on the same campus, it feels like there's a wall between us. I'm around other MBA students, but I hardly talk to students from other programs. We're close, but it feels like we're worlds apart." This was supported by another Focus Group 1 participant who added, "There are no mixed social events for undergraduate and graduate students, which I believe doesn't promote well-being. My dream is to participate in events that bring all students together to socialize and enjoy student life." Abhas summed it all up in an interview:

I envision the creation of several extracurricular activities that promote interactions between domestic and international students and local community members. I believe that studies are not just about what happens in the classroom but also about building excellent rapport among everyone involved in the school. Our satisfaction and success are very important, and as an international student, I think feeling a part of the community is crucial to my happiness in the program.

Empowering the Student Voice in Academic Trajectories

Participants also expressed a strong desire for more control over their educational choices and for their voices to be heard in institutional decision-making processes. Eve, an individual interview participant, emphasized this need, saying, "We aren't here to just receive; we aim to shape, direct, and forge our own paths. The master's journey should be a partnership, where our voices guide our academic and professional paths." A participant in Focus Group 1 also noted, "As international students, we bring diverse perspectives that can enrich the academic environment. I dream of an institution where our voices are not just heard but are integral in shaping policies and programs that affect us directly." Another participant, Ranajay, articulated his vision during an interview, stating, "My dream is to see a system where students are genuinely involved in decision-making processes. We are the ones experiencing the challenges and opportunities firsthand, so it makes sense for our voices to be central in discussions about our education." In addition, participants also expressed the need for their feedback to be actively sought and valued. They dreamt of an academic environment where regular consultations with students are the norm, allowing them to contribute to the continuous improvement of their programs. As one participant put it during a focus group discussion, "If we are to succeed, our leaders must recognize that we are not just recipients of education; we are active contributors. Our insights should be used to tailor our academic trajectories better to fit the evolving demands of the global job market."

Balancing the Books and the Budget: The Importance of Employment Opportunities for International Graduate Students

Participants highlighted the importance of employment opportunities, particularly on- and off-campus jobs, as essential for their financial sustainability and professional development. Vihas, reflecting on the financial stress faced by international students, shared,

International students spend a lot of money on tuition and other expenses. Therefore, to reduce the financial stress on us, it would be appreciated if the program and institution could help international students find on-campus employment, such as teaching, research, and graduate assistant positions. I know that these positions would not generate much money, but they may help offset accommodation costs.

Praful also shared his vision for strengthening career services to support international students better:

I dream of a day when the career zone is revitalized better to help us with resumé and cover letter preparations. As international students, we are new to the area and the country, and so we are unfamiliar with the employment landscape. I hope that institutions will work collaboratively to assist us in finding on and off-campus jobs. It would be a significant step toward helping us get our job application documents sorted and ready to go.

The desire for fairness and equal opportunities was also a recurring theme in the dreams of participants. Jaival expressed his frustrations about the difficulties in securing on-campus jobs, saying:

I dream of a system where international master's students have equal opportunities for on-campus employment and co-op positions, competing fairly with domestic students. We are new to the institution, locality, and culture, and it would be a dream to have leaders advocate for us every step of the way. So far, most of my friends and I have struggled to secure on-campus employment. We've applied repeatedly, but it seems like international students in MBA programs are often overlooked, which is why many of us end up working in department stores in the city.

These dreams reflect the participants' deep need for institutional support in accessing employment opportunities, which they see as vital not only for financial stability but also for gaining relevant Canadian work experience in their areas of expertise to enhance their future career prospects significantly.

5. Discussion

In this discussion section, I contextualize the findings within the international higher education literature and analyze their implications for policy and practice.

Equitable Tuition and Enhanced Funding: Implications for Fairness and Inclusion

The financial disparity between domestic and international students is significant, with international students often paying three times more in tuition than their domestic counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2020). This substantial difference is frequently justified by institutions as necessary to compensate for the lack of government subsidies available to international students and to make up for cuts in government funding for higher education (Usher, Balfour, 2023). However, research indicates that these tuition fees far exceed the actual cost of education for international students, raising serious concerns about fairness and equity (Ankomah, 2022a; Calder et al., 2016; Klodt, 2019). Participants in this study consistently advocated for a more equitable tuition structure that reflects the true costs of their education. From this study's data, a reduction in international tuition fees to levels comparable to those of domestic students – adjusted to exclude government subsidies but covering the operational costs – would be a significant step toward addressing these disparities. This approach would not only alleviate the financial pressure on international students but also foster a more inclusive academic environment, enabling all students to thrive without the burden of excessive financial costs imposed to compensate for funding gaps in host institutions and governments.

The reliance on international students as a primary revenue source has become a global trend, driven by reductions in public funding for higher education (Qureshi, Khawaja, 2021; Sanchez-Serra, Marconi, 2018). In Canada, as government funding per full-time student declined by 19 % between 2009–2010 and 2015–2016, revenue from international students nearly doubled, effectively offsetting the shortfall caused by the reduction in public funding (Usher, Balfour, 2023). This pattern is not unique to Canada, as similar trends have been observed in Europe and the

United Kingdom, where institutions increasingly rely on international students to fill funding gaps (Cantwell, 2019; Qureshi, Khawaja, 2021; Sanchez-Serra, Marconi, 2018). However, this commercialization of education, where international students are viewed primarily as revenue generators, undermines the principles of equity and fairness in higher education. Congruent with the participants' dreams of tuition cuts and increased funding opportunities, addressing these disparities is crucial for creating a fairer, more inclusive educational landscape that acknowledges the contributions and needs of international students.

Bridging Theory and Practice: The Need for Experiential Learning

The participants' desire for a curriculum that integrates theory with practical application is echoed by scholars who advocate for experiential learning models (Arnesson, Albinsson, 2017; Radović et al., 2021). The demand for practical, hands-on experiences reflects a global trend towards education that prepares students for real-world challenges. Several studies emphasize how international students crave a balance between theory and practice (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Calder et al., 2016; Gao, 2019; Guo, Chase, 2011). Research on Chinese international graduate students similarly found that these students yearned for a curriculum that gave equal weight to theoretical and practical learning (Li, Tierney, 2013). This aligns with existing literature, which highlights that international students often seek education abroad specifically to gain access to experiential learning opportunities that may be lacking in their home countries (Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b; Calder et al., 2016; CBIE, 2018; Klodt, 2019). Participants from MBA and material physics programs, for example, expressed appreciation for the experiential components already embedded in some of their courses, but they also articulated a collective dream for every course to include a practical element. Conversely, the lack of such opportunities has been linked to negative outcomes. Some international students withdrew from their PhD programs due to the absence of practical applications of the theories they were studying (Gao, 2019). Participants in this study consistently emphasized the importance of experiential learning, viewing it as crucial for enhancing employability and ensuring that graduates are equipped to navigate complex professional environments (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b). Addressing these aspirations and integrating experiential learning across all courses is a necessary response to the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse and global student body, making it a crucial pedagogical improvement. By doing so, institutions can enhance the academic experience for international students while better preparing them for the professional challenges they will face after graduation.

Professional Development: Addressing the Skills Gap

While participants appreciated the sparse workshops that offered professional development and skill training on resume writing, interview preparation, and other career-related skills, they expressed a strong desire for more comprehensive and consistent support. In the context of this study, soft skills refer to essential non-technical abilities such as effective communication, networking, adaptability, and the ability to navigate the Canadian job market. These skills are crucial for international students, many of whom come from educational systems and labour markets where securing employment did not require the same level of rigorous resume crafting or interview preparation needed in Canada. This gap highlights the importance of tailored professional development programs that can equip international students with the tools they need to succeed in a new cultural and professional environment. The findings align with existing literature that underscores the critical role of professional development in bridging the gap between academic achievements and professional aspirations. For example, Guo and Chase (2011) highlight how targeted courses at Canadian universities have been effective in equipping international students with the necessary presentation and teaching skills, enhancing their confidence and competence. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2017) document the value of internships and work-integrated learning opportunities in helping international students understand the Canadian work environment. The participants' dreams of more robust and accessible professional development opportunities underscore the need for institutions to expand these offerings. By doing so, institutions can better prepare international students for the challenges of the Canadian workplace, thus contributing to the broader efforts to improve the quality and inclusivity of international education (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Guo, Chase, 2011; Zhou et al., 2017).

Extracurricular Activities: Enhancing Integration and Community Building

The desire for extracurricular activities that facilitate cultural exchange and community building reflects a broader recognition of the importance of social integration for international students.

Participants, particularly those in international student-only programs, expressed a strong need for activities that bridge the gap between them and their domestic counterparts, given that their programs often segregated them from domestic students. They dreamt of participating in sports, music festivals, potlucks, and other social events that would not only allow them to forge friendships but also foster cultural exchanges and a sense of belonging (Ammigan, Jones, 2018; Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b; Klodt, 2019). The literature reveals that a strong sense of belonging is closely linked to the mental health and overall well-being of international students (Chen, Zhou, 2019), and also highlights the importance of extracurricular activities in creating a more inclusive and cohesive campus environment (Zhou et al., 2017; Zhou, Zhang, 2014). The findings of this study underscore the importance of creating spaces where international students can engage meaningfully with their peers and the broader community, thereby enhancing their academic and social experiences.

Participants in this study also highlighted the limitations of relying solely on relationships with fellow nationals, noting that such connections, while valuable, do not provide the full breadth of experiences they sought in their international education. Instead, they advocated for structured, institution-led events that would allow them to interact with a wider range of individuals, including undergraduates, PhD students, and local community members. These activities, they argued, are essential for reducing feelings of loneliness and for helping international students feel welcomed and accepted within the institution and the local community. Higher education institutions must intentionally create a sense of belonging for international students through year-round programming and outreach initiatives (Ammigan, 2019). By prioritizing such initiatives, institutions can significantly enhance the overall satisfaction and well-being of their international student population, ultimately contributing to their academic success and personal development.

Empowering the Student Voice: Implications for Institutional Decision-Making

Empowering students by involving them in decision-making processes is critical for fostering a sense of ownership and partnership in their educational journey. Participants in this study expressed a strong desire for their voices to be heard and their input to be integrated into decisions that directly affected their academic and professional paths (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b). They dreamt of a more inclusive and collaborative educational environment where their needs and aspirations were not only acknowledged but actively considered by institutional leaders. This dream is underscored by a powerful argument: “The most important way for universities to discover how to serve international students best is by seeking the information directly from the students” (Klodt, 2019, p. 98). Such an assertion aligns with the participants’ call for enhanced involvement in decision-making processes, emphasizing that the integration of student voices is not merely beneficial but essential for the development of effective and responsive educational policies.

The literature confirms the importance of student-centered approaches in higher education and how “student outcomes will improve, and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). This study’s findings resonate with Mitra’s (2004) perspective, as participants articulated a deep-seated need for their voices to guide institutional decisions, especially those affecting their academic and professional trajectories. The participants’ dreams for a more participatory role in institutional governance reflect a trend towards the democratization of education, where student input is seen as vital for fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing overall student satisfaction (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Klodt, 2019; Mitra, 2004). Moreover, participants proposed practical strategies to ensure their voices are heard, such as informal visits by leaders, designated office hours for student consultations, and direct communication channels like email. These suggestions are consistent with the literature, which advocates for the use of diverse methods to capture and incorporate student feedback into institutional decision-making processes (Ammigan, Jones, 2018; Ankomah, 2022a; Bergmark, Kostenius, 2018).

Employment Opportunities: Supporting Financial and Professional Needs

The importance of employment opportunities for international students is well-documented in the literature (Ankomah, 2022a, 2022b; Ammigan, Jones, 2018; Calder et al., 2016). For many international students, securing on- and off-campus jobs is essential for their financial survival and plays a critical role in their professional development and integration into the host country’s workforce. Participants in this study highlighted how employment opportunities provided them with much-needed financial support and a sense of independence, as well as valuable Canadian work experience that could enhance their future employability (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b). Despite the gratitude expressed for the opportunities they received, participants also dreamt of more structured

and accessible employment pathways, emphasizing the need for institutions to prioritize the creation of meaningful employment opportunities that align with their academic and career goals. The literature supports the participants' dreams, as scholars emphasize the challenges international students face in securing employment and the resulting stress, anxiety, and depression when these opportunities are limited (Altbach, Knight, 2007; Ammigan, 2019; Calder et al., 2016).

Additionally, participants in this study expressed the desire for their institutions to take a more proactive role in facilitating employment opportunities, echoing the calls in the literature for institutions to retool career services, create more on-campus jobs, and collaborate with local businesses to offer part-time employment (Calder et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2017). These suggestions are consistent with findings that indicate international students who can support part of their cost of living through employment experience greater satisfaction and a stronger sense of agency (Ankomah, 2022a; Ankomah, 2022b; Stevenson, Bland, 2017). The findings of this study also align with the research on the benefits of employment for international students, suggesting that by addressing these employment needs, institutions can significantly enhance the overall well-being and success of their international student population.

6. Recommendations and Implications for Enhancing International Higher Education and Student Experience

To provide a top-quality educational experience for international master's students, the findings of this study highlight several key recommendations that can guide policy and practice. Educational institutions and policymakers should first recognize international students as valued members of the academic community, rather than merely as revenue sources. This recognition should be reflected in equitable tuition fees and expanded scholarship opportunities, which can alleviate the significant financial burden these students often face. The implication here is that by addressing financial barriers, institutions can move away from a model where high tuition disproportionately disadvantages academically capable students who are priced out of the prestige of international higher education. This change will not only support student well-being but also foster a more inclusive academic environment that will attract a diverse and talented student body.

Incorporating hands-on learning into the curriculum is another critical recommendation, as it allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, thereby enhancing their employability and overall educational experience. This approach has broader implications for how institutions design their programs, emphasizing the need for curricula that bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application. By doing so, international higher education institutions can better prepare international graduates for the complexities of the modern workforce, making them more competitive and adaptable in global job markets.

Furthermore, institutions should prioritize comprehensive professional development, including the teaching of essential soft skills such as cultural awareness, time management, and problem-solving. These skills are crucial for international students to navigate and succeed in competitive job markets like Canada's. The implication is that by equipping students with these competencies, educational institutions not only enhance individual student success but also strengthen their own reputation as providers of well-rounded, job-ready international graduates.

In addition, extracurricular activities play a vital role in fostering connections and a sense of belonging among students. International higher education institutions should actively promote and organize regular events that encourage cultural exchange and interaction between international and domestic students. The implication is that such initiatives will help build a more integrated and cohesive campus community, reducing feelings of isolation among international students and bridging the knowledge gap between international and domestic students. This will, in turn, promote a more inclusive, collaborative, and supportive academic and social environment.

Also, empowering students by giving them a voice in their educational journey is crucial. Institutions should seek student input in curriculum design and decision-making processes. This will enhance the relevance and engagement of academic programs and also strengthen the relationship between students and their institutions. The broader implication is that when students feel heard and valued, they are more likely to succeed academically and contribute positively to the university community.

Finally, enhancing access to on- and off-campus employment opportunities, such as teaching and research assistant positions, is essential for supporting the financial and professional needs of

international graduate students. This recommendation has the implication of addressing both financial pressures and the need for relevant work experience, which are critical for the long-term success of international students in their host countries.

7. Conclusion

In answering the research question—“How do international students describe their ideal experience in terms of quality and learning experiences in a master’s program?”—this study, rooted in Appreciative Inquiry, has highlighted the aspirations and ideal experiences of international master’s students at the University of Southern Ontario in Canada. These students seek a more hands-on, integrated, and practical education, where classroom learning connects directly with real-world applications. Their stories reveal the strong potential of an education system that truly prioritizes students’ needs, emphasizing the importance of equitable tuition for all students, regardless of nationality, alongside fair funding and meaningful cultural exchanges. The insights from this study present both a challenge and a clear direction for academic institutions, policymakers, and practitioners. There is an urgent need to reshape the academic environment to be more welcoming, responsive, and aligned with the unique aspirations of international master’s students. This change will not only improve individual student experiences but also strengthen global connections, foster mutual respect, and advance academic research. As we move forward, it is essential to listen to and amplify the positive voices and dreams of international graduate students. Their visions offer a blueprint for a more inclusive, innovative, and forward-looking era in international higher education.

8. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths that contribute to its overall value and relevance. Building on my previous dissertation research and a related study that covered the discovery phase, this study provides a well-rounded exploration of international master’s students’ experiences. The focus on the dream phase of the Appreciative Inquiry framework allows for an in-depth understanding of the ideal educational experiences these students envision. This approach is part of a broader, ongoing investigation that also touches on the design phase in another manuscript (in preparation), ensuring continuity and depth in exploring international student experiences. The combination of individual interviews and focus group discussions enhances data richness and triangulation, providing a comprehensive perspective on the aspirations of international students at a specific Canadian university.

However, the study also has its limitations. The use of snowball sampling, while effective in reaching a targeted group of international students, may have introduced selection bias, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Additionally, since the study is focused on a single institution, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts. Furthermore, while this study emphasizes the dream phase, which explores students’ aspirations, it does not fully address the challenges they face or the implementation of these dreams, as would be covered in the design and destiny phases of AI. Future research should aim to include a broader range of institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, exploring the complete AI 4-D cycle, including the design and destiny phases, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how international students’ aspirations can be realized and sustained in practice. Longitudinal studies that track the impact of these ideal experiences on student success and institutional practices over time would also be valuable in assessing the long-term effectiveness of the recommendations derived from this research.

9. Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The Research Ethics Board of the University of Southern Ontario, Canada, granted ethics approval. All participants provided informed consent.

Consent for publication

Participants consented to the publication of any results arising from their participation in the research.

Availability of data and materials

All data are available in a password-protected file maintained by the researcher.

Conflict of interest statement

The manuscript's author declares no conflicts of interest and confirms that all consulted literature is duly credited in the text and reference list.


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