

UBC Social Ecological Economic Development Studies (SEEDS) Sustainability Program

Student Research Report

**The Social Well-being of International Students with English as Their Second Language  
at UBC**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

This health promotion project looks at minority communities and revolves around identifying the potential barriers that limit their ability to engage in recreation at the University of British Columbia (UBC). This project specifically looks at the international students in which English is their second language. To aid in identifying these barriers, we primarily looked at the social aspect of well-being and connectivity. In this study, social well-being is defined as the sense of belonging within the community.

The recruitment process was conducted through convenience sampling in which social media, UBC's AMS club page and word of mouth was used. Through the recruitment process, 8 individuals (4 males; 4 females) voluntarily agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews. This approach was used to simulate a conversation-like environment to allow the participants to speak with more ease as a rigid formal interview may be constricting and affect the participants' answers. An interview guide (provided in the appendix) was used to help facilitate and direct the interviews. The questions used, focused on aspects like degree of social exclusion or isolation, whether the participants felt supported and whether they had the resources that allowed them to partake in activities or events.

Through the semi-structured interviews, there were three key themes that were consistent across the participants. The first theme was the financial issues that arise from living abroad. Most of the participants voiced that work played a large part in limiting their free time to engage in recreation. Conversely, due to the financial constraints, many participants also reported that, if they were to engage in recreational activities it would need to be accessible by public transit. The second key theme was the higher levels of social exclusion and isolation when they first started living abroad. The participants reported a higher level of family connectivity and would often call home as a result. However, events like imagine day was extremely valuable because it gave the international students an outlet to network and meet new friends. Lastly, the fourth theme and most critical theme was the presence of the language barrier. All participants reported that having language difficulties made it very difficult to make friends outside of other international students, especially if they did not engage in recreation or sports before living in Canada. One specific participant noted that when he made an effort to meet friends outside of the international student community, there would be a lot of references that he wouldn't understand which limited his ability to connect with others. In relation to family, a lower level of homesickness was reported and the frequency of calling home decreased.

Two recommendations that were prevalent from the findings revolved around the English Corner program and Imagine Day. The English Corner at UBC is a place for students to go and have conversations in English with other proficient volunteer speakers. This significantly helps international students with getting used to holding conversations in English. A participant recommended that it would be more beneficial if they had more programs like this around campus (refer to appendix). The other recommendation was for there to be two Imagine Days, one for each semester. The reasoning behind this was because it may be difficult for international students to find clubs or engage in recreation if they missed out on the Imagine Day in September.

**INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Vancouver is one of the most ethnically diverse cities on the planet (Vancouver Sun, 2015). According to Statistics Canada, 45.2% of the Metro Vancouver residents are of the visible minority, particularly Chinese, South Asian, Filipino and Korean (Vancouver Sun, 2015). It is no surprise that this is also reflected at one of the biggest universities in Vancouver, the University of British Columbia (UBC), which has a rich diversity of students from all over the world. In the 2016/2017-year, international students comprise 23% (8,984 students) of all undergraduate students (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). A total of 152 countries were represented by these international students (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). The most common countries of citizenship were China, United States of America, India, the Republic of Korea, and Japan (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). With 35% of international students in 2016/17 year being of Chinese citizenship and 6% of international students being of Indian citizenship (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). The international student body at UBC is expected to increase in the years to come as UBC continues to attract students from diverse countries through eRecruitment, which is a strategic initiative that allows UBC to recruit students in regions that cannot currently be visited in person (Redish & Mathieson, 2017).

The majority of the international students at UBC come from non-English speaking countries such China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan. It has been identified that language difficulties are the most critical issue facing international students today (Gatwiri, 2015). The ability to communicate effectively is key to a person's self-identity as it enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge (Kim & Mattila, 2010). It is vital in the measurement of a person's capability to perform socially and academically (Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb & Schartner, 2013; Gatwiri, 2015). When focusing on language proficiency, the communicative purpose of language is of primary importance and is a major determinant of successful integration and lessened trauma in a new culture (Gatwiri, 2015).

Many students at some point in their university career will experience stressful circumstances, but for international students, they face many more special challenges due to their transition into a new academic and social role (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). Mak et al investigated into this issue by doing a study on Australian-born domestic undergraduates and their quality of contact with international students (Mak, Brown, & Wadey, 2013). The study revealed that if there is a decrease in the language barrier between international students and English-speaking students, the more possibility of building interpersonal relationships across cultures (Mak, Brown, & Wadey, 2013; Gatwiri, 2015). Another study shows that international student's inability to communicate effectively in the host culture complicates their ability to socialize and integrate with local students (Wright & Schartner, 2014). Other studies also indicate that English proficiency influences social interaction and adjustment and that international students who have higher confidence in communicating in English adjust more quickly and make friends easily. (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Sampasivam & Clément, 2014; Wright & Schartner, 2013; Young et al., 2013; Gatwiri, 2015).

Currently, UBC provides a variety of resources and documents online for international students that contain important information and documents that international students are responsible for throughout their time at UBC (“International Student Guide”, n.d.). This includes information pertaining to immigration, health insurance, working, taxes, and more (“International Student Guide”, n.d.). In addition to the online resources, UBC also offers in-person assistance with Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants and Regulated International Student Immigration Advisors at their International Student Development Advising Office located in the UBC Life Building (“International Student Guide”, n.d.). There are also programs such as the Vantage One Program at UBC Vantage College and English Studies Programs at UBC English Language Institute that offer international students learning support (“Vantage one your starting point”, n.d.; “International”, n.d.). The Simon K.Y. Lee Global Lounge located in the Marine Drive Residence offers a place for everyone to take part in intercultural-focused events (“Simon K.Y. Lee Global Lounge”, n.d.). UBC Tandem Language Learning Program is a free initiative 10-week program that also provides support for students who wish to improve their conversational fluency in a language and is matched with a partner who speaks this language fluently (About UBC Tandem, n.d.). Right before the start of the semester, UBC hosts an 11-day Jump Start orientation program that is led by student leaders and a Faculty Fellow. Together as a group, they will participate in a full range of activities during the week and create a network of contacts who will become part of the student’s community on campus (Hilderman, 2017). Jump Start is provided free of charge by UBC, but the cost of meals and on-campus accommodation is not provided (\$829.66) (Hilderman, 2017). As mentioned above, UBC does try to provide resources to help international students with learning English, building networks and creating social support.

A deeper look into this case reveals that there is a lack of support and resources for international students who are living off campus to build social networks. Most of the programs available are designed around the idea that international students are living on campus. This is demonstrated in the location of the Simon K.Y. Lee Global Lounge, which is located in the Marine Drive Residence Building, and the Jump Start Program, which is designed around the assumptions that the international students will live on campus. As well programs such as the Jump Start only occurs once at the beginning of each semester and lacks support for international students throughout the term and undergraduate degree. UBC Tandem Language Learning Program is available through the semester but it only matches one student to another student. This program lacks the resources needed to build an extensive social network.

The definition of health according to the World Health Organization is a state of complete physical, mental, and social and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity (Bundon, 2017). It is difficult to clearly define health, as the definition is broad, subjective, and encompasses many different aspects of life. For the purpose of this study, the main focus will be on the aspect of social that is impacted by the language barrier. Social in this study will be defined as the extent to which a student feels a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and social connectedness in the UBC community. This will be measured by the student’s active participation in the UBC community such as UBC clubs, UBC sport and recreation, UBC programs and events. As UBC plans to recruit

more international students in the years to come, more resources and support will be needed to support the international student body. The goal of this study is to examine the health and well-being, specifically looking into the social aspect of international students with English as their second language who are studying at the UBC Vancouver campus for their Undergraduate degree. Through this study, the social aspect of international students will be investigated to develop a better understanding of what type of resources and support is inadequate at UBC's Vancouver campus.

Data will be collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Results from this study can identify issues that need to be addressed or changes that need to be made for existing programs and future programs. Furthermore, the results from this study can function as a guiding tool for other institutes and universities to promote the critical resources and support needed to enhance the overall of international students with English as their second language who are studying out of their home country for their university degree.

## **METHODS:**

### Target Population:

The target populations that will be investigated are international students studying at the UBC for the sole-purpose of obtaining an undergraduate degree. With this in mind, inequities may exist for international students where language potentially functions as a barrier to active lifestyles and overall. Thus this study aims to focus on the impact English as a second language has on international students studying at UBC. Although encompasses concepts of mental, social, and physical aspects, the scope of this study will be focused on exploring the social nature of international students in the university setting.

### Rationale:

The international student body at UBC is extremely diverse and is constantly growing with coming years through a strategic recruitment initiative called eRecruitment (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). With this in mind, the rationale behind examining this target population is attributed to the potential low-levels of recreational activity undergone by international students, specifically emphasizing the international students in which English is their second language. Understanding that there is a relationship between language difficulties and an individual's ability to express themselves, we have identified this as a barrier that could thwart a students' ability to engage in physical activity or recreation at UBC (Kim & Mattila, 2010). In a study conducted on language and its effect on health status, findings demonstrated a discrepancy among Spanish-speaking Hispanics and English-speaking Hispanics within the United States (DuBard & Gizlice, 2008). Based primarily on self-report, Dubard & Gizlice suggest a correlation between language proficiency and health status. Taking this into account, this study aims to identify the impacts of having English as a second language and its influence on social well-being.

At UBC, the international student body is represented by a total of 152 countries. The primary and most common countries that make up a majority of the international

student body are China, the United States, India, the Republic of Korea, and Japan (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). Strictly looking at Chinese international students, it is shown that they represent a large portion of the international student body standing at 35% (Redish & Mathieson, 2017). As a result, a majority of our participants consisted of Chinese students, which is an accurate representation of the population of international students at UBC.

When comparing international students with students born in Canada, International students are potentially less likely to participate in existing programs compared to the latter due to a lack of social networks, knowledge of existing programs, and overall lack of motivation or interest. As a result, socially isolated international students living abroad may struggle with to feel connected within their communities leading to a lack of engagement in recreation at UBC.

#### Data Collection:

In order to determine the well being of individuals, a semi-structured interview approach will function to outline potential discrepancies in mental, physical and social status of international students at UBC. With this in mind, an interview guide (provided in appendix) will be referred to in order to focus on topics of physical activity and social connectedness. For example, the degree of social isolation or exclusion will be determined by the amount of time spent alone, as well as the individual's perceptions on the accessibility of existing programs provided on campus (whether or not individuals can find the resources/support needed). Ultimately, advantages of this method include providing a more in-depth understanding of the individual where the inclusion of open-ended questions provides the opportunity for freedom and to identify new ways of approaching well-being.

Focusing on international students, recruitment methods were based on the use of social networks like Facebook to identify and contact various international clubs at UBC. To provide an incentive to participate, a chance to win a raffle prize such as a \$25 gift card to a campus vendor was offered.

Since semi-structured interviews often contain open-ended answers, conversations were recorded (with consent) with a smartphone to provide a reference for optimal transcription and data analysis. Facilitating an informal approach, interviews were conducted at the UBC Life Building to provide a comfortable environment and to advertise the new Activities and Recreation Center (ARC) facility as a means of health promotion. Furthermore, the Life Building is located conveniently near the bus loop for commuters. Additionally, appointments were determined primarily by interviewee's availability/preference. However, to allow for the best quality answers, the interviews were conducted during the afternoon where most participants are free and awake during lunch. Group members will be wearing a "UBC Kinesiology" to be easily identified at the UBC Life Building. Potential limitations to conducting interviews at this location were the various distractions during peak hours, such as people talking and clattering plates. Moreover, participants might have felt vulnerable with sharing potentially sensitive information in a public environment.

In order to maintain the consistency of results, the same 2 group members were responsible for conducting the interviews. Furthermore, a maximum of 5 interviews will be performed per day to maintain overall quality by minimizing potential interviewer fatigue. In order to develop an in-depth understanding of individual differences among international students, 8 participants have been selected to be a part of this study with an even split in gender (4 females; 4 males) to avoid gender bias. More specifically, 6 participants are of Asian descent, 1 from Brazil, and 1 from Africa. Although interviews were expected to take 20 minutes to accommodate busy schedules, participants were encouraged to express their ideas and opinions with no time limit. This ultimately facilitated data collection where interviewers were not pressured in their responses due to time constraints.

The questions asked were open-ended questions in order for the participants to provide critical and subjective answers. Slated questions were focused on the participants' time spent engaging in social activities, their feelings towards living in a different country, and their ideas on how to improve social well-being for international students. Each interview consisted of the same ten questions asked to the participant but allowed for more sub-questions or probe questions at the researcher's discretion.

#### Data Analysis:

To determine the potential barriers international students face due to language differences, interviewees' responses will be qualitatively analyzed. Collectively, this will allow us to identify potential trends and the underlying barriers to well-being in order to conduct a thematic analysis.

#### Challenges:

Potential challenges emerge in data analysis where language barriers can be a contributing factor to this research, where participants being interviewed have English as their second language. In order to mitigate this challenge, approximately 5 minutes can be spent engaging in general conversation with the participants to build rapport and to have a sense of the participant's communication ability. If extra resources were needed to communicate, certain methods such as translators or simplified questions were used. With this in mind, potential challenges may also emerge in cases where respondents are unable to express their ideas and opinions effectively due to a limited vocabulary. As a result, information may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the interviewer.

#### **FINDINGS:**

After conducting 8 semi-structured interviews, a thematic analysis of transcripts was carried out to highlight 3 main themes pertaining to international students. 1) The financial barriers; 2) influence of social clubs; and 3) Language barriers.

### Financial Barriers:

A common underlying barrier to well-being for international students may be attributed to financial issues and agency. More specifically, separation from family tends to put pressure on students studying abroad to find part-time work, cook, and take public transport. As a result, this leads to significant time constraints where time for recreation is sacrificed for work or school related priorities. This is most evident in a response that states that, “things are a lot more costly here compared to back home, and hence money plays a huge part in many of my decision-making processes” (Transcript 6 in appendix). Furthermore, another individual states that “I need to make big decisions by myself when parents are not along with me, need to manage my money to make sure I’m not broke” (Transcript 7 in appendix). This ultimately highlights the priority finance has and the potential stress it may contribute to the well-being of international students.

### The Influence of Social Clubs:

The research also concluded that many of the international students had directly benefited from the clubs offered by UBC. There was an increase in the social activities among international students when engaged in these various clubs; whether it was directly by “UBC itself” or clubs put together by students. UBC’s Imagine day proved to be a key influence in promoting social clubs and activities as stated by most participants. Many of the participants explained how most “made their closest friends from imagine day... and that those activities” (Transcript 3 in appendix) were beneficial in creating friends and social groups. The clubs also allowed some participants to expand the ethnic diversity of peers through these clubs. One participant explains how relationships were “made through imagine day [and that they] culturally diverse than their home country” (Transcript 5 in appendix).

### Language Barriers:

Although the responses we received included many different experiences of international students studying at UBC, there were a few main themes that remained constant throughout the study. Multiple participants cited the language barrier in English proficiency as a fundamental cause to their lack of engagement in social activities on campus. Even an understanding of Basic English does not guarantee fluid social connections as detailed in the following participant’s excerpt “You just don’t have the same background growing up ... when they make references you don’t get it” (Transcript 1 in appendix). Another quote stated, “As an international student, it was pretty hard to make friends at... like the language barrier, it’s there” (Transcript 1 in appendix), adding to the difficulty of creating relationships while having to learn a new language. We also found that the language barrier influenced how the participants felt other students thought about them in their class. Consequently, international students tend to rely on family, using social media as a means of communication and form social networks more effectively with individuals of similar ethnicities. With this in mind, language barriers ultimately influence the well-being of international students, as individuals are more prone to experiencing social isolation and homesickness.



**DISCUSSION:**

One of the more significant challenges observed was regarding the date the study was conducted. More specifically, the date of when the interviews took place. The methods for this research took time into consideration; for example, the time of day the interview would take place. However, the month the interviews were conducted resulted in a contributing factor to the research quality and the quantity of participants that volunteered. The interviews took place during the last few days of March, the same last few days where students were preparing for finals and working on project. The answers provided by the participants were fairly short and general as study time was more valued. Many of the participants explained how the interview may cut into valuable study time and asked if the interviews could be kept brief. Furthermore, the amount of potential interviewees decreased as many were also studying for finals and working on projects. This resulted in a prolonged period of searching and recruiting the “preferred amount” of participants that was needed interviews. As this occurred, exam prep assignment due dates came near, repeating the whole cycle all over again.

A limitation of this research can be attributed to the recruitment methods and how participants were notified about the study. First, the method of recruitment was solely based on social media and relied on Facebook as the main source of acquiring participants. This method did not take into consideration the participants who had no access to social media or who do not use Facebook as the main social media platform. Contacting participants who are already involved in international clubs also may have resulted in a biased data collection. This would mean that the club members were already inclined to participate in club activities, as opposed to freely and voluntarily participating in social activities. Another notable limitation to this method was that only participants already involved in international clubs were asked to participate in the study. These samples were already exposed to social gathering and had direct connection and access to information because of these clubs. Once again, the data collected would be biased in a sense that exposure to social events would be evident. By only recruiting international club members, it did not account for the possible participants who were not part of any clubs at all. This would have been essential to the research as those specific participants are less likely to engage in any social gatherings.

When considering how the study may be improved, possible approaches include a more longitudinal approach as well as incorporating a control group to refer to. More specifically, the well-being of international students at UBC could be monitored over a year, rather than a semester. This would ultimately allow researchers to gather more information and potentially identify specific times of stress. On the other hand, in addition to incorporating more international students, a control group could benefit this study where the well-being of local Canadians are taken into account as well. This would ultimately provide a resource for comparison where a lack of social well-being can be more closely attributed to being an international student than other factors such as financial constraints as a university student.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Recommendations for international students with English as their second language at UBC include an increase in social activities targeted towards new students, clubs or groups on campus that focus specifically on English as a second language members, and more financially affordable programs for international students. Imagine Day is held every year in September at UBC as is aimed towards helping new students meet other students in their faculty as well as learn about the campus and join any clubs that interest them. This event is known to be quite successful but could be even more useful if held twice a year, once in the fall and again at the start of Winter/Spring semester in January. "Some people graduate or go on co-op in the winter semester so it may be hard for clubs to recruit if they don't have another imagine day," said one participant who explained the importance of having a day to view club recruitment stands and tour campus. While there are numerous UBC clubs related to particular international clubs, more clubs focused on grouping ESL students together with other students who are willing to offer their help would be recommended. The English Corner at UBC is one place where students can join for free and converse in English with other proficient volunteer speaker. "I think UBC should do more affordable language courses offered to Chinese people ... where an international student pair up with a local student and they talk to each other to improve their English." said one Chinese participant. More of these groups would be beneficial in offering students a fun and enjoyable way to practice their English outside the classroom free from judgment. Reviewing the costs on international programs at UBC is recommended, as costs that are too high will deter potential students from enrolling in the future. The cost is also especially important when added to the cost of housing, food and transportation for new students who are also without employment upon arrival to Canada.

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