

The Role of Two Extracurricular Programs in International Students' Informal Learning Experiences in Atlantic Canada

by

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DEDICATION

其实地上本没有路，走的人多了，也便成了路。 — 鲁迅

谨以此文献给我亲爱的父亲母亲

“Traveler, your footprints are the path and nothing more; Traveler, there is no path, the path is
made by walking.” — Antonio Machado

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved father, and to the memory of my mother (1959-2015),
without whom none of my academic achievements would be possible.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores international students' informal learning through two extracurricular programs in Atlantic Canada, by focusing on their community involvement, volunteering, and social interactions. With the unique insight from an international student, program organizer, and practitioner in international education, this paper uses qualitative methodology to study the cases of two extracurricular programs, the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) in Halifax and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). Ten international students from Halifax, the city with the most Higher Education institutes in Atlantic Canada, were involved in a focus group interview and a semi-structured in-depth interview. The research illustrates the values of community engagement and volunteering for international students in cross-cultural awareness, transferrable professional skills development, and network building. In the long run, the objective is to find ways for these prospective immigrants with Canadian credentials and experiences to integrate with the local community and contribute to the local economy, to solve the "triple glass effect" (Guo, 2013) problems for immigrants in the Canadian labour market, to retain more talented international young people, and to contribute to the economic and social development in Atlantic Canada.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My research interest in international education developed ten years ago when I started to work in overseas education in Beijing, and my passion for lifelong learning has been increased since I became an international student in Canada. To explore the facilitating and impeding factors in international students' overseas experiences, I conducted my Master's research on international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada through two extracurricular programs. My standpoint is quite unique, for my role as an international student in Canada, a practitioner in overseas education, and a critical observer of educational internationalization from multiple perspectives.

Researcher's Standpoint

My primary impression of international students was formed in 2002 when I left my small hometown and went to attend university in Beijing, the capital city of China. At Beijing Language and Culture University, I got the chance to meet in person with several students from other countries, such as Switzerland, Great Britain, Denmark, and South Korea, when I worked part-time as a Chinese language tutor on campus. By then, I was amazed by the progress a student from Denmark made in Mandarin in a short time. In a sense, he started as a piece of blank paper, but within six months he could have fluent dialogue with me after six months, even in a Beijing accent mixed with slang and colloquial words. He attributed this achievement to his active interaction with the community, his frequent exposure to real life in Beijing, and his massive practice of the language in authentic situations.

Later, a 7-year career in educational consultancy and international education cooperation had a profound impact on my decision to pursue further education abroad. I was amazed by how tremendous changes could have been brought by overseas education to individuals. After the study in another country, the transformation of some young people astonished me, and acted as an incentive for me to examine the phenomenon myself. With the goal to enrich life and knowledge, as well as the curiosity about different culture and pedagogy, I stepped out of my comfort zone and started adventure in Canada as a graduate student in 2015.

Before arriving at Halifax, I had learned English for over 10 years, received a Bachelor's Degree in English, and used English as a working language for over 8 years as an editor, consultant, and manager. Nevertheless, as a newcomer to Canada, I have come across the typical dilemma for an international student, including the excitement for different styles of teaching and learning, the open academic atmosphere, and cultural diversity, as well as the anxiety about language barriers, cultural identity recognition, and social isolation. After the first year in Halifax, I was almost defeated by the fact that I could not even get an interview for a part-time position, not to mention any work opportunities, in the way that I had been constantly devalued of my skills and experiences, because of English as my second language and my lack of Canadian experiences.

Luckily, I gradually overcame these difficulties through volunteering and participating in community activities. For example, in the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) of the United Nations (UN) World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) in Halifax and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), my social networks were expanded and my professional skills were enhanced, and my local experiences were recognized as transferrable by employers in my job hunting process.

In these three years, I underwent quite a few challenging situations and experienced several life-changing moments in this country. From a by-stander, to a practitioner in overseas education, and now an international student myself, I have accumulated multiple layers of understanding and insights on the learning experiences in another country. Ultimately, my life path brought me to the research topic on international students' informal learning experiences in Atlantic Canada.

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this research include: to add to the research on international students' learning experiences; to contribute to the discussions of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1985; Mezirow, 1996; Mezirow, 2000), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005); to influence the practice of education providers and practitioners; and to provide references to Higher Education institutes and policymakers on how to make adjustments and support international students in Canadian universities or in a wider context.

My hypothesis is that, informal educational approaches affect international students in cross-cultural awareness and their integration into the host country. By focusing on international students' self-directed involvement in serials of activities organized or co-hosted by a university in Halifax, this research explores how international students develop their intercultural awareness and enhance professional skills through community engagement and volunteering.

This research on international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada will foster better understanding of international students' learning experiences in this region, and is likely to provide recommendations for educational program design and policy making in the future. In theory, although many researchers have done studies on American students' overseas

experiences, the research about international students' lives in American universities is still insufficient (Ritz, 2010). Compared with the research in the U.S. and in other Canadian provinces, the research on international students in the four Atlantic provinces in Canada is even scarcer, so this research addresses the gap and complements the literature in this area.

The clarification on the vital role of informal learning in adult education, will help to contextualize international students' learning experiences within larger theoretical frameworks and policy initiatives. To illustrate the values of transformative learning, experiential learning, and cultural immersion for international students, it may contribute to finding approaches for international students and other newcomers to solve the "triple glass effect" (Guo, 2013) problems in the long run.

The two-fold significance of the research are comprised of the potential benefits for international students in improving their learning results, satisfaction, and employment rates, and the theoretical basis for the Higher Education providers and the government if they aim to increase the retention rate of international graduates in the local schools and labour market.

Background

Research Context

The background of research is set in the context of Canada, in the Atlantic area, where I have been studying and living for almost four years. For the research practicability and data availability, the cases under analysis are Canadian, and the research has been done mainly in Halifax, the city with the most Higher Education institutes in Atlantic Canada.

As a country with an aging population and lack of skilled workforce (Burke & Ng, 2016), Canada endeavors to attract skilled immigrants to meet its labour needs by applying attractive

immigration policies (Ng & Metz, 2015; cited in Rajani, Ng, & Groutsis, 2018). In a survey on international students in Atlantic Canada, results show that these students hold a positive feeling towards this region, and 40% participants express interest in acquiring Canadian permanent residence (Siddiq, Nethercote, Lye & Baroni, 2012). When Atlantic Canada is faced with demographic challenges such as aging and out-migration (Chira, 2016), it is of vital importance to increase the retention rate of international graduates here to revitalize the local labour market (Siddiq et al., 2012).

The findings of this research may provide evidence on how to develop effective extracurricular programs to help with international students' transition and retention in this area.

Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU)

Situated in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU, or the Mount) has a history of over 140 years since 1873. The Mount tries to provide opportunities to enhance students' experiential learning through co-op, practicums, volunteering and other activities (MSVU website, 2014; MSVU website, 2017).

The Mount is a small university with a mixture of over 4000 students from over 50 countries (MSVU website, 2017). Comparing the facts in a broader range, the international students' ratio among all the students at MSVU is 17.1% in 2014 (Annual Report, MSVU Office of Institutional Analysis, 2014), while the percentage of international students among all Nova Scotia post secondary students in 2013-2014 is 15.3% (Statistics Canada, 2016). From 2011 to 2016, the overall number of MSVU international students, including the newly enrolled (Year 1) and the returning students (Year 2, Year 3, Year 4, etc.), has grown from 532 to 730, and its percentage among the total student population at MSVU has increased from 11.9% to 16.4% (Annual Report, MSVU Office of Institutional Analysis, 2011-2016). For the 2017-2018 full

year, the ratio of international students to the whole student population is 15.4%, which dropped slightly from the previous years (Annual Report, MSVU Office of Institutional Analysis, 2018). However, in a long run, data show that the Mount has a higher rate of international students which is slightly above average in Atlantic Canada.

Both the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) were initiated at MSVU, and the visions of IEP and ISVP were designed to serve the development needs and policies of the university. This is why these two programs have been advocated on campus and are recognized by the school's Co-Curricular Recognition Program (CCRP). The university Career Services provides CCRP in the format of an official document to recognize students' non-academic contributions, for example, their volunteer work, athletic involvement, awards or scholarships, leadership in community or social work, which is deemed to be favourable to students' future study or career (MSVU, 2018).

Therefore, the comparatively high percentage of international students and the dense atmosphere of experiential learning make MSVU a primary site for me to conduct this research on informal learning of international students in Atlantic Canada.

The Interfaith Engagement Program of WIHW in Halifax

The World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) began in September 2010, when H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan proposed the idea to the United Nations (UN), and it was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly one month later (World Interfaith Harmony Week, 2017). From 2011, people around the world began to celebrate the WIHW in the first week of February, to promote dialogue among people of diverse faiths, cultures and good will, and to stimulate “mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people” (United Nations [UN], 2015, para. 3).

The former coordinator of the Mount Interfaith Peace and Friendship Centre (IPFC), and coordinator of Interfaith Harmony Halifax (IHH), Kim MacAulay, introduced WIHW to the Mount, and also initiated the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) with a volunteer team of student leaders. In 2016, Kim MacAulay and Anthony Power went to Jordan as representatives from IHH, to receive the third prize in WIHW, which was awarded by King Abdullah II of Jordan (IHH, 2017). 2017 was the fourth year that IHH organized a series of activities to foster the vision of WIHW in Halifax (Interfaith Harmony Halifax, 2017).

Among all the elements, IEP is an important part of WIHW in Halifax, in which participants visit local sacred spaces, experience diverse religious practices, and celebrate the harmoniousness of multi-faith in one week's time (IHH, 2017). It provides opportunities for people to engage with religious people, sites, communities, and to experience the diversity of faiths in Halifax of Nova Scotia (Interfaith Harmony Halifax [IHH], 2018). In order to get the certificate from the program, participants are required to attend a pre-session and a post-session, participate at least three events on list, reflect and share their experiences with the group (IHH, 2018).

My involvement with the IEP started in January 2016, when I first registered to be an IEP participant. With deeper understanding of the program and more contacts with the IHH members, I joined in this group of people as a part of the planning team. Meetings are organized throughout the year for the preparation of the next year's WIHW activities. During this process, I noticed that a number of international students engaged themselves in the WIHW, as planning team members, IEP participants, and volunteers.

By interacting with people with a wide range of beliefs and cultures, international students as members of IHH or IEP participants, develop perception of religions and cultures in Canada, and become more tolerant with cultural differences. The activities may help to revise their belief systems and actions, and to expand social networks, practice skills, which is also a good channel to learn from each other and from various communities.

The International Student Volunteer Program

The International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) is a project-based program with a duration of three months each, which was initiated and established by the International Education Centre (IEC) of MSVU in Winter 2017. IEC is an import component of MSVU. It accompanies the international students along their journey at the Mount, and contributes to the enrichment of international students' learning experiences in Canada (MSVU, 2017).

As a graduate student in Lifelong Learning, I had to complete a 150-hour practicum to fulfill the program requirement. Considering my interest and specialty, I approached some IEC staff, and we reached the agreement that I would do my practicum with the IEC. As a result of my conversation with the international academic adviser Kay Balite, the ISVP was first initiated, designed and carried out in January 2017. My role in the ISVP was as a program designer and coordinator, and Kay Balite was my practicum mentor (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290). We borrowed some ideas from the International Education Volunteer Program (IEVP) listed on the official website of the Langara College in B.C. We revised and developed Langara's ideas and tried to make the program reflect more of the MSVU international students' interests than the institutional interests, in the way that appropriate tasks be assigned to the student volunteer according to his/her specific needs or interests (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290).

The first ISVP lasted from January to April 2017, when 12 international students went through competitive selection and interviews processed by an IEC committee, which included an international academic adviser, an international student liaison, and me as a program coordinator. Each student had to participate in a pre- and a post session, a training workshop, and was committed to a minimum of 15 hours' service time in the designated project or event planning (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290).

As a project leader, each student volunteer is also an individual learner, who takes action to practice. To meet the goal of each project or event, he/she must interact with others to conduct the process of learning. After the three-month program, most of them showed a certain degree of increase in self-confidence, but not every participant finished their major task due to the cancellation or delay of some projects (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290). At the end of the semester, a final session was held to celebrate the student volunteers' achievements and to debrief their learnings throughout the process, and the certificates of completion were also awarded to the SVs at the celebration party (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290).

After the success of the first trial program in Winter 2017, the second cohort of ISVP was launched in September 2017. Although I have finished my practicum, I was invited to continue and assist as a program coordinator. This time we enrolled another 11 international students and this sessional lasted again for 3 months until December 2017.

The ISVP creates and provides volunteer opportunities, as well as training and consulting supports, to improve international students' professional abilities. In practice, the student volunteers make connections with each other and also with the communities, build up

transferrable skills, and also better prepare themselves for future career (Fu, 2017, Practicum Report GSSL 6290).

Methodology

In this research on international students' informal learning experiences, a case study method was applied to describe and analyze two programs mentioned before, the IEP and the ISVP. The selection criteria for participants in this research consisted of (1) international students, (2) being over 19 years old, (3) studying in Canada for over 6 months, and (4) having participated in the IEP or the ISVP. The participants were enrolled and interviewed in a focus group and one-on-one basis on their experiences, and they were encouraged to share what they had learned from attending these extracurricular programs.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and the gathered qualitative data were analyzed to describe and interpret international students' challenges, feelings, and informal learning experiences in Atlantic Canada.

Summary

This chapter is an introduction to international students' informal learning through extracurricular programs in Atlantic Canada. My personal experiences and observation of other international students inspired me to delve in to the functions and effects of learning beyond the classroom, and contributed to the inquiry into this domain.

What kind of challenges and pressure did international students encounter in the host country? How did they manage to overcome difficulties and make transitions? How did they develop cultural awareness and skills through informal learning? Could they apply what they

have gained in places other than classroom or not? These questions have been raised along the way of my practice in international education.

By investigating specific cases of the two extracurricular programs, the IEP and the ISVP, my thesis tries to find potential answers to the above questions, which follows a six-chapter format. The First Chapter introduces the topics and provides the context of the research. In Chapter Two, relevant literature is reviewed on international students and their learning experiences in overseas education. Chapter Three exams the research methodology, including the choice of method, advantages and disadvantages of each method that has been used. The Fourth Chapter analyzes the qualitative data and describes the findings. Chapter Five discusses the overall findings according to the four research topics, which follows by Chapter Six — a research conclusion, including summary, limitation, implications for future research, and a brief conclusion. At last, references and appendices come after the main body of the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the current literature on international students, the barriers they face, the theories applied in explaining phenomena in this thesis, and the relevance of these components to the research topic on international students' informal learning through curricular activities in Atlantic Canada. The goals of a literature review include, finding a position for the on-going research in the current pool of knowledge, preventing repeated attempts, learning from previous problems, and making progress (Dane, 1990).

The review procedure is, first, to contextualize within a general examination of associated literature on several areas related to international students from the global to regional level. Then I enumerate the barriers that handicap international students' growth in the host country. In the next part, I introduce a series of theoretical concepts, such as informal learning, the experiential learning theory, and the transformative learning theory, with a review on how international students' learning experiences relate to these concepts. At last, the importance and necessity of doing this research are discussed.

Growth Trend of International Students

The informal learning of international students in Atlantic Canada cannot be separated from the bigger picture of the growth trend of international students worldwide. On a global scale, the number of international students is increasing.

Growth of International Students in the Globe

What makes one an international student? The definition of an international student, according to UNESCO, is a person who has been "enrolled at an institution of higher education

in a country or territory of which he [or she] is not a permanent resident” (UNESCO 1971, p. 9; cited in Gürüz, 2011, p. 201).

Education has become more globalized, with the fact that the numbers of students pursuing education in another country are increasing. In the past few decades, an important part of the development of tertiary education is the process of internationalization, which means more and more students’ educational activities happen in an overseas context (Levatino, 2017). Figures can tell the story of educational internationalization on a worldwide scale. Globally speaking, from around 1970 to 2015, the number of international students has grown from 800,000 to 4.6 million (OECD, 2017).

Four English-speaking countries, the U.S.A., Great Britain, Australia, and Canada, have almost half of the world’s international students (Gopal, 2016). Take the number of international students in America as an example; it reached 1 million in 2015 for the first time in the U.S. history, with a 7% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016). The British Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) research shows that, about 318,000 international students came to study in the UK in 2004/05, and the number increased to over 435,000 in 2011/12 (BIS, 2013; cited in McDonald, 2014). In 2009, Australia has witnessed a 16.8% increase in its enrollments of international students over 2008, and the exact number of international students in 2009 is 631,935 (Australian Education International Industry Publication, 2009; cited in Kambouropoulos, 2014).

Growth of International Students in Canada

Compared with its counterparts, Canada similarly has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of foreign students, and evidence shows that the numbers of international students have increased in Canada at both national level and regional level.

Figure 1. International Students in Canada by Province. This figure displays the average percentage of post-secondary international students at a national level and at province level in 2004-2005 and 2013-2014 in Canada.

Province of Study	International Students	
	2004-2005	2013-2014
	percent	
Can.	7.4	11.0
N.L.	4.4	10.7
P.E.I.	5.7	11.8
N.S.	9.3	15.3
N.B.	10.8	16.0
Que.	8.2	11.0
Ont.	6.4	8.9
Man.	7.0	10.0
Sask.	6.6	11.2
Alta.	6.0	9.7
B.C.	10.9	17.6

Source: Statistics Canada, Post-secondary Student Information System, 2004-2005 to 2013-2014.

At the national level, the overall population of international students is exploding. The portion of international students in the whole Canadian university student population grew from 7% in 2004-2005 to 11% in 2013-2014 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Geographically speaking, almost half of the international students study in Ontario, 24% in British Columbia, 12% in Quebec, and the rest 16% are in the other part of Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2018). Based on the students' academic levels in Canadian universities, in 2007, 7% of the full-time undergraduate students and almost 20% of graduate students are from

outside Canada (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2007; cited in Arthur & Flynn, 2011). After three years, the percentages of international students at different academic levels slightly increased in 2010, when the number of full-time international students ran up to 90,000, and the amount of part-time international students reached 13,000 (AUCC, 2011; cited in Calder et al., 2016).

In 2014, Canada's International Education Strategy (IES) proclaims that the number of international students in Canada will double from around 239,000 in 2011 to over 450,000 by 2022 (Government of Canada, 2014). However, CBIE (2018) announced that according to Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), by the last day of 2017, the number of international students in Canada was 494,525, which is an increase of 20% from 2016. The data also indicate that the IES's goal of 450,000 international students has been over-fulfilled five years earlier.

At the regional level, international students are important elements for all the 16 universities in the four provinces of Atlantic Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador. According to the Preliminary Enrollment Survey of Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), in the 16 Atlantic Canadian universities, there are altogether 13,784 full-time visa students enrolled in 2017, which accounts for 18.86% of all the full-time university students enrolled in 2017 and an increase of over 10% from ten years ago. Take MSVU as an example. In 2007, it enrolled 177 new international students, which took 8.01% of the whole student population at the Mount; in 2017, the number of newly enrolled international students (Year 1) was 498, accounting for 22.6% of its whole first-year student population. Therefore, from the west coast to the east coast, international students have become an important component of most Canadian universities, no matter where their locations are.

International Students and Canada

Challenges in the Host Country

Under the circumstances of educational internationalization, for those with the aim of receiving further education abroad, it might be inevitable to experience all kinds of challenging situations, including a sense of alienation, unfamiliarity, homesickness, and cultural conflict, along with their migration to a different atmosphere.

One positive part of international education for the student is it promotes individual development. Sufficient research shows that the major benefits of studying abroad include enlarging learners' horizons, enhancing intercultural competencies, as well as motivating self-confidence and a sense of being independent (Carlson and Widaman, 1988; Dwyer and Peters, 2004; Ingraham and Peterson, 2004; Nunan, 2006; Vincenti, 2001; cited in Foster, 2014).

Yet, despite the benefits for students, life and study in another country often come with unpredictable situations and challenges. The migration from one's motherland to another country brings the migrant with frequent issues, such as being away from the family, detachment from accustomed social structures, beliefs and traditions, and lack of accesses to social supports from the host country (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002; cited in Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006).

When one moves to a brand-new environment, he/she will notice the differences between his/her home country and the new place. It is very often that the person will experience acculturation at the same time of immigration (Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006). As defined by Gibson (2001), "acculturation is the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact" (p. 19). In the context of global immigration, acculturation can be viewed as a two-dimensional process, which means one

can retain his/her inherited culture while adapting him/her self to ideas, values, and behaviors in the host country (Liebkind, 2001; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006; Fraser, 2016).

For international students, they have to endeavor to “fit into” the life in the host country. In Lewthwaite’s (1996) study of international students in New Zealand, he observes that “the differences in values, attitudes and beliefs between home and host cultures were seen as great and coupled with the sense of loss of the familiar (including food) put considerable pressure on the student” (p. 182).

For the majority of international students in the U.S., life in American higher education institutions can bring them a feeling of being overwhelmed, as well as challenges in cultural adjustment and adaptation to the local culture (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). In the research conducted in the UK, surveys show that international students feel more challenged when trying to accustom themselves to a different academic and learning environment, than to a dissimilar cultural and social surrounding (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010). Nearly half of the students who completed the survey expressed their dissatisfaction with “social life”, and about 32% of these participants revealed feeling “powerless” and “lack of a sense of belonging” when living in Britain (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2009, p. 17).

International education is not always an easy task for students to accomplish. Since arriving in the unfamiliar host country, international students are likely to find themselves in several difficult situations, which may involve language barriers, culture shock, isolation, financial problems, academic pressures, physical or mental issues, acculturation and identity conflict, racial and gender discrimination. With their inherent characteristics brought from their native

country, these students have to learn to transfer and develop skills, and adjust themselves to cultural differences, so that they can gain a sense of social belonging, and ultimately integrate into the host society.

Benefits and Impacts

In Canada, international students gain academic achievements and personal growth, and they also contribute a big portion to the government revenue and economic growth, and even become an essential source of human capital in the labour market.

International education is a win-win for the international students and the host country. For students themselves, they gain from overseas education a deeper cross-cultural awareness, a more open attitude to diversities, and competitiveness in employment (ACE et al. 2008; Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, & Straughan, 1999; Daly & Barker 2005; Di Pietro & Page, 2008; Green 2005; Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2005; as cited in Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011). The benefits to the host country have been recognized as bringing in diverse cultures and perspectives, fostering mutual understandings, adding human resources and skills to the local market (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; cited in Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010).

The economic impact of international students in Canada is significant in boosting employment and consumption. Over 81,000 job opportunities have been generated because of the incoming international students in Canada (CBIE, 2018). In the year of 2014, for example, international students invested 11.4 billion dollars on tuition, residence and other expenses all over Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2016). At the same year, the total number of international students in Atlantic Canada was 19,663 (CIC, 2016), and their initial economic impact was 525.9 million dollars, and the overall economic impact was 692.4 million dollars in these four provinces (CIC, 2016).

International students do not only have an impact on the local revenue and economy, but also contribute diverse perspectives and construct an international context in the community. When a large number of international students prefer to stay in Canada after their graduation, they become both the social wealth producer and consumer. Their stay brings in new consumptions and employment opportunities, and fosters economy growth. For the nation's demands for more immigrants, Canada's immigration policies value international students for their skills, productivity, local experiences, and marketing effects on bringing in more prospective international students (Chen, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2005; Ziguras & Law, 2006; cited in Arthur & Flynn, 2011). Compared with the local Canadian labour force and other immigrants from the skilled worker stream, international students' advantages consist of having Canadian credentials, local experiences, and being in a younger demographic (Arthur & Flynn, 2011).

According to CBIE (2018), over half of the international students intend to apply for Canadian permanent residence after their graduation from Canadian schools. From a longitudinal perspective, there is continual growth in the whole population of international students across Canada, and over 1/5 of these students have gained Canadian citizenship within 10 years of receiving their first study permit (Statistics Canada, 2015). At a regional scale, foreign students generally hold a positive feeling towards Atlantic Canada, and 40% participants of a regional survey express interest in acquiring Canadian permanent residence, which indicates them as ideal reserves of prospective immigrants and a potential alleviation to the aging and shrinking population (Siddiq, Nethercote, Lye & Baroni, 2012).

The provincial governments have realized the importance and urgency to increase the retention rate of international graduates in Atlantic Canada, out of the utmost urgency for a

sustainable economy. Several measures have been taken to sustain these young and international talents in this region. As the four Atlantic provinces are faced with demographic challenges such as aging and out-migration (Chira, 2016), it is of vital importance to increase the retention rate of international graduates in the region to revitalize the local labour market (Siddiq et al., 2012).

At a provincial level, awareness on the importance of international students has been raised and changes have been happening. The report, *Now or Never: A Call to Action for Nova Scotians*, addresses challenges and opportunities for the province (Nova Scotia, 2014). The Commission of the *Now or Never* report notes that, aging and shrinking population has become one of the most challenging issues for Nova Scotia, and international students are a potential source of young and productive population, in the case of 122% growth of the international students' enrollment in 2012-13 than 10 years ago in the province (Nova Scotia, 2014). In Nova Scotia, an initiative to support international students and keep them in the province has been started collaboratively by local organizations and schools, including EduNova and MSVU. The BEST Conference, EduNova's Stay in NS Program, and Stay and Study Program are the results of this initiative, and all these events and programs aim to provide appropriate training and support to help with international students' transition to study and work in Nova Scotia (EduNova, 2018).

Although a benefit to the country's economy, not all international students have received enough supports from the government or educational institutions for their transition and integration in the Canadian society, and they may have met the "triple glass effect" problems during the process. The three layers of glass include the "glass gate", the "glass door", and the "glass ceiling", which block immigrants' upward social mobility and keep them away from being employed, obtaining a professional job with equitable pay, or reaching a management position in

the host country (Guo, 2013). Canada fails in providing sufficient social and financial assistance, to create fairness and cultural inclusion in lifelong education for all newcomers (Guo, 2010, 2013). Although the visible ethnic groups will occupy the Canadian mainstream population by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2010; cited in Houshmand, Spanierman, Tafarodi, & Zárate, 2014), there is wide disparity of government supports for international immigrants, in a way that new settlers in biggest cities seem to get more resources than those in smaller towns or rural areas (Guo, 2010).

Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the seriousness of challenges faced by international students, educational institutions, and regional governments. Appropriate resources and supports should be distributed to international students in smaller cities and less urban areas, such as the four Atlantic Canadian provinces. This may help increase the retention rate of international graduates, attract more international immigrants, reinvigorate the local economy, and reduce the imbalance of regional development in Canada.

Learning Experiences of International Students

The main purpose for international students in the host country is to improve skills, increase intellectual development, and obtain credentials, which will enable them to succeed in future employment. The process of learning takes place in formal settings, such as in the classroom and school, as well as in informal sites, such as at home, at the workplace, or in the community. This thesis discusses the informal learning of international students in an experiential and transformative way.

Informal Learning

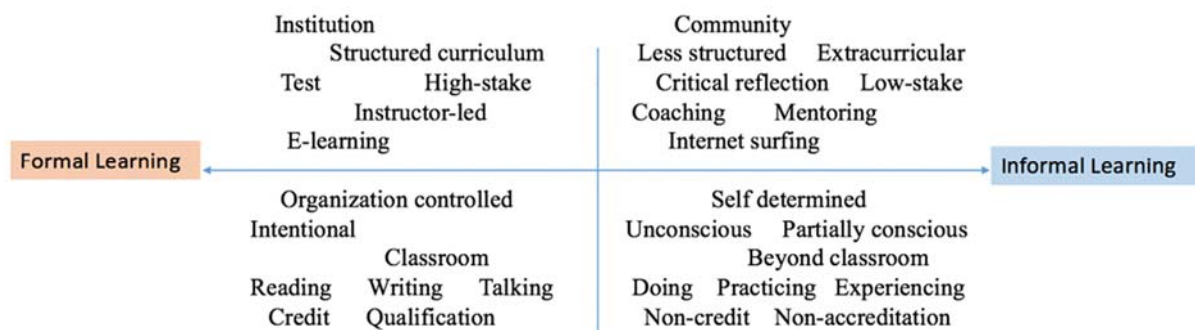
Besides taking classes at educational institutions, international students learn from difference resources and experiences. Learning is a basic human right, as it is fundamentally important for

human beings to understand the meaning of their experiences (Mezirow, 1990). Hutchins (1968) introduced one of the first concepts on learning society, and since then a view on lifelong learning has formed, which is that a successful lifelong learner is self-directed and has the autonomy to learn and practice, and that lifelong learner's primary ability is to understand how learning works (cited in Griffin & Brownhill, 2001).

Based on how to organize activities and how to classify learning objectives, international students' learning experiences can be roughly divided into two parts, learning in a formal setting, and learning in an informal way. As roughly defined by Eshach (2007), formal learning happens in the classroom, while informal learning happens beyond the classroom. School learning often happens in formal settings, including elementary and middle schools, higher education institutes, and with structured curriculum, activities, and academic assessment, so it is called formal learning (Gerber, Marek, and Cavallo, 2001). Compared to formal learning, informal learning is less structured and happens in a variety of locations other than a classroom environment, in which students take the initiative to learn (Gerber et al., 2001).

Compared with formal learning, activities "involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies" belong to informal learning (Livingstone, 1999, p. 50). As large amounts of students' time are spent beyond formal settings, informal learning experiences play important roles in developing students' potentials, yet there are not enough studies on the settings of informal learning to help us understand its role for university students, and in particular for international students (Gerber et al., 2001). Compared with local students, international students are a unique group and their informal learning experiences are under urgent need of exploration and analysis.

Figure 2. Formal learning vs. informal learning. This figure exhibits some distinctions between formal learning and informal learning, and was created by Junfang Fu in 2018.



Experiential Learning Theory

For students who come to study in a foreign country, they form and co-create a special environment of learning, both in the classroom and beyond. When these students associate new knowledge with their previous beliefs, learning happens during the process of interaction and assimilation. The findings of a study of 70 high school students in Texas of America indicate that students’ participations in activities enhance their understanding and memory of the experiences (Jose, Patrick, and Moseley, 2017).

According to Brownhill (2001), humans develop their identity as social beings through experiences with surrounding cultures, interactions with people, and self-reflections on social activities, which is happening throughout the lifetime. In Giddens’ study (cited in Augustyniak, 2014), one’s learning ability keeps developing across his/her life span, and it is a process interrelated not only with the individual him/her self, but within a broader range, such as with his/her peers, family members, educational institutions, communities, and the globe as well.

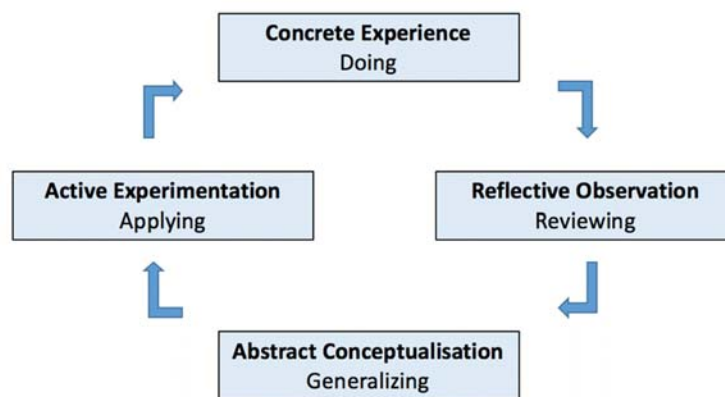
The international students’ experiences in the IEP and the ISVP can be marked as experiential learning in informal learning spaces. The informal spaces have a big impact on the

engagement of international student by creating a shared learning community and encouraging learning through experiences.

Dewey (1938) defines experiential learning as “a process by which the learner creates meaning from direct experience” (as cited by Chavan, 2014, p. 202). Kolb (1984) takes experiential learning theory as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41).

Experiential learning is “an idealized learning cycle or spiral” process, and the learner experiences, reflects, thinks, and acts “in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned” (Kolb and Kolb, 2015, p. 194). “Experiential learning happens when (a) a person is involved in an activity, (b) he/she looks back and evaluates it, (c) determines what was useful or important to remember, (d) and uses this information to perform another activity” (Kolb, 1984; as cited by Chavan, 2014, p. 202).

Figure 3. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle adapted from Kolb (1984) and created by Junfang Fu in 2018. This figure depicts the four steps of the experiential learning process.



Transformative Learning Theory

Learning by doing brings international students the opportunity to transform, which is likely to happen under an unconscious or partially conscious way almost everywhere throughout life.

As adults in university, international students can be self-motivated to learn and take the initiative to gain new insights from learning. Mezirow (1985) declares, “no concept is more central to what adult education is all about than self-directed learning” (p. 17). In the centre of adult education, adult learners take responsibilities for their own behaviors and learning results, and educators are the ones to assist these learners in critical reflection, reasonable verification, and active practice of what they have experienced (Mezirow, 2000).

With the motivation and initiative, international students learn from their experiences and life changes in the host country. Transformative learning will not happen without people’s experiences, for “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

Cranton (2006) states that transformative learning theory is built on “constructivist assumptions”, while “the goal of learning would be to discover the right answers rather than to reflect on our perspectives of the world”, and the learning process includes “examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives” (p. 23). In many cases, people’s perspectives transform after a set of actions, or as an outcome of unprecedented occasions, such as a sudden social or natural disaster, bloodshed, death of a close one, accident, or unemployment (Taylor, 2008).

The informal learning for international students is a complex transformative process of experiential learning. A study in the U.S. shows that, the majority of international graduate students experience transformative learning, and there are more reports on transformative learning by “non-school-related activities” than by “school-related activities” (Kumi–Yeboah & James, 2014, p. 48). Kumi–Yeboah and James (2014) suggest that international students should draw more of their attention from formal learning to cross-cultural awareness development, extracurricular life, and social network building, which will make it easier for their adjustment and acclimation to the new environment.

The Necessity of Research

In this research, I endeavour to examine international students’ transformative learning and experiential learning in two extracurricular programs to analyze such ways of informal learning in Atlantic Canada. My assumption is that, informal educational approaches enable international students to enhance their learning in practice, which in turn benefits their cross-cultural awareness and adaptation to the host country.

Most international students in higher education have the aim to gain knowledge and accumulate sufficient local experience, which requires attempts and efforts, and may prepare them better for future employment. In a new environment, these learners might first perceive some kind of dilemma, then recognize their inadequacy and learn to solve problems by themselves, while developing new skills through practical work, which could bring them self-confidence at the same time. Central to international students’ transformation might be their intercultural awareness, critical reflections on previous experiences, and critical discourses with other people in an informal setting. It is of practical and realistic significance to delve into international students’ informal learning experiences in a Canadian context.

In various informal settings, international students get together for different purposes and aims. They collaborate and interact with each other, and learn from activities that they carry out together. For example, in the IEP and the ISVP, through reflective discourse, critical debriefing, and interactive engagement, the participants, especially the international students, gain deeper understanding of their capabilities, and extend their sphere of knowledge. Yet in the process, there might be some negative effects on the participants' learning, due to different factors, e.g. lack of interests or initiatives, unpleasant atmosphere, unreasonable design of program, inconvenient transportation, miserable weather, and other uncertainties.

The findings of my research might address the gap in the literature of international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada, and provide evidence on how to improve international students' satisfaction of education in Canada. The results could be of value for designing appropriate extracurricular programs, and supporting international students' intercultural awareness development and employment transitions, which might help retain international student as prospective young immigrants and relieve the labour shortages in Atlantic Canada.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of literature on the international students, an analysis of concepts and theories on learning, and an explanation of the importance of this research. After the discussion of theoretic framework, Chapter Three outlines my research methodology and describes in detail how the research is designed to achieve the research objectives.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

After reviewing the current literature on international students, relevant learning theories, and the meaning of international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada, this chapter moves on to the topic of research methodology, and outlines who the participants are, the objectives and main research questions, how the research will be conducted, and what limitations and challenges are noticed in this research.

A qualitative methodology was used to explore ten international students' informal learning experiences in two extracurricular programs in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The research methods for data collection include case study, focus group interviews, and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Research Objectives & Questions

The intent of this research is to explore how international students develop their cross-cultural awareness and enhance professional skills through community engagement and volunteering experiences in Atlantic Canada. The focus is on international students' self-directed involvement, practice and interaction with people through a series of activities and events organized or co-hosted by a local university.

My overarching research question is "How do international students gain knowledge through informal learning, specifically their social engagement and extracurricular experiences in Atlantic Canada?" Under this big umbrella, four interrelated research topics are developed to better explore this main theme as follows,

1. To pursue higher education, international students chose to migrate from their home country to Halifax, the biggest city in Atlantic Canada. How does leaving home and moving into a new community affect their life and learning?

2. After 6 months or more, international students become more engaged in campus and local life, meeting people and expanding their social networks. What inspires/motivates them to join in an interfaith educational program or an international students' volunteer program?

3. As participants in each specific extracurricular program, what were international students' learning experiences during the process of their participation in the program?

4. How are the international students' life choices, attitudes, values, and behaviors influenced by their learning experience in these activities beyond classroom?

An interview guide was developed as a guidance for the researcher to facilitate the interviews. Respectively the first two research topics listed above were discussed in the focus group interviews. The third and fourth research topics were explored in the semi-structured in-depth interviews afterwards. Under each research topic, several sub-topics were raised in an open-ended way and in a logic order, so that the participant could grasp the point easily, and thoughts could flow in a natural way. It contained a list of questions and areas that should be covered in the interview. However, in the actual interview, the researcher might not ask all sub-questions or follow the fixed order, and it's possible that the follow-up questions might be raised by the researcher according to the participant's response. (Please refer to Appendix A: Interview Guide)

Participants

To better understand international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada, I selected two extracurricular programs in Halifax, the IEP and the ISVP, in which I play an active role in planning or coordinating, so I had some basic knowledge of these participants before I started this research. From the interviews and communication with the participants, I have a deeper understanding of their backgrounds and experiences.

Figure 4. Research participants from IEP and ISVP.

IEP	ISVP
Ahmad (Male, Middle East, PG)	Andy (Male, East Asia, UG)
Fox (Female, East Asia, UG)	April (Female, East Asia, UG)
Julia (Female, East Asia, PG)	Dr. T. (Male, Middle East, PG)
Meredith (Female, East Asia, UG)	Lola (Female, Africa, PG)
Yolanda (Female, East Asia, UG)	May (Female, North America, UG)

This table shows the participants' pseudonym, gender, region of origin, level of study (e.g. undergraduate [UG] or postgraduate [PG]), and the extracurricular program attended. Each participant has selected or been assigned a pseudonym in this research. In general, among the ten participants, 3 are male, 7 are female, while 4 are graduate students and 6 are undergraduate. Demographically speaking, the ISVP group tends to be more diverse than the IEP from participants' gender and areas or origin. And the IEP group is ethnically homogeneous, because four of the five participants are female students from the same country — China, in East Asia.

Research Methods

To find patterns and causation from complex human behaviors, qualitative research methods are used in this study to form a holistic understanding of the relations between the phenomena and its nature. For researchers in education, the complexity of interpersonal interaction and education situations could not be studied or presented in simple terminologies or formulas, while qualitative research has the advantage to enable in-depth and comprehensive understanding of problems in teaching and learning (Anderson, 2010).

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study, with focus group interviews and semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main tools for data collection. The qualitative way of research gives me the chance to know personal stories and to illustrate individual cases. As Surron and Austin (2015) indicate, by qualitative research, the researcher could enter participants' emotion world, to understand their experiences from their standpoints, and to view the world through their eyes.

On the other side, qualitative research has its limitations. Other than its strengths of the rich and descriptive data, flexible formats of data collection, and the transferrable nature of data, the disadvantages of qualitative research are: its heavy dependence on the researcher's skills and biases, challenges in rigorousness and objectivity, time consuming in data processing, and difficulty in presenting findings in a visual way (Anderson, 2010).

Several factors might have constrained the representativeness, accuracy, and objectivity of this research, for example, the limited random samples of participants, the researcher and most participants' language proficiency in English as a second language, and the researcher's personal bias as an international student and program organizer.

Case Study

As mentioned before, the intention of this research is to understand international students' informal learning experiences, and to contribute to the discussions of transformative learning and experiential learning. The findings will influence the practice of educators who are working with international students, and provide references to higher education institutes and policymakers on how to make adjustments and support international students in Canadian universities or in a wider context.

The case study method allows the researcher to better understand the complex phenomena, to ask “how” and “why” questions in an in-depth way, and to analyze international students' experiences and the reasons behind. To investigate the international students' personal feelings, experiences, and changes in those two programs, the case study method was used to analyze the phenomenon and context of complexity.

What can be defined as a case, a case study, and a case study design in qualitative research? A case can be “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (Yin, 2002, p. 13). In Merriam's point of view, a case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (1998, p. 27). Therefore, a case can be a human being, a product, a community, a specific policy and so on.

A case study, as Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) point out, is “an in-depth study under consideration” (p. 1), in which a number of methods are applied to investigate the case, as interviewing people, participatory observing, and field study.

In research, a qualitative case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). It is “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544), which allows the researcher to investigate the issue from diverse angles.

A case study design can be used in these conditions:

“(a) the focus of the study is to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context” (Yin, 2003; as cited in Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 545). In the core part of a case study, the goal is to find out a solution or set of conclusion: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result (Schramm, 1971).

In this study, the cases of the IEP and the ISVP are explored for similarities and differences in the international students’ informal learning experiences in extracurricular programs. Focusing on specific cases will enable understanding of international students’ cross-cultural awareness and their learning process in an interactive group out of class. It will provide new perspectives on how ideas from transformative learning theory, experiential learning theory, and cross-cultural awareness development contribute to international students’ informal learning.

Focus Group Interviews

This research enrolled two groups of international students, who attended either the IEP or the ISVP. All of them left their native country to study an academic program in Canada, and took

the initiative to attend an extracurricular program in Halifax. Therefore, the focus group interview allowed them to discuss topics on their experiences, and to share their feelings in Canada and in the program with their peers and the researcher. In a collective way, they could share constructive ideas, ask each other questions, reflect on their own experiences, and respond to others' comments.

Focus groups are usually used to acquire an overall understanding of the context of a topic, to provoke views on certain subjects, e.g. a product, program, company, or services, to foster fresh thoughts and innovative notions, and so on (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In my research, the focus group interviews enabled the participants to exchange feelings with people who shared similar experiences, and the discussions in a group could evoke sympathy and emotional responses more easily and frequently.

Compared to other methods of qualitative data collection, including participant observation and individual interviews, focus group interviews have advantages and disadvantages. As it is socially oriented, focus group interviews have a more natural and relaxing environment than one-on-one in-depth interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Morgan (1997) argues, the strong point of focus groups lies in the possibility to witness a large quantity of "interaction on a topic in a limited period of time" through group discussions (p. 8), yet the disadvantages of focus groups are the homogeneity of data merely gathered from participants' oral performance, the constraints of time assigned to each interviewee in the group, and the unnatural settings initiated and directed by the researcher.

To share their experiences in Canada and in the programs, five from each of the IEP and the ISVP were invited to attend the focus group interviews first. Later, they were interviewed by the

researcher at a one-on-one meeting. In total, there were two focus group interviews, one group of the IEP participants, and the other one of the ISVP participants. Each focus group interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes.

Questions for the focus group interviews were developed to stir participants' interest on the topic, which allowed further development of conversations in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The questions were designed to identify disorienting dilemma, personal objectives, actions, and changes. Two focus group interviews were done before the semi-structured in-depth interviews, and it helped the participants to warm up and recall them the experience in the program.

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

After the participants completed the focus group interview, I contacted them to set a time for a one-on-one interview at a private space, usually at a university library, or Halifax Central Library. This interview concentrated mainly on the student's learning experiences as an individual and his/her changes after the extracurricular program. This private atmosphere gave the student more time to talk, and enabled the participant to share more personal details than in the focus group with several other participants.

As a major method to gather data in qualitative research, in-depth interviews maintain several features, including the flexible structure of topics, interactive discourse between the interviewer and the interviewee, in-depth exploration of participant's answers, possibility to generate new knowledge in the conversation, natural way of data gathering, and its face-to-face style of meeting (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has to prepare questions in an open-ended way in advance, and be prepared to generate follow-up questions during the conversation with the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Usually, the researcher has an interview guide, and it is not restricted that the interviewee follows the research guide or listed questions precisely; instead, the interviewee is encouraged to take the initiative and to answer the questions in his/her own way, while accordingly, the interviewer can adjust the subsequent questions, depending on responses of the interviewee (Bryman, 2004).

To gain more detailed and personalized data from the participants, the semi-structured in-depth interviews came after the focus group interviews in this study. In each interview, the researcher adhered to the interview guidelines, and revised the questions slightly according to each participant's response and English language competence. Most semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted no more than 60 minutes, which resulted in about 8 hour's interview in the end.

Research Design

To address my research topic, the qualitative research methods of case study, focus group interview, and semi-structured in-depth interview were integrated in a coherent and logic way. In this way, the data obtained in this research were rich and reliable, and the findings would be trustworthy and of value both in theory and reality.

Two programs, the IEP and the ISVP, have been investigated to give a particularly detailed insight into the processes and experiences of international students' involvement within the community. Ten international students who study in Canadian universities, of which five from the IEP, and the other five from the ISVP, constitute a collective case study. In the study of the IEP and the ISVP, such inquiries were raised and challenged: What does international students' learning look like in the literature of an intercultural environment? How can ideas from

transformative learning, experiential learning theories, and intercultural sensitivity help us to understanding learning in an intercultural environment? Through understanding international students' learning in the IEP and the ISVP, what can be taught on practicing adult education in an intercultural environment, as well as within the globalization process?

At the participant recruitment stage, the purposes and goals of this research were explained both in oral and in written format. All participants enrolled must have met the following criteria: (1) international students over 19 years old, who (2) held student visa when they were in the IEP or the ISVP, (3) have been in Canada for at least six months, and (4) have participated either in the IEP or the ISVP.

To avoid confusion and misunderstanding, all interview questions were written in English, and peer-reviewed by both native English speakers and ESL learners to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of wording. The interview questions were arranged in a logical sequence, so that the conversations could flow in a natural way.

At first, in the focus group interview, each participant was anonymous and was assigned a number on a name tag respectively, and they were required to refer to each other by the number assigned to them. In the one-on-one in-depth interview, the participant was referred to by a pseudonym in the recording and transcription for confidential purpose. In the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss and introduce in English any topics that were relevant to the guided questions, and they had the right to decide whether they wanted to talk about the topic or not.

In a group atmosphere, all participants had an overall idea of the research, and they could discuss any doubts or concerns on the research or questions in a group. Afterwards, the semi-

structured in-depth interviews were organized on a one-on-one basis. In a comparatively private setting, participants could answer certain questions in an open way, and share their personal thoughts with details. All interviews were tape-recorded and the audio-taped data were transcribed verbatim by the researcher for further analysis.

Ethics, Procedures, and Challenges

Ethics and Procedure

The research is approved by the MSVU University Research Ethics Board (UREB) (Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance File No.: 2017-069). As the researcher, I adhered to the MSVU UREB ethic guidelines, and encouraged participants to show respect and be mindful of diversities in the focus group.

Ethical issues were taken into serious consideration. All participants are from a country other than Canada, and each has a unique social and cultural identity. It was vital to keep in mind for the researcher to show respect and trust to each participant, and to ensure the confidentiality of personal privacy. To avoid misrepresentation of the data gathered, it was necessary to cross-check the uncertain information through multiple methods with the participant, such as text message, telephone, email, etc., which increased the accuracy and efficiency in data processing.

Ten students, who expressed their interest in participating the research and met the criteria, were contacted by email to fix a time for interview, and the consent forms and interview guideline emailed to the participants before each interview. Five from the IEP and another five from the ISVP were all informed of the possibility to withdraw at anytime of the research. Before the interview, all participants voluntarily signed up the consent form, and confirmed their intention to attend one of or both of the focus group interview and semi-structured in-depth interview. Participants from each program had to attend a focus group (1.5 hour – 2 hours)

within their own group and a semi-structured in-depth interview (0.5 – 1 hour), if they planned to attend both.

The plan was that students from each program attended the focus group interview with their peers from the same program, which means there would be two focus group interviews in total, one group of five IEP participants, and the other group of five ISVP students. However, for participants' personal reasons, each focus group ended up with four interviewees. Of those two, who missed the focus group interviews, one finished a longer semi-structured in-depth interview, and the other completed the interview by email.

After all the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher word by word. Then the raw data was organized, coded into clusters, and then interpreted in the researcher's own language, which followed the three procedures of qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) — data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The data, which have been collected, transcribed, coded and themed, ultimately led to the development of a detailed report on a group of international students' experiences of learning in doing, which Sutton and Austin (2015) state as telling the story in a way respectful to participants, and understandable to an audience.

Research Challenges

In this research, the qualitative research methods were used to investigate the informal learning experiences of ten participants, while most of the participants and the researcher's first language was not English. Based on the selection of research methodology, there might be some limitations and challenges related to data collection and analysis, due to the scale of participation, English language barriers, and the researcher's subjectivity in the research.

First, the selection and small group of participants could limit the representativeness of the primary data, and may not reflect the actual situation of most international students in Atlantic Canada. Five participants from each program was a small number compared to the huge quantity of international students in Atlantic Canada, in which the IEP participants were from four different higher education institutions in Halifax, and the ISVP participants all studied at MSVU. These participants have already shown some kind of intercultural awareness, and the ability to learn and adapt to other cultures by taking their initiatives to attend such extracurricular programs, but what about the other international students out of these programs? The limited selection of participants could not represent the whole population of international students in Atlantic Canada, which may affect the reliability and representativeness of this research.

Second, all the participants and the researcher are international students, so the English language might not be their native language, and cultural differences might also cause constraints on the depth and content of the information gathered. To avoid misunderstanding and confusion, sometimes I had to reaffirm the participant's sentence in another way, and sometimes I had to remind them of a certain word, when I felt necessary if they required assistance in finding an appropriate word.

What's more, as a researcher, I am also an international student, and have been playing an active role in both the IEP and the ISVP. I am with similar backgrounds, experiences, and even sharing the same native language with some participants, so inevitably I am a researcher with a perspective as an insider. Unlike an outsider from the programs, I have already own deep insight on these programs, and built some degree of mutual trust with the participants.

The advantages of the insider researcher include being accepted by the participants in a shorter time, and allowing participants to be more open and willing to share their experiences, which would result in data to a further level in the depth and reliability (Wu, Garze, & Guzman, 2015). But the familiarity with the programs and the participants could have led to my blindness or insensitivity on some phenomena, or participants' simplifying or omitting of some "taken for granted" information during the interview.

Therefore, the insider's position and bias could enhance the in-depth and validity of the research, but it might also decrease the neutrality and objectivity of the research. Moreover, the researcher's interview skills and interpersonal communication skills could also impact the participants' performance during the interview, as well as on data process, analysis, and interpretation.

Summary

This chapter is an outline of the qualitative research methodology, which I implemented to construct the research in this thesis. First, I introduced the research objectives and questions, participants, and research methods, then I explained the qualitative research ethics and procedures, as well as the research design and limitations. In Chapter Four, international students' stories are reported by themes after codes and patterns have emerged in the data analysis process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the major themes that arose from analysis of the transcriptions of participant interviews. The interviews were all transcribed by me word for word into written format, and I read the transcripts repeatedly and thoroughly, when several themes and clusters were generalized during the process of coding.

In the following part, I use the acronym of the program name (IEP, or ISVP) plus the number (1, 2, 3, 4) to identify each participant and the corresponding remarks in the focus group interview for confidential purpose. For the semi-structured in-depth interview, each participant is assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity.

Data analysis shows that discussions are largely focused around the following nodes: Motivations to study in Atlantic Canada, dilemma in new environment, reasons to attend extracurricular programs, their experiences with the IEP/ISVP, and differences between formal learning and informal learning.

Motivations to Atlantic Canada

When the Canadian government introduced policies to encourage immigration of the young and skilled to stay (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018), at a provincial level, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program and the Study and Stay Program were launched to alleviate the regional retention problems (Katem, 2018). As Federal Minister of Immigration Ahmed Hussen proclaimed, international students are one key stream of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program, because they receive higher education in Canada, with local experiences, and speak at least one official language of the country (Intiar, 2018).

For a country like Canada who makes efforts to implement welcoming immigration policy to entice and retain international students, immigrating to Canada might not be the international students' primary motivation to come to Atlantic Canada. Six of the ten participants in my research confirmed that the education quality or their preference for a certain academic program was the most important reason for coming to this region, only one of the ten said that she came here because it's easier to immigrate, and the rest two had other personal reasons.

Regarding the reason to choose Canada, IEP Participant No. 1 said that his preference for the university and the academic program outweighed the attraction of the location.

I chose to come to Canada because it offers the best learning opportunities, and Canada is a welcoming country, and diverse country, multicultural. So I decided if I want to further my education, I should be choosing a country with that criteria, and the country, Canada was the best choice that I made and I don't regret further time... I spoke with the supervisors, and they offered me the research topic I was interested. So it's more Dalhousie [University] than Halifax.

IEP Participant No. 2 explained her reason for choosing Halifax when I asked her why she chose Canada to study:

My consideration was not because Canada, it's because I chose the university to start my education. They have the the program, the nutrition program. It's high quality, that's why I chose to study here... I think I chose the university not the city, more than the city... And the program is Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. I didn't know anything about Halifax before I came here.

Unlike those participants who took Canada as the first choice to study, ISVP Participant No. 2 had a slightly different answer. She planned to study in the UK first, but then she changed her mind, because she had lots of family members in the UK, and she wanted to be independent in a country where she studies. She said,

I just want to be independent from my family... then I changed my mind. I told my dad, I don't want to live with all of you. I just want to be separate from all of you. I want to be independent, at least be able to stand on my own, not be depending on you guys all the time. Then I applied for master's program here in Halifax... and I got admissions here, and then I came to do women and gender studies, being a great experience for me.

Only one participant accredits her coming to Atlantic Canada to the immigration reason, because she could get permanent residence more easily in this area. IEP Participant No. 4 said,

Actually, I chose the city more than university, because I applied a lot of colleges in Ottawa. But the agency told me Halifax is the city for you to go. It's easier to get immigration. I said, Fine, OK. And there is a university, the NSCAD is one of the famous design universities in Canada. So I said, OK, I can, I can go to NSCAD. And then, I came...

When I asked about their reason to Canada, the result shows that for most participants, their motivation to Atlantic Canada largely relies on the education they could receive in this area.

Among all the ten participants in this research, only one said immigration was the main reason for her to study in Halifax, and two put other reasons on top of education, such as having family in Canada, and to be away and independent from family. Surprisingly, other than immigration,

seven of the ten placed' receiving education of high quality or personal preference for a certain academic program as their biggest reason to Atlantic Canada.

Although most participants in this research didn't place immigration as the Top One reason to Atlantic Canada, nine of the ten expressed their willingness to stay after graduation. Among four participants who have graduated, three choose to stay and have started their career in Halifax, and only one has already gone back to his native country after completing the study, but this participant indicates his desire to come back for work or visit in future if possible.

Dilemma in New Environment

After the participants' arrival in Canada to study, they came to an environment that they might not be familiar with, such as the weather, landscape, food, the variety of people's races, a diversity of behaviors, languages, culture, traditions, academics, social rules, and everything that might be different from where they came from. A study in the U.S. by Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) reminds us of the challenges that international students encountered, such as academic barriers, social barriers, and cultural barriers. The findings of my research reveal that the participants were faced with the similar dilemmas of studying in Atlantic Canada, such as academic barriers, feeling of isolation, and institutional or systematic obstacles.

Academic Barriers

Language Problems

Language is a barrier for several students whose first language is not English, because they not only have to catch up with the academic study, but also have to improve their English ability, which will affect their academic study. Although some of them mentioned they have studied English as a second language in their native country for years, they still have difficulties when

using it in academic study in Canada. Despite that, the English language problem also puzzles a participant who takes English as a lingua franca, when people in the host environment have the bias or stereotype towards international students because they come from other countries.

IEP Participant No. 2 is a non-native English speaker, who takes English language as the biggest challenge for her study in Atlantic Canada, because of her unfamiliarity with the English academic language, insufficient preparation before class, and professors' ignorance of the different levels of international students' English ability. She told me that she could only grasp 30% of the professor's lecture at the beginning of her study in Canada, because she was "not familiar with" the environment. Even after two years, she couldn't understand the professor totally, but if more "focused" in class or "prepared earlier" before class, she "could understand better".

... it depends on the professor, because some of them may be considering that you are an international student and they would talk not that quickly. But some of them, they just think, as you have the ability to engage in our program, maybe you have no problem to join the class. So they would just talk as normal... And terminology is the most important one. Actually, if translated into Chinese, I would know that, but it's just new in English for me. Even when I studied another course called Nutrition Medical Therapy, it's related to medical therapy which I am familiar with in Chinese, but when it's talked in English, I couldn't understand all the terminologies in medicine. Because we learned them in Chinese, not in English. (IEP Participant No. 2)

After IEP Participant No. 2 discussed that language was her most challenging thing in Canada, IEP Participant No. 3 pointed out that strong accents of some professors caused problems for her in class.

Some professors have strong accent, and sometimes I do not really understand what they are talking about, and I am quite shy to ask questions after class... Because those accents, or maybe my vocabulary is not big enough, or I don't really familiar with some words they are saying, I just didn't really understand everything. (IEP Participant No. 3)

The native language of ISVP Participant No. 1 was not English, and he listed English as a great hindrance when he first came to Canada, because the English learning in his previous study focused more on grammar or writing skills rather than using it in real life. In Canada, he had to speak and communicate with people in English on a daily basis, and to improve his level of English in academic study to keep himself on track.

I think the language was the most challenging for me. Like in China, we learn English, but we just didn't use it. But here you have to use English every day, to do it as a communication tool. So you have to understand what's everybody's talking about, and you should give them responses correctly. And based on the English academic level of myself, I couldn't do that from the beginning. So I tried hard as a beginner here from China to Halifax. (ISVP Participant No. 1)

Even with a comparatively good English level, May was upset at the truth that the local people treated her differently because English was not her first language.

The first time that I encounter a problem was when I did my first co-op. The people I worked with didn't understand that even though I had good level of English, they

expected me to not have errors. I didn't like them treating me as I was a different person just by the fact that English wasn't my first language. (May)

Although English is her lingua franca, ISVP Participant No. 2 experienced a hard time regarding English language in Canada, because many people had a stereotype about international students, and they were surprised when they met a student from another country who could speak English well, or with an accent. She said,

I struggle with people always. I was usually... Right, because I'm African, I can't speak English. Like someone asked me,

- [Started in this way] Do you speak English?

- [I said] Well, this is my lingua franca.

- [They continued] What? What do you mean by lingua franca?

- [I said] I mean, you didn't know? English is my adopted language. I studied in English. I grew up speaking English, and I can speak and see...

- [They said] Your English is so different.

- [I said] You know, English is English.

It was hard for me to get used to that. Because when my country is dominantly black, so coming to a different country where you have people from different cultures or races, it's difficult to assimilate other people, and then people will judge you based on the color of the skin and all of that. (ISVP Participant No. 2)

Lack of Cultural Context

When students come to Atlantic Canada from another cultural background, they have to adjust themselves to the Canadian academic environment, adapt to the pedagogy of Canadian education, use the same curriculum to learn, and take the same test as the Canadian students do, which unavoidably create hardships for those who are not familiar with or not used to the Canadian way of teaching and learning.

Participants in this research expressed their concerns about not having the Canadian cultural context when they started to learn in a Canadian university, such as different ways of education, lack of presentation skills and learning skills, trying to do things in a more “Canadian way”, and challenges in “catching up” or building up knowledge on the local culture.

When talking about the challenges he encountered in his study in a Canadian university, IEP Participant No. 1 observed the differences between the education he had received before in other countries and the education in Canada.

The different perspective that we got back home is totally different here. The way they educate their kids is totally different from the way that we got education. Their perspective of life is totally different. The methodology of thinking, analyzing, creating, innovating, is totally different. Back home we used to minimalizing the stuff without thinking about what we are doing. But here all the education is teaching you how to think... What the professors expect you to do, know, and understand, and solve is so high. And I always got surprised during exams because their expectations... (giggling)
(IEP Participant No. 1)

IEP Participant No. 3 reflected her experiences in class as “a risk” when they were required to do presentations. She attributed her limited knowledge of presentation to none exposure to

these skills before in her homeland, and she also noticed her Canadian counterparts' proficiency and abundant experiences in presenting since an early age in school.

I took the business courses, unlike some students here in Halifax, they all had presentations since primary school, or middle school, or high school, but we didn't have those presentations skills, when we were back in China. So the local students, they know how to prepare for presentation, they will not be nervous to do the presentation. But for us, it's totally a risk. (IEP Participant No. 3)

IEP Participant No. 4 added that the professors, who took for granted that international students should have had the adequate ability to cope with the Canadian education, was another factor that affected her learning and resulted in her transferring to another program in Canada.

Also some professors will think you, now you are doing the master [degree], you should have these skills. Also the language skill is important, so you should have it, and then you can keep doing your master, and learning like this. So they will push you to learn language skills. That's the reason I gave up the master program and moved to culinary... (chuckling)... Yes, too hard. (IEP Participant No. 4)

The Canadian context in class forced Andy to perform in a "more Canadian way", so that he could fit into the academic environment, because most of the class including the instructors and classmates were "local people".

When you are in classroom, when you have discussions with your professors or classmates, most of them are local people, which means they grow up within this definitely Canadian culture, so what you have to do should be more Canadian way for them... (Andy)

Meredith studied a science program in a Canadian university, and she noted that her study was filled with challenges, because of her insufficient knowledge of the local culture. To “catch up” with her peers, she gave up “music”, and “sacrificed” lots of her spare time on supplementing the “Canadian context”.

I used to talk to my colleague that I don't know why I stopped to listening to music, but the thing is, I guess, is the intense fear that you are a dummy in a room that people are talking about things that they all seem to know, and you have no clue what's going on, because you don't grow up with the same culture. And when you are expected to be the expert to teach people, you really have a lot of catch up to do. So there is no time for music. Because music, those kind of leisure things, you can not afford. You have to use the time to catch up on the Canadian context. (Meredith)

Meredith used a metaphor “riding the bicycle” to describe her learning experience in Canada. The Canadian students with the “cultural context” were those bicyclists following the wind, but she was an international student “without the cultural context”, so she was the one riding against the wind. The unfair competition caused by external factors situated the participant in an oppressive learning environment. It worked as a prompt for the student to seek for approaches to overcome disadvantages, and to facilitates cross-cultural awareness and emancipatory learning in community engagement.

And you feel that you have to catch up with the others, and they have over twenty years to accumulate all those cultural contexts. But looking at you, if you want to get to the same finish line, you need to set a lot more hard work than anymore else trying to catch up. It's like you are riding the bicycle, everyone has the wind on their back pushing them

forward, but you have the wind to the opposite direction, and it's constantly drawing you back, and you have to work harder just trying to catch up on the same way, so you don't end up being too behind. (Meredith)

Feeling of Isolation

Although assembling in a diverse learning environment, these students have realized the difficulty in making friends with the local students or Canadians.

Before coming to study in Canada, they had pre-sketches of a beautiful picture in which they hung out with Canadian classmates and friends from other countries, but the reality was that they could meet their Canadian classmates only in the classroom. After class they had no connections with each other, and some participants shared their hurtful experience of being intentionally ignored, when they tried to make eye contact or greet the Canadian students somewhere other than the classroom. Some participants talked about the feeling of alienation, and several mentioned they didn't have any Canadian friends after living here for over 2 years or more.

IEP Participant No. 1 grew up in a community where everyone was closely related to each other, and study abroad meant to "start again" in a new place, and the "individualized" social life in Canada challenged him.

The other challenges in life outside school is to find as I said a community, a company, or friendship, because we are international students, and we are alone. Back home we were with everybody, the big family, the long friendship from school time. So this is the challenge that you are here alone, start again... Social life here is more individual, sometimes, especially when we are talking about students, it's more individualized. And I am a person who loves to be with a community... (IEP Participant No. 1)

“Lonely” was a word that appeared in several participants’ statements, describing their first few days in Canada. The loneliness might be caused by the contrast of the weather, snow, sense of alienation in Canada, biases from the locals, and the unpleasant experience with the local people.

I felt so lonely for two weeks. I didn’t talk to no one for two weeks. That’s was ... bad. And it was really difficult to communicate to people, because the weather didn’t help, and it was my first time seeing snow. Like I came from the Middle East. So I waited till school, and after that I started to have friends, to talk with teachers. It was okay after one month, I believe... I tried so hard to make friends but the whole thing was new to me... After I started my program, because the small classes, I start to have friends. And everything was really good after that. (ISVP Participant No. 4)

Some participants talked about the “Hi” and “Bye” conversations with the local students. Although they all said the locals were “nice” and “friendly”, but just as “acquaintances”, not “friends” for them.

It’s very common. Even though everyone says hi to you. You [the locals] think that’s being nice, but it’s not, like you [the locals] just wanna say hi, but you [the locals] don’t wanna me to be your clique. You [the locals] don’t want to talk to that person. You [the locals] don’t want to get to know the person... even in school here, it’s the same thing. Hi. Pass by. If you don’t say Hi, and you two just pass by. The next time you see each other, you don’t. (Lola)

ISVP Participant No. 4 had some negative experience when he was ignored by his Canadian classmates after class. He described it as a “heart broken” moment, and it directly resulted in his hesitate in showing friendliness later.

I have actually the similar experience. I was sitting with two students for four months, like they were next to me, and we talked. After we finished that class, I was like “Hi”, they were like... [acted like] We don't know you ... I was heart broken... I was surprised. I was like [asking myself], “Did I do something wrong?... Is there something in my face?” And then I don't say Hi. (ISVP Participant No. 4)

Several participants echoed on the difficulty of making friends with the Canadian students. Lola said that people from different countries had their own “clique”, and it's harder to “penetrate” in university than in high school.

So it so hard for me to make friends, because I think here we have a clique kind of thing, where you might have, sorry, the Chinese students, they are always their own, there are Korean students all of their own, and you have the African students in their own clique. You have white students in their own clique. So it's difficult to penetrate those cliques, except maybe having presentations, you guys talk, but after that, nothing, they see you. Yes. Like when they see, you know, they ignore you, you don't, you can't say hello. And you also ignore them, and by passed. That's also kind of hard for me to get used to, because I think it's easy when you are in high school. You are still trying to penetrate and make friends easily, but once in universities, it's difficult, because everyone already has friends to hang out, so trying to make friends with people from other countries is kind of hard. (ISVP Participant No. 2)

Even they had a hard time to make friends with the locals, some participants said they were still trying to find a way to get along with the Canadians, to “learn” how to build a “deeper relationship” with them rather than merely working together on assignments in the classroom.

It’s difficult... I think I have a similar problem as yours. I think the biggest difficulty is to make friends or communicate with local people here. It is easy for me to talk to Chinese or Asian, when I have difficulty, or I have question. But it is a problem until now... it is hard for me to communicate with the locals, or to be really a friend... or having a deeper relationship with them, because... they are all friendly, and they’re willing to talk with me, or having a group with me, or we do assignment together. This is not a problem. But I think the difficult part is that you have a deeper relationship, like making friends, or really talking something out of the class, or out of the assignment. So I’m still learning how to start a conversation with them comfortably, and to learn about their culture. I think this is still a difficult thing, or still a thing for me to learn until now... (ISVP Participant No. 3)

One participant’s parents even showed worries that she didn’t make any Canadian friends, and they thought it’s because she always preferred to stay with those from the same region as her. As a result, the student argued, and used another friend as an example to prove that the locals “didn’t make friends with us”.

Even my parents asked me, “Do you know some Canadian friends?” ... [They think] I don’t make an effort, and I have to explain to them, because the culture here is different, after class we just say bye, then we leave... It is difficult for me to really know them out of, or after class. But my parents think that, “It’s because you were always staying with

Chinese”, so I explained to them, “No, I tried.... But...” I think most countries, like most foreign countries have this problem. Like my friend has been to London in the UK, and he said it’s the same problem, they just don’t make friends with us, so I think it’s a common problem. (ISVP Participant No. 3)

A participant, who graduated from a business program, referred to international students as “a special group” with “different opinions”, who wanted to learn “the local culture”. When discussing why it’s hard to “make friends” with the Canadians, one participant observed that some Canadian students had negative impression on international students, because they took international students as “incapable” or would “slow down” the class. Some also expressed the difficulty to have Canadian friends, because “For me, they are too sensitive” and “easily offended”, so “I am very careful with them”.

Another statement showed the participant doubted that her Canadian classmates would be interested in hanging out with her after class, because she tried several time to contact them, but they “don’t really connect to others”. But someone also mentioned it all depended on “people’s mindset”, whether they liked “the idea of getting international in Halifax”, or they had “bad attitude”, or they judged international students by their English was “good” or not.

Not only did the indifferent responses from their Canadian peers lead to international students’ feeling of isolation, but the negative or rejection attitudes from their original group or people around also caused the feeling of being abandoned.

And another lonely is, I guess, breaking away from the pack, and having a very different experience compare to a lot of other international students in a way, you have less people understanding how you feel, and you see less people are like you. And then it kind of

making you feel that you are very lonely... A lot of the experience that I have, I don't think that my parents are able to understand that, [because] they never need to learn how to live with racism, they never need to learn to live with a system that set against them... (Meredith)

IEP Participant No. 1 admitted his concern about people's reaction to his change in Canada, which was different from the adopted trait from the original society.

I am trying to adopt the believes, and the ideas that I really want to choose for myself, not the same set I have been told for the beginning, since the beginning of life. But the new challenge is, when you change, how others are going to see this change, and what their reaction will be, whether the people you knew before, or even the people that you have been with them for quite some time. So this is a little bit challenging, the new you change in you, outgoing to impact others, what the other reaction will be on that. (IEP Participant No. 1)

Institutional / Systematic Obstacle

Other than barriers relating to language, culture, and being lonely, participants outlined the obstacles in the educational institute or school system, which hindered their learning in Atlantic Canada. The institutional and systematic obstacles include, the high expectation of academic performance despite of their prior knowledge, their unfamiliar with the Canadian teaching style, and lack of supports provided by the school and instructors to international students.

And another participant felt overwhelmed at the amount of content to learn in a short time and the high expectation from the professors.

Because here, they expect you already know. Especially in postgraduate studies, this is the first point. The second point, the content is too much. Finishing four chapters in one session. I was never exposed to this during my undergraduate ... It was so intense, and the level of expectation is so high, as you already know. And if you don't, it's your problem, you have to follow up. So I found it's very challenging to just move on... (IEP Participant No. 1)

One professor told a participant, if she wanted to succeed, she had to “leave the pack of people” from her home country, “because they don't know the Canadian way of thinking”.

... you set up these policies... this policy can work its own magic, even the people who have the good meaning or never intend to hurt you. But the thing is we live in the system, and then the system function in the way and this proportionately affect you... Looking back, just like the program that I was in. In order to get into the internship program, you have to demonstrate those academic, employment, and volunteer experiences... They have to look at every single application and then compare one and another. So the standard is set. However, if you are local student or you are Canadian born, you have a lot more years to accumulate all these employment, volunteer. (Meredith)

It's more than just reading books. If it's just book, I can handle that. But ... [Canadian] people have a lot more time to accumulate that. That's how the set system is set against us. At the first place, you have to use all those very limited hours or years that you have, in order to catch up, because you only have that, say, two or fewer years, but the other people have lots longer. They could draw to things all the way from their high school or

middle school, that's the thing, then they demonstrated they have the leadership skills...
(Meredith)

Many participants in this research expected to get more support from the institute, to get more information on volunteer and other activities, which implies that Canadian education providers have to give more appropriate assistance and create more channels to connect international students with the community.

For example, Lola discussed the importance of international students to know about the right information and get adequate services from the university.

We're not given the kind of attention they give all the Canadian students here. But we pay more money, double or triple of what normal Canadian students pay. But we are not really taken good care of, not really given that attention. We're paying more and just dumping in the system and not given the right information, that is why the Afrocentric group is very important to African students. And also I feel like there should be other groups, other students from some other countries, that will help them, because most students are going through a lot because they don't know their rights... (Lola)

Dr. T. found it hard to find volunteer opportunities, because the university didn't have a "volunteer centre".

... as an international student, I think it's very difficult to find volunteer works, because I tried to actually volunteer many times, but the problem is the university doesn't provide like a volunteer centre... (Dr. T.)

Yolanda found that the IEP was not known widely among international students, and she recommended to promote it by posters or TV ads, in order to attract more young people and students.

I feel some people just don't know anything about this program, so maybe to use social media or something to let more people know about it ... Like some university students, can know by some big posters in the university... I don't really see a lot of international students to come here ...(Yolanda)

In the educational institution, some teachers didn't provide enough attention to international students either, or their inactive response, misunderstanding, or stereotype on international students might have affected international students' learning experiences in Canada in another way. Meredith said,

And the system set up in a way that doesn't help with at all. They would think that, as the teacher would say, "Well, the Chinese students are very quiet, so they must not have a lot of opinions, they must not be willing to contribute to the experiences of the class". But the fact is, we grow up in a classroom where the students are expected not to speak. They are expected to be obedient, they are expected to listen to the teacher... (Meredith)

Reasons to Attend the IEP/ISVP

The two extracurricular programs, IEP and the ISVP, they have different aims, structures, contents, and target of attendees, so it's not surprising to see that the participants' reasons to attend each program are quite diverse in this research.

IEP Participants

The top motivations for the IEP participants include: the curiosity to learn about religions and culture, and the opportunity to meet people and share experiences.

The Interfaith Engagement Program focuses more on the experience of the diversity of cultures and religions, in which participants visit several sites and attended religious practices, and each participant receives a certificate of completion at the end of the program. Three of the IEP participants have attended the program more than once, and all of the five confirmed their returning in the future. The reasons listed by them to attend the IEP were, the curiosity to learn, to experience other cultures and exotic food, to meet more people, and recommendation from other people on this program. And none of them said that the program certificate was something they were looking for from this program.

Some participants said the primary motivation was the curiosity, and the word “interfaith” interested them. No matter they had their own religions or not, they had interest in knowing more about faiths.

At the first time, I was just curious about some (faiths)... I could find the introduction about each religion online, but I really wanted to connect with their people, to know what their believes are... Do they really love their religions or just follow their traditions?

(Yolanda)

I think the first thing that interested me was the name of the program. It is called interfaith. I was wondering what is interfaith? And what it is about? That’s the first thing that brought me to the program. And then I went to the Program last year. Because I

found it interesting, and maybe I would like to learn more about the faiths, so that's why I went the second time. And I was thinking about attending next year. (Julia)

IEP Participant No. 1, who identified his spirituality as Muslim, said the urge to learn about others and their religions pushed him to attend this program, and he also mentioned that the program was all about "harmony" and there was "no reason to quit" during the process.

I just want to know more about others, how they think, what they believe in, how to practice it, how do they feel it spiritually, and is it satisfactory for them? And I was very curious about knowing things that I had no idea before about it. And I believe this program provided [me] this opportunity to know a lot of information from the people on spot. (IEP Participant No. 1)

For returning participants, the positive experiences in previous years enhanced their willingness to come back to the program, and some of them even introduced their friends to this program.

Last year when I participated in this program, I only went to 3 or 4 events. So I felt interesting. Some of the events, they served food, and food was very special for their culture. And I felt maybe I could know something more by attending some of the other events, so that's why I joined this year. (IEP Participant No. 2)

I really enjoyed everything in the week, and I just have gone to some places I'm interested in, and I wanted to share [my experiences] with the other people through the ending session, (IEP Participant No. 3)

Meredith acknowledged her doubt at the beginning, but the “forgiving” attitude of the people in the IEP eased her nerves.

I have initial doubt that I would be treated like a dummy, but it turned out that people are a lot more forgiving, in a way that it’s OK that you don’t know anything about our faith organization... you are OK to be unknown about certain things, and you are OK to ask question. And you don’t always get that kind of thing when you are going to a professional conference, where you have to portray your very much professional self, and you have to add that you are very much knowledgeable on certain topic. And that’s a lot more challenging in a way, so I would say, because I have a lot of the professional conference going experience, I know how to deal with setting of discomfort. So Interfaith in comparison, is a lot easier for me to handle... (Meredith)

Fox was a first-time participant in this program, and she came to the IEP with her friend, Julia, who was a returning participant. The company of her friend in this program gave her much comfort and ease, when she had to visit new places and interact with strangers in Canada, and food in other ethnic communities attracted her to attend more events.

From this program, I feel I should go to some places to travel and eat their traditional food, because their food, like the dessert in the Indian community, is super good. (Fox)

ISVP Participants

The most mentioned motivations for these participants to join in the ISVP include: to meet more people and make friends, to accumulate local experiences, and the reference letter and volunteer certificate.

The International Student Volunteer Program provides practice opportunities for these international participants, and it focuses on accumulating professional skills that could be applied in their future employment in Canada. Each cohort of ISVP lasts for several months, when the participants have to take their initiatives to lead an event or a project, and to work with others to accomplish the objectives. In the end, a volunteer certificate and a reference letter would be provided to the participants by the MSVU International Education Centre.

ISVP Participant No. 1 said his first reason to join in the ISVP was to “make friends”, and to help those who had similar experience and came to Canada “alone”.

First of all, to make friends, and to help other international students to get into the community here in Halifax at the Mount. Because I know the feeling, when I was here as an international student... they, most of them I hear, are alone, so they came to Halifax, to Canada by themselves usually. So I know they want to make friends. They want to know the local culture, and, where should they go have food and go to movies, things like that. (ISVP Participant No. 1)

One major goal for ISVP Participant No. 4 to the ISVP was also to “meet new people”, and he “had a great time with them” in the program.

I just felt at home studying, playing a game, that’s it. I know it’s wired ... the reason why I joined this is because I want to meet new people actually. This is one of the main goals. Yeah, I met a lot of people from my country too. They were like very, nice, I had a great time with them. And the experience I received from this activity, Photoshop, Snapchat. Now I know how to add a filter in a snapshot... and I opened an Instagram page... (ISVP Participant No. 4)

Many international students explained that it's hard for them to have Canadian work experiences, or to get a local reference letter, which was often asked for during job hunting in Canada. In order to prove their capacity and adaptability in the local market, and to get a local reference letter, they applied for the ISVP and hoped this program would benefit them in future employment.

The reason for me to join is the work experience, the most I think is the work experience and the reference letter. Because I think it is so difficult for international students here to find a job after we graduate. I think it is easier in Toronto or Vancouver... the population of international is bigger, and there are different companies from different countries... but here it is still developing. So I think I need more experience to prove that I'm capable of working here, and talking in English... I have some part time jobs, during these three years, but I still think this program can help me to develop more professional skills, so that that leads me to join this program. Because I think it is really useful for my future career, if I want to find a job, or if I want to stay here. So I decided to participate in this program. (ISVP Participant No. 3)

The reference letter. That's why I applied, as Participant 3 said, it's hard for international students to get jobs here, because Halifax is a very small city, and they don't have so many job prospects. So I think that's why most international students move out of the province once they are done. So I thought it would be a very good experience for me to do something out of my comfort zone, because I've never coordinated a campaign before, doing anything like that. So it was a good experience for me. (ISVP Participant No. 2)

Experiences in the IEP/ISVP

In the IEP, participants have the flexibility to choose which events to attend, when participants in the ISVP are assigned with the primary tasks and could choose from several others as supplementary projects. The characteristics of each program made the participants' experiences quite unique from each other.

IEP Experiences

The IEP participants revealed that they had a deeper understanding of other cultures, and got to know people with diverse faiths and backgrounds.

Cross-cultural Awareness

The participants of the IEP group constantly referred to the words “different” and “difference”, when they talked about their experiences in the week-long program. As they attended faith events and mingled with people from various religious community, the participants realized the diversities and similarities across cultures and faiths, and the understanding of each other enabled them to be more open and tolerant to the differences they might encounter.

Actually I joined very less of the programs, and this Interfaith program was the first program I joined... I just feel it's interesting. During the whole week, you go different places to feel the different cultures, and feel the different interfaiths... actually it's like, widening your knowledge, and you know lots of different things, so it's good. (IEP Participant No. 4)

It was my first time attending a harmony program with different interfaiths engaged together. So the program that I have attended before, it was more oriented into one

religion, one interfaith. And also here I love the diversity that exists within this group. And I love how everybody was open to one another, with curiosity to know humbleness, which is the most important thing. To humble ourselves in front of others, and not seeing ourselves superior than others, so this is the special thing that I like with this program.

(Ahmad)

While working in a non-profit organization, Meredith works with people from various backgrounds, and the learning experience at the IEP has also influenced her understanding of her career and her understanding of people.

It's very very powerful, and I still constantly quoting the theme of this year, and also the banner from the mosque. When I was at work, and I have to bring up things as how we can achieve racial equity in the organization, and how we need to truly embrace the community that we want to welcome to our organization. I feel like I go back to constantly quoting that, like "exploring similarity and celebrating diversity", quoting "Don't just hear about us, hear from us." And I feel like that's the message, that I would love other people from my organization to get to learn a little bit better. Because it speaks very much to my heart. By now that I guess, when you work in an organization and people have different levels of understanding on things, because they have very different experiences, sometimes they don't really get it in a way you get it. (Meredith)

Some participants reassured their misunderstanding of certain ethnic group and their culture has been changed, after they had direct interaction and communication with these people.

Yolanda disclosed that she had learned about a religious group as "very dangerous people", but

after she attended the IEP, she found it contradicted to her previous impression, because “they were really friendly”, not “like the news said”.

Building Connections

Despite the learning about cultures and religions, all IEP participants admitted that they had known new people through this program, and made some new connections in the community.

Yolanda was invited to perform at one of the IEP events in 2017 and had very good feedbacks. Afterwards, some faith communities contacted her and asked her to perform at other events. Several others, like Julia and Ahmad, said they had met people they would never expect before, and the experience was positive.

I think I made friends with two people last year, we had each others' Facebook, and sometimes we maybe contact with each other. (Julia)

Ahmad shared his positive experience with the communities he had visited, which he described as “open”, approachable, and “welcoming”. He felt comfortable among groups of people with different believes. He was happy to retain his identity, because he was received as “a friend of them”, “not part of them”.

I love to engage with people. I love always outdoors, I love to go out to explore, to meet people, to communicate with them, to have a better understanding about life and humanity. So I didn't find difficulty in just going out of my own zone, I really do enjoy it, and I learned of something very positive that all the communities I have visited, they were so open to be approached, so welcoming. They wanted you to come and be a friend

of them. Not part of them, but a friend of them. So I like this positive environment of welcoming. I couldn't find any difficulty in approaching them. (Ahmad)

ISVP Experiences

When being asked about their ISVP experiences, change or gaining after the program, the participants stated that most of their experiences were positive and beneficial. Their experiences concentrated on gaining professional skills through practice, and building connections or expanding social networks.

Professional Skills

All the ISVP participants in this research confirmed that the practice in the volunteer program had enhanced their confidence, by improving their professional skills, such as intercultural communication, time management, leadership, teamwork, organizing, event planning, marketing, and IT skills as well.

The program targets international students from MSVU, and it's held by the university's International Education Centre. Its success was because, as Dr. T. said, "it was done by professional special persons to serve the same special persons in the same community". Dr. T. was an international student without a social security number, so it's really difficult for him to get local work experience from a job, but the ISVP was "a good thing", because there were no worries about the visa issue.

In the ISVP volunteer work, Dr. T. observed that they had to use specific ways to approach different student groups. For example, international students were "more flexible" and wanted more detailed explanations. But the Canadian students were "direct", when they "received the

information”, they “just went away with it”, because “they were busy” and “didn’t want to discuss it”.

In the discussion on their achievements in the ISVP, some talked about how they improved skills in the volunteer work.

First of all, organization skills and time management skills. Because we have to do many stuff day by day. We have to make a group plan for what’s we are going to do each day to achieve our goals. And also marketing skills and interpersonal skills... We have to have communication with the other people, or with other staff or students. And we have to express what we think and what we want, then to have them to support us... also communication skills, as well as intercultural communicating skills... (Andy)

Because the ISVP lasted for the whole semester, all participants had to find a balance between volunteer tasks and their academic study, which required them to be well organized and develop the time management skills. On the other side, the project requirement for teamwork gave the participant a chance to practice their skills as a good team player and a good communicator, while building up leadership skills.

So... time management, because I was taking actually three courses that semester, one of them was research method, which took a lot of my time. And I also had a lot of work to do with the international volunteer program. So time management was definitely one of the skills that I gained. Because I created time to work on the ISVP task, and my assignments from other courses. Also, how to communicate with my team. So some of my team you know they have been not working probably, but I discussed with them because they were also busy fighting, I guess working on their assignments, and some of

them were graduating, so they were so busy. So we found time to meet, and discussed all the things, and we did that, which was really awesome, because it helped later. We did all of the tasks, and they took some great pictures for the social media, profiles, yeah, so...

The third thing I learned was how to work in a team, how to be a team player. (Dr. T.)

Building Connections

The ISVP participants all said they made friends, and made more connections through the volunteer program. Some participants took up a leading role to form a team, and worked together with other volunteers to accomplish their goals.

It gave me more confidence... We have other people, because I didn't do it alone. I had the help of WUSC, which is the World University Services in Canada, so I worked in collaboration with the WUSC, and we had volunteers, we had set a table, so it was great experience. I got to meet a lot of people, you know. I met a few friends, so it was a very good experience. (ISVP Participant No. 2)

Andy felt he was working with his friends in the ISVP, and the program was "very interesting".

People here are very friendly and fun, and feels like friends here. And you're going to do the program with your friends, and also the program is very interesting, so you will be staying here. It's typically you just do it, like playing some games with some friends and meeting more friends. That's the reason I did this program for the entire semester. (Andy)

After the ISVP, April continued to attend several other volunteer events, and she said the reason for her was to expand the social network through these activities.

I think the main reason is to know more people and to expand my network, because I understand the type of activity and event, and I want to expand my network at that time, so I participated these few events after this program. (April)

Learning Differences

Many participants in this study reported their notice of differences between their learning in the classroom and the learning happening in extracurricular activities, such as the IEP and the ISVP.

Formal Learning — in the Classroom

The education in the classroom is a typical format of formal learning for the participants in Atlantic Canada, and they marked it as “academic”, “compulsory”, “structured”, “systematic”, “competitive”, “standard”, “exams”, “reading”, “writing”, “theory”, and not helpful in “getting a job”.

I feel they are totally different... in the program of my study... It’s academic study... you have to arrive in the classroom at a certain time, and you don’t want to miss your attendance in the classroom, or participation in the classroom. That’s kind of partly compulsory... (Julia)

... in social science, normally they focus in education in theories, giving theories in the classes. And from a social science point of view, I believe the IE Program provides a unique experience in education in social science. I do agree with you that in applied sciences, same as I am doing, for example in engineering, we have lots of lab work, but I am not sure about the social science if it’s the same or not, but I do believe that they

focus a lot on classes and theories. So the IE Program gave us another approach in Education, which is a site social visit. (Ahmad)

But in classroom, most of the part is about academic contribution, which means you guys have probably the same assignment, or the same paper you need to do, and everything you talk about is about the assignment. And after your paper is finished, your goal is finished. (Andy)

The formal education in Lola's perception was more about "cramming" the knowledge into the learner, and the learning process was for the learner to read the bibliography provided by the professor and write a paper. But when the paper was done, the learning finished.

Because you're cramming, for examples, my professor tells me to read this book, and cram everything in mixture. And I'm determined to cramming everything on this piece of paper, so I can have an A. But the problem is once I'm done, I'm done. So I don't go back to it... You didn't get any skills from it. You only just studied the book, and write your research... but you haven't really shown what you've learned from the teacher, or you haven't shown your skills. (Lola)

Informal Learning — in Extracurricular Activities

When talking about their learning in extracurricular activities, participants frequently used words such as, "flexible", "experience", learning from "doing", "community", "authentic", "practice", useful "skills" and so on.

Actually, there is more freedom. Actually, you can learn by yourself, and you can choose which event you want to go, or you don't want to go, you are interested in or not interested in. If you are not interested in that program, you can not go there. (Fox)

Meredith had experienced identity difficulty in her academic study, when she tried to act in a more "Canadian" way to "fit into" the academic environment. But because she was acting "too Canadian", she felt abandoned by her Chinese peers because she was too "assertive". In the IEP, she felt comfortable, because she didn't need to "erase" her original identity, but just to learn and see "different way of thinking".

Well, not just about test. Like in the classroom, even it's a science program, you almost feel like you have to confirm the culture, you almost have to erase your identity to fit into the culture. But in the Interfaith program, because you only go to different faith organizations, and they are all different, and they have their own culture, so you don't need to learn to erase yourself from your own identity, you are only going to learn a little bit about them, and different, seeing different way of thinking. (Meredith)

Dr. T. believed the informal way of learning in the volunteer program gave him "a better way to express". There's no judgemental pressure or standardized assessment, like the "grades" in the formal education. Other than the predictable academic achievement, the reward of informal learning was unexpected, but it's "real work experience", "authentic" communication with "different people", and "it's really good".

Yeah flexibility... the timeline, assignments... the volunteer program offered a better way to express your ideas, work together, fail and succeed, no one's gonna judge you. There's no grades...All you gonna gain is work, real work experience. You cannot expect

what you going to receive, because you are meeting with different people, communicating with different people. So that's actually really good, because it's authentic, it's real. (Dr. T.)

April stated that compared with academic assignment, the ISVP was more about "self discipline", and depended on her attitude and "effort".

Yeah self discipline, because there's no one forcing me to do it actually. They will not blame me, so it really depends on myself and depends on my mind, how do I think it? Do I think it is worth? What for my effort? So this is the biggest difference I think for the program and the academic assignment. (April)

Lola thought that class experience was not so helpful for her to get a job as the real work experience or volunteer experience would do in Canada, because the volunteer experience would be counted for work experience by the local employers.

... that's why work experience is different from class experience. You're trying to get a job, and they ask you, "Do you have work experience?" OK. I studied women and gender studies for example, I did not have any volunteer experience or have any experience. I don't have any work experience. I will not get a job. Someone with my (work) experience will get a job, because the person has worked and done all those things in the office, has done awareness campaign, has been able to coordinate an event, has done so many things. While (if) I have never done it before, then how do I start it. (Lola)

Summary

In this section, I introduced the relevant findings and presented them in themes, and the relevant interview excerpts were used to illustrate the themes accordingly. The major themes discussed in this chapter included, why participants came to Atlantic Canada, what challenges they encountered, why they joined the IEP/ISVP, what they experienced in the programs, and what differences they noticed between their formal learning and informal learning.

In Chapter Five, the findings will be connected to each research topic, and be analyzed using the transformative learning theory and the experiential learning theory.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS

My discussion in this chapter is organized by four research topics, and it is an overall analysis of the research findings and the previous research. The data revealed facilitating factors and barriers in international students' learning in a city of Atlantic Canada. When analyzing the data in reference to the literature review in Chapter Two, I noticed that the informal learning process of these participants was confirmed by or extended the literature review.

In this research, I explore how the participants learned in two extracurricular programs and what caused such learning experiences, which I think cannot be split from their previous personal experiences and the broader social and cultural context. The word "experience" is often used to analyze various phenomena, and MacKeracher discussed three layers of the definition of it: Imposed knowledge, subjective knowledge, and constructed knowledge, which respectively refer to the knowledge imposed by one's "social and cultural heritage", the knowledge related to one's personal involvement and awareness, and the knowledge constructed by the previous two sets of experiences (2012, p. 344).

First, in the focus group interview, my research topic started from their motivations to come to Atlantic Canada, and moved on to the challenges they encountered in their life and study, which followed by a discussion on the reasons for them to join in and complete the IEP or the ISVP. Then in a semi-structured in-depth interview, I guided individuals to share their personal learning experiences in the IEP or the ISVP, as well as the influences of these extracurricular activities on them.

Some findings led to my conjecture that well-organized extracurricular programs could have influenced international students' knowledge-gaining positively, and alleviated barriers to

their integration into the host country. These speculations are based on the findings in Chapter Four and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which will be elaborated on and presented as recommendations in the next chapter.

Research Topic No. 1

To pursue higher education, international students chose to migrate from their home country to Halifax, the biggest city in Atlantic Canada. How does leaving home and moving into a new community affect their life and learning?

In the focus group interview, the first question for discussion was why they came to Atlantic Canada. Seven of ten participants ranked education as the top motivation, and only one student chose to come for immigration purpose. This finding corresponded to Guo's research in 2013, which unveiled some recent changes in Chinese immigrants' motivations to Canada, that the economic motivation was not the primary one, and the top four reasons for the Chinese' migration to Canada are: Canada's advantages in the ecosystem (52.5%), the high quality of educational system (47.5%), pursuit of other opportunities (25.1%), and legal identities in Canada (22.7%).

In the discussion on their feelings at the first arrival in Canada, almost all participants mentioned the differences they perceived, except for one who had been in Canada before. IEP Participant No. 3 touched on the contrasts between Canada and her home country in residence, transportation, weather, and entertaining. IEP Participant No. 2 talked about her "fears to talk" in English, because she was concerned that she couldn't "understand them" and couldn't make herself understood by them. ISVP Participant No. 2 admitted that the first thing she was struggling with was "the weather", "it's so cold", because the temperature where she was from

was “39 or 40 degrees” and “not too cold”. The only participant who reported it as “not a big difference” was May, because she had visited and done summer camps in Canada before, and it’s “common” in her country to pursue further education after high school “somewhere inside of the country or outside (going abroad)”.

As Jack Mezirow affirmed, his transformative learning theory was first articulated in his study of women’s returning to college education in the U.S. in the 1970s, and ten phases of transformative learning were clarified as follow,

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. A self examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan
8. Provision trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective

(Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

Disorienting dilemmas could be from a personal dreadful catastrophe as Mezirow defined in 1978, or the situation when individuals seek to integrate something missing from their lives (Clark, 1991, 1993; Taylor, 1998; cited in Roberts, 2006). The effects of disorienting dilemmas on learners comprise: Stress and anxiety, distress such as sickness and disease, and fears in individuals (Roberts, 2006, pp. 101-102)

In the findings on international students' informal learning, the first phase of disorienting dilemma for these participants could be the life change from their home country to Canada, a feeling of alienation or being isolated, cultural shock, or a big contrast or gap between their pre-existing impression and the reality in the host country. After their migration to Atlantic Canada, the external and internal changes brought the international students to a disorienting dilemma.

Before coming to Canada, Lola had imagined herself to be independent and learning different languages and cultures from the Canadians, but some locals she met overvalued English ability in interpersonal communication, which blocked her from interacting with people in the host country.

If you know people look at you like, "Oh she can't speak"... [But] for me, English is just a language. It's no different from Chinese language, it's no different from Nigerian language, it's not different from French, it's no difference. I see it that way. But people make it seem like "If you can't speak good English, I can't interact with you", or "You are not good enough for things"... I want to interact with people from different races, I love people, whether I speak English or not. It doesn't really bother me. I actually want to learn from you. I want to learn your language. I want to be able to at least to be able to communicate at some level. But it's kind of hard being talking to people, because people

are always looking at you in some kind of way. It's hard to interact with people, so I'd rather stay away. Stay away from people. (Lola)

IEP Participant No. 4 came from one of the biggest cities in China, and her prior understanding of a “developed country” was smashed by her first impression of Halifax, the biggest city in Atlantic Canada. And the snow in April also “shocked” her, because she came from a warm place. She used the word “upset” to describe her feeling when she first arrived in Canada.

Actually for me because I haven't been to the other cities in Canada, I just came to Halifax. And I found actually, when I arrived here, there was a gap between the truth and what I imagined... (laughter)... I came from a big city in China, and I think about Canada as the developed country, and that's very different things... And when I arrived here, it's totally like a country. It's just a country. And I felt a little bit upset, actually. And when I arrived here, it's almost April, but it's still snowy, that shocked me. It's snowy in the April, but in my city it's already like spring or summer. It's very warm, but here it's still snowy, so it's a little bit different. (IEP Participant No. 4)

ISVP Participant No. 2 grew up in a big family, so being away from her family and coming to Canada alone was “overwhelming” for her. After being grieved with tears, she critically assessed her situation and recovered with a positive attitude towards her new life ahead in Canada.

And it was so overwhelming. When everyone was talking in class, I would be crying, and then when it was my turn, I stopped crying, and saying my feeling that my mummy was not here, my family was not here. It was not easy for me. I struggled a lot, because being

away with a lot of people you love. But at the end of the day, I started realizing it was a good experience for me to understand my own and, meeting all those people and having new experiences, so I found that well... (ISVP Participant No. 2)

Participants from both the IEP and the ISVP acknowledged the dilemmas in a new environment in Atlantic Canada, which could be regarded as the beginning of their transformative learning in the host country. The disorienting dilemmas might have pushed the participants to seek for approaches to change the existing circumstances, which directly led to their participation in these extracurricular programs.

Research Topic No. 2

After 6 months or more, international students become more engaged in campus and local life, meeting people and expanding their social networks. What inspires/motivates them to join in an interfaith educational program or an international students' volunteer program?

The action to change their dilemma situation in Canada, was a result as described as the second to the sixth stages of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2009). After they checked and assessed their internal conditions and external environment, these students recognized their discontent with their situations. Then they explored their surroundings for new roles and actions, and made plans to take actions and change their situation.

The motivations for the international students to attend these extracurricular programs involve: the curiosity to learn (e.g. culture, religion, workplace culture, skills), to accumulate local experiences (e.g. working in a Canadian context, volunteer certificate, and reference letter), and to make connections with more people.

The findings show that these international students experienced hindrances, such as academic barriers, feeling of isolation, and institutional or systematic obstacles during their stay in Canada. Therefore, their intention to learn and accumulate local experiences from the IEP or the ISVP is a reaction to the pressure they experienced in Canada. The pressure on the international students was caused by various cultural differences they experienced and the feeling of unfamiliarity in the host country (Lewthwaite, 1996).

Language and culture differences were two biggest challenges for Fox, and she gave an example of different behaviours between Asian students and her Canadian classmates, when they were given the same task in class.

I think the first thing is the language, and the second is the culture, like the thinking ways are different actually, from the Asian people to the Canadian. So sometimes we think about this, but the Canadian people they may not think so, or they don't like it. So it's totally different things... like in my class, our chef asked us to cut something. For Asian people, we just cut, and focused on cutting things or the work. But for the Canadian people, they preferred to talk during their work, but their speed would be very slow, but for the Asian people, we wanted to speed up and to finish the work as soon as possible. But for the Canadians, no, and sometimes we have to wait for them... (Fox)

The motivation to meet people through the IEP or the ISVP was to alleviate the feeling of isolation in Canada. Almost all participants in this research talked about their difficulties in making friends or developing deeper relationship with Canadian students beyond the classroom.

IEP Participant No. 4 found herself didn't have much to do in the free time in Canada, and the most frequent activity for her and her friends was to hang out and have dinner together.

[With extra spare time], [I] stay at home. Just staying at home, and lying down on the bed, and playing the video game... [In the IEP], I wanna try different kinds of food ... to feel different cultures, and I want to know more things... maybe meet some friends. (IEP Participant No. 4)

April's reason to attend the ISVP could be a good example of the international students' problem. She had the feeling of disconnected with the local community, and discovered the disadvantage for her to get a job in the local market if she didn't build up her local social networks.

Because I am an international graduate here, I feel like that I have to. I know so little people in Halifax, and I have to look for a job at that time. I know that that activity will not help me to find a job, but I think it is a great chance for me to know more people and expand my networking in Halifax, or just like talking with someone and to know more about Halifax. I think this will be useful and interesting for me too, so I participated the events. (April)

All participants joined in the IEP/ISVP for various reasons, while the similarity was that they were unsatisfied with the situation to some degree in the host country, and wanted to make changes. Some participants contemplated the situation at a deeper level than their fellow participants. Some participants might not realize the importance of cultural immersion or volunteering, but followed their friends or other people to attend extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, the ambition to reverse the unsatisfactory status eventually impelled them to sign up for the IEP/ISVP, to interact with people in community activities, and to learn about the social environment and culture in practice.

Research Topic No. 3

As participants in each specific extracurricular program, what were international students' learning experiences during the process?

The experiential learning theory originated from John Dewey, and developed by Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, and then subsumed in Kolb's definition (Sternberg and Zhang, 2014; cited by Akinde, Harr & Burger, 2017). The experiential learning process includes (a) concrete experience, (b) abstract conceptualization, (c) reflective observation, and (d) active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Chavan, 2014; cited in Akinde, Harr & Burger, 2017, p. 138). Experiential learning is a process when knowledge is generated in the transformation of experience (Sternberg and Zhang, 2014; cited in Akinde, Harr & Burger, 2017).

The IEP is a week-long intensive experiential program, in which participants visit sacred spaces and attend faith practices in Halifax. Each participant has to fill in an online registration form, attend an introduction session, in which they meet the program coordinators and other participants, and in the end they have to come to a closing session. In these two sessions, they could share their stories, feelings and experiences in an open and respectful environment. To get a completion certificate, after the introduction session, they have to attend at least three events listed on the program schedule, and to reflect on their experiences and share it in a group at the closing session.

The ISVP is a project-oriented program designed by the International Education Centre for international students at MSVU, in the hope of providing volunteer opportunities to help them build transferrable professional skills, which could be beneficial for their future employment in the local labour market. Participants have to go through a full application process, by filling a

form, submitting a résumé and cover letter, and attending an interview. The application is designed to create for them an authentic scenario of a job interview in Canada. Then they would attend an introduction session, when they are assigned a main project, and they could choose from a list to select their subordinate projects. By the end of the term, they had to complete at least 15 hours' volunteer work, in order to obtain a volunteer certificate and a reference letter from the IEC.

The international students' learning experiences in the IEP and the ISVP could be depicted as both transformative and experiential. It corresponds with the seventh to the tenth phase of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2009), in the way that international students developed their cultural awareness and other skills during the programs, they acted their new roles as a participant or a volunteer, and they gained confidence or sense of belonging, when they made connections with people and developed cross-cultural awareness and professional competency. After or during the program, participants reintegrated their new knowledge into their lives. By then, their behaviours or attitudes could have changed, and been equipped with new perspectives from the extracurricular programs.

The informal learning experiences in the IEP and the ISVP could be divided into four stages, according to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984). In the first stage of "concrete experience", the international students registered or applied to the extracurricular programs, and they experienced the process by attending different events or doing volunteer work. In the second stage of "reflective observation", they reviewed or reflected on their experiences, by critical self assessment or reflective discourse with other participants or the program coordinators. The third stage, "abstract conceptualisation" was a conclusion and generalisation on their learnings from the experience, and the closing sessions in both programs acted as a

debriefing stage for participants to share experience formally, and to celebrate their achievements with the group. In the last stage, “active experimentation”, the participants with new perspectives or skills try out what have been learned in other places, or they apply their gaining from the program to their study or work.

Meredith developed concrete experience with the indigenous community by visiting the Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Halifax, as part of the Interfaith Engagement Program. By reviewing and comparing with what she had learned before, she observed contradictories between her personal experience and “mainstream news”. She realized that the news about the indigenous people was “not very true”.

I went to the Mi’kmaw Friendship Centre the first year I entered the Interfaith [Engagement] Program. It’s kind of opening my eyes, because I think that Canada has a long history of silencing the voice of the indigenous community, and unless you really like to dig or are trying to have a good understanding of them, or trying to make friends with them, you sometimes don’t hear about them... very often you hear very negative things about them, that they get portrayed with various stereotypes, but right now I feel it’s not very true... (Meredith)

At the Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre, Meredith communicated with the indigenous community, and experienced the indigenous culture. She generalized the similarity between indigenous culture and her native Chinese culture. The process of reflection raised her doubts on “the history of colonization” and its influences on the indigenous community.

I felt like more at home with the indigenous community, and I felt very comfortable with a lot of their worldviews. Because there is a lot of similarity with what they think about

the nature, about the environment, with the soil, even they use medicinal plants... and how they think of their elders, and tons of similarity as our culture as Chinese. As we use a lot of traditional Chinese medicine, we are very much respecting our Elders... that's the time when I realized how amazing this community is, and how a lot of the mainstream news talking bad things about them is not actually true, and how you get to reflect on the history, and how the history of colonization affected them... (Meredith)

The conclusion Meredith drew was that the unique elements of the IEP were the first-hand experience with cultural communities and the reflections in the program.

And that [competition in academic study] is not very helpful, and that very competitive way of learning, in a way, is very much exhausting, and it doesn't give you energy. You know that you have to keep going, because you have to, you don't have another choice. But I think the way that Interfaith [Engagement Program] teaches me, is in a more storytelling way, allowing me to use a very different way of learning. Like I am seeing things, and getting to experience and learn... it's more about having reflections in the Interfaith [Engagement] Program... (Meredith)

In the IEP, Meredith had the chance to visit the Mosque and be together with the Muslim community. This experience enhanced her cultural awareness, and enabled her to be more understanding of people's ways of doing things and the possible reasons behind that, which also benefited her career, because she had to dealing with a diverse group of people in work.

I get to know my neighbours even better, and that's a very very cool thing, and that's kind of benefiting my work right now... I know that certain volunteer would have to leave on a Friday at lunchtime, because they are going to the mosque, and I would learn

to be understanding of why they have the need to be away... because I understand their need now. (Meredith)

Andy has graduated from his Bachelor's program, and he said the ISVP experiences allowed him to communicate with "people from different cultural backgrounds" in an appropriate way. From his job hunting process in Halifax, he found that the awareness of cultural diversity and networking was "very important for a job seeker in Canada".

... from this program, I do gain work experience, as well as more skills, such as time management, detail oriented, and organization skills, which will definitely help me to do my job better than before, and help me to achieve my personal goal more easily. (Andy)

Lola's comment on what she gained from the ISVP is strong evidence to the transformative and experiential learning experience. She learned and gained new skills by doing. The accomplishment of the volunteer project gave her much confidence to try new things, as well as the courage to learn from mistakes.

I remember when they told me I would coordinate the awareness campaign. I was like, I can't do it. How to do? Just try your best and see how it works. It came out well, so I'm grateful for the confidence to be able to handle things that I thought before that I wouldn't be able to, but now I can see that. I'm not afraid anymore... I'm never going to listen to anyone who tells me I can't do it. I'll tell them I can do it, because I'm confident enough that I can do it, even if I make a mess of it. I will learn from the mistakes made and make it better. So that's what I've gotten from it, the confidence thing I got from the program. (Lola)

Research Topic No. 4

How are the international students' life choices, attitudes, values, behaviors influenced by their learning experience in these activities beyond classroom?

After the IEP and the ISVP, the participants reported several changes in themselves, such as enhancing intercultural awareness, making connections, improving skills, building up confidence, some attitude and behavior changes and so on. Several of the personal changes have been discussed previously, so here I will focus more on one of their perspective changes, the understanding of volunteering.

Many participants disclosed that their perception of the word “volunteer” had slightly or greatly changed after they came to Canada. Their prior understanding of volunteering was “not a must”, people took it “less seriously”, “useless” in “finding a job”. One of them said,

It is voluntary, so it depends on how much I want to do. I think it's a useless thing at first, because in my hometown we don't usually consider volunteer work as an important factor for like finding a job. But after I came into here, I saw the difference. So I tried, I started to learn about the volunteer program, and to try to participate and make them useful for my future. And at first I think that it is so much trouble, because you have to spend your own time, but you don't get money, you don't get anything. But after participating this program and also some individual events, I feel like that actually I can learn something... although maybe sometimes it is tiresome, I can feel that I'm joyful at the end. So I think this is the thing that I have learned from the program and changed my mind a bit. (April)

The above quote is a reflection of April's previous understanding of volunteering, and her attitude change during the volunteer program.

After their participation in the IEP and ISVP, many of them revised their understanding of volunteering. They saw volunteering as “useful”, “commitment”, “self learning”, a supplement to their “résumé”, “gaining points”, and “work experiences”. Here is an example from an IEP participant, who noticed the Canadian way of volunteering was different from what he knew about the facts in other countries.

But here I realize that all of them, [the volunteers in Canada], they have tons of things, but yet they give time, they are committed and happy about what they are doing.

Volunteer work in Canada here is different than other countries, because here they do it because they want to do it, even though they don't have time for it. But they want to do it, there is an urge inside them to do something, to share something, to help, to care, to give, rather than just take, and this is totally a new perspective that has been changed after I came here. (Ahmad)

Moreover, when talking about their changes after the extracurricular activities, participants constantly mentioned their gaining of skills and confidence from the practice.

Lola realized the different management styles in her home country and Canada, and she admitted that she enjoyed the western style of leadership, in which supervisors showed complete respect and trust to the others, and encouraged them to take initiatives to do things.

One thing I've learned about working with other people, like if you don't carry other people along, whatever you're doing is not going to work, because you have to respect the people you work with, and show them that you believe what they're doing, even if

they're making mistakes, not to help them, but telling them, "OK, let's do it this way, and see if it works." (Lola)

Dr. T. developed his skills in communicating, organizing, marketing, time management, and leadership. On what he learned from the ISVP, he talked about his excitement about his role changes from an international student to a leader of a team, a professional doing real marketing stuff, and a communicator in a diverse community.

...like you said, skills such as time management, communicating with my team, designing, and creating targeted messages, being critical about what I posted, and who I should follow... I think this is one of the main things, because I was the project leader. I talked to many student... [thinking about] how to create appointment, [how] to talk to them very nicely using specific words, how to approach... I think that's I gained from this program. (Dr. T.)

In addition to all the skills they developed, Andy and May noted the changes in their career options and life choices. Six participants have had perceived obvious behavior or attitude changes after attending the program. And almost all of the participants expected themselves to be more open and tolerant to differences, more independent and adaptable in future possible unknown new situations.

Summary

Returning to the overarching question that guided this research project, the community engagement and extracurricular activities do affect international students' informal learning in Atlantic Canada. The process of the informal learning experiences corresponds to the main routes and steps described in the transformative learning theory and experiential learning theory.

All participants in this research had critically reflected their experiences after running into disorientation in different formats. They self-directed to the extracurricular program to convert the challenging situations. Most of them revealed changes in attitudes, growth in skills, or cultural awareness to varying degrees, which was depended by individual's ability in analyzing the problem, critical thinking, in-depth reflection, and application of skills in various circumstances.

In the final chapter, I provide a summary of this research, reflect on the process of data collecting, and discuss some limitations of the findings. Then this study's implications and suggestions for future research will also be discussed. And lastly, some brief concluding remarks are presented.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

This study supports the role of informal learning in international students' personal growth and integration in the host country. The self-directed cultural immersion, volunteering, and community engagement facilitated participants' informal learning. Within a qualitative methodology, research methods, such as case study, focus group interviews, and semi-structured in-depth interviews, were applied in this research to understand international students' informal learning experiences in a city in Atlantic Canada.

The findings of this study largely support the initial assumption that the participation in extracurricular activities, such as attending cultural related events, interacting with people, and volunteering in the community, are related to international students' adaptation and integration to the life and study in Atlantic Canada. In general, data analyses suggest that students, who expose themselves more to various cultures and social contexts and conduct in-depth critical reflections on their experiences, are more likely to hold open and inclusive attitudes, be more independent, and more adaptable to unfamiliarity and unexpected changes.

Limitations

During the data collecting process, my position as a researcher, an international student, and my previous roles in these two programs all affected my relationship with the participants. My limited qualitative research skills and my facilitating experience might have affected the discussion outcomes. The role of an English as a Second Language learner is likely to have influenced my communication with the participants, and my understanding of their discussions. Additionally, my "insider" role in the IEP and the ISVP may have been a constraint of

participants' intention to reveal "shared" information, or an accelerator for them to share what they assumed I would love to hear.

As Roger et al. (2018) declared, qualitative research findings are mediations and negotiations between the researcher and those researched, in which the researcher's assumptions should be explicit and straightforward. The results of the qualitative research are not completely neutral, but in a state called "empathic neutrality" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014; cited in Roger et al., 2018, p. 532).

According to my understanding, as a qualitative researcher, I have to create, not a vacuum, but a respectful and open environment for the participants to share their experiences freely in a natural situation. My research findings should be presented in a transparent way, and I have to strive to avoid exaggeration or misinterpretation on participants' voices and behaviors.

To decrease the effects of my personal skills and English language proficiency on the research participants, I introduced the focus group interviews and semi-structured in-depth interviews in this research, in the hope that these two formats of interviews would generate data with validity. During the interview, if I had doubt about any words or sentences in the discourse, I would ask the participant to clarify, or I would paraphrase and reaffirm it with the participant, in order to get the most authentic voices in data collecting.

To alleviate my role as someone with authority or power, in the Participant's Information Letter & Consent Form, I specify that the participant's withdrawal from the interview or refusal to answer questions will not affect them in any thing that relates to MSVU, IEP, or ISVP (please refer to Appendix E). And at the beginning of each interview, I would reinforce my role as a researcher and an international student, and I would ensure them of their autonomy to withdraw

or stop the interview at anytime if they wanted to. I tried to reduce the power imbalance between myself as the interviewer and the participants by being a facilitator of the discussion, rather than creating any sense of superiority or hierarchy during the interviews.

Implications

The enquiry into extracurricular programs such as the IEP and the ISVP may help intercultural students to seek for effective ways to adjust to a brand-new culture or social environment, and to build up necessary skills for future employment in Canada. In turn, this study also benefits the educational institutions in generating insights to better understand the experiences of international students, and to provide appropriate services to meet the requirements of both international students and the global market, which also complies with the region's increasing demand for young and skilled immigrants.

It would be beneficial if this study could be repeated within a larger participant sample group in order to test the feasibility of the extracurricular programs, if they benefit the new incoming international students in helping them transit and integrate into the host society. By clarifying the role of informal learning in international higher education, the experiences of international students can be contextualized within larger theoretical frameworks and policy initiatives.

Future study could include a diverse age range of participants. The study was limited to adult international students at their 20s or 30s. So I would be willing to see the results among various age groups, like the international students in high school, in their 40s or even older.

As suggested by Ryan (2011), universities should endeavor to provide adequate education of high-quality to international students, and make sure that they receive appropriate preparation

for future profession, which could be a primary selling point in the international education market. The findings of this research may contribute to the advancement of knowledge in international education, and might be applicable in program evaluation, educational service development and reform.

The implications of this research for practice include providing evidence on a heuristic method of learning, enhancing Canadian universities' competitiveness, increasing the retention rate of international students in Atlantic Canada, and contributing to the local economic development. Given the limitation of the methodology and small number of participants, more in-depth research should be carried out for future program developing and policymaking.

Conclusion

With the educational internationalization worldwide, international students strive to gain more overseas experiences, which is not limited to learning in a formal setting, but also in a wider scope, like in the community. The findings of this study support the effects of informal learning on international students through two extracurricular programs in Atlantic Canada.

Using the findings as a reference, policy makers could work on making and adjusting the education and immigration policy, while educational institutions and program developers could develop more effective and inclusive curriculum and extracurricular programs for international students in Atlantic Canada.

For policy makers, the priority of educational internationalization should be shifted from increasing the number of students choosing Canada as their educational destination, to increasing the retention and employment rates of those international talents in the Canadian market. The immigration policy makers have to create more accessible pathways for international students to

come and immigrate to Canada, for example, by withdrawing financial obstacles, providing scholarships, bursaries, and pre-departure guidance, and making it easier for their families to visit Canada. For immigration organizations, the settlement services should not end with the newcomers' arrival in Canada, but should be extended to their relocation and reintegration into social life in the host country. For example, language training, cultural immersion activities, and career development supports should be provided to help new immigrants become a correlated part of the society. It's important to bring in international students and other immigrants to Canada, it's never of less importance to retain these migrants, and enable them to achieve personal success and create social and economic values. The immigration supporting system should be a collaboration of the federal government, the provincial government, and the municipality and community. While providing appropriate support to newcomers, educating the public cannot be ignored to developing cross-cultural awareness development, and the importance of the co-existence of diversity and inclusion in our society.

The two programs discussed in my research, the IEP and the ISVP, respectively have distinct implications. In the IEP, the participants enhanced their cross-cultural awareness by immersed themselves in specific cultures and religions, intentional interactions with people, critical reflection on experiences, and sharing experiences with other participants. In the ISVP, the participants took their initiatives to practice whatever skills they wanted to improve, and took the responsibility to complete a project, which acted as professional transition training and Canadian work experience accumulating before they could move on to real employment.

Through this study, it is expected that positive changes can be created, and international learners' satisfaction could be improved within Atlantic Canadian universities, which will

reversely enhance this area's competitiveness as an ideal destination for international education, immigration, employment, and long-term settlement.

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APPENDIX A



INTERVIEW GUIDE

The guide will act as a prompt, reminding the researcher of necessary topics to cover, questions to ask and areas to probe. It is composed in simple language and in a logic order, so that the participant can grasp the point easily and thoughts can flow in a natural way. It contains a list of questions and topic areas that should be covered in the interview. But the researcher may not ask all sub-questions or follow the fixed order, and it is possible that follow-up questions may be raised by the researcher according to the participant's response.

The overall research question:

How do international students gain knowledge through informal learning, especially by engaging with the community and attending extracurricular activities in Atlantic Canada?

Sub-questions

1. To pursue higher education, international students chose to migrate from their home country to Halifax, the biggest city in Atlantic Canada. How does leaving home and moving into a new community affect their life and learning?

- Why did you come to Canada?
- How did you feel after you came to Canada?
- What was your biggest problem/challenge at the beginning of your study in Canada?
- What are the differences between your life and study in your native country and your life and study in Canada?
- What caused the challenges/changes in your life and study in Canada? Why did you meet these difficulties?

2. After 6 months or more, international students become more engaged in campus and local life, meeting people and expanding their social networks. What inspires/motivates them to join in an interfaith educational program or an international students' volunteer program?

- What brought you to the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) or the International Student Volunteer Program?
- Why did you decide to join in the IEP/ISVP?
- What was/were your concern(s) before you started the program?
- Why didn't you choose another program? Or what are the differences between the IEP/ISVP and other programs/activities?
- What sustained you to the end of the IEP/ISVP? What helped you stick with the program up to completion of it?

3. As participants in each specific extracurricular program, what were international students' learning experiences during the process?

- What did you experience during the program? Please describe your experiences.
- What have you learned from the IEP/ISVP?
- What new skills/abilities have you gained from the IEP/ISVP?
- What is the most impressive thing/moment for you in the program?
- What are the biggest difference between your participation in the IEP/ISVP and your leaning in the classroom instructed by the professor?

4. How are the international students' life choices, attitudes, values, behaviors influenced by their learning experience in these activities beyond classroom?

- What, if any, are the changes the IEP/ISVP has brought to your life, such as your choices / attitudes / values / perspectives / behaviours?
- After completing the program, what's your largest achievement from the program?
- After the IEP / ISVP, have you attended any other similar programs? Why did you attend these programs, or why not?
- Would you like to attend this kind of extracurricular programs again? Why or why not?
- What would you like to change if you have the chance to attend the program again?
- What is the biggest change to you after attending this program?

APENDIX B



Excellence • Innovation • Discovery

PARTICIPANT'S RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear IEP/ISVP participants,

Greeting from Junfang Fu.

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am doing my research for my master thesis on international students' learning experiences in Canada, and I am recruiting former international students who participated in the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) in Halifax or the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) at MSVU.

If you are interested in this research, please contact me for further information. Or if you know someone who might be interested, please feel free to share the attached recruitment poster and flyer. I appreciate your help.

Sincerely,

Junfang Fu

MAEd Student, Mount Saint Vincent University

APPENDIX C



PARTICIPANT'S RECRUITMENT POSTER

A Call for Research Participants

February 2018

Dear International Students,

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University conducting research for my master thesis under the supervision of Professor **Susan Brigham** on the role of two extracurricular programs in international students' informal learning experiences in Atlantic Canada, the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) in Halifax and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP) at MSVU.

Extracurricular activities, such as community engagement, interaction with people, and volunteering, play a vital role in international students' overseas experiences. The IEP and ISVP are very good examples of the extracurricular programs beyond the classroom. As a former participant of one of these two programs, your opinion is important to this study.

I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about your experiences in one of these two programs. I plan to conduct this research in the format of focus group interviews and one-to-one interviews in March-April 2018. Interview time will be negotiable, and the location will be at MSVU/DAL/SMU, or in one of the public libraries in HRM. Your involvement is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study. If you agree to participate, the focus group interview will be approximately 2 hours, and the one-to-one interview will be no more than 1 hour.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have questions or concerns for this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in this study, you may contact the University Research Ethics Board by phone at 902-457-6350 or by e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

Thank you in advance for your interest in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Junfang Fu
Mount Saint Vincent University
Faculty of Education
Contact Telephone Number: [REDACTED]
Email Address: junfang.fu2@msvu.ca

APPENDIX D






PARTICIPANT'S RECRUITMENT FLYER

International Students' Learning Experiences Study

You are invited to participate in a research project about international students' learning experiences in NS, Canada.


This is a research project for Junfang Fu's Master Thesis in the Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University.

-  Are/Were you an international student at the age of 19 years or above?
-  Have you been in Canada for over six months?
-  Have you participated in the Interfaith Engagement Program in Halifax or the International Student Volunteer Program at MSVU?

If you answered YES to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an education research study.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the role of two extracurricular programs, the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP), in shaping the international student participants' informal learning experiences in Atlantic Canada. Benefits include a thorough reflection on the learning experiences through community engagement, interaction with people, and volunteering. Participants will receive an honorarium of \$20.

The interviews will be conducted at either MSVU, DAL, SMU, or at one of the public libraries in HRM, depending on your preference.

Please contact Junfang Fu at junfang.fu2@msvu.ca or  for more information.

Thank you!

APPENDIX E



PARTICIPANT'S INFORMATION LETTER & CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY: **The Role of Two Extracurricular Programs in International Students' Informal Learning Experiences in Atlantic Canada**

RESEARCHER: Junfang Fu, Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University

Purpose of the research: The purpose of the study is to examine the role of two extracurricular programs, the Interfaith Engagement Program (IEP) and the International Student Volunteer Program (ISVP), in shaping the informal learning experiences of international student participants. The goal is to identify some of those factors that affect participants' learning and personal success in Atlantic Canada, and to explore how specific informal programs impact international students to make cultural transitions from their homeland to the host country, while building a bridge to connect prior knowledge and current life. An understanding of these various experiences may contribute to building a stronger learning community and developing multiple ways to improve international learners' satisfaction with their overseas experiences.

What You Will Be Asked to do in the Research: Approximately ten (10) people, who held student visa when they participated in either the IEP or the ISVP, will be invited to participate. There will be two groups, one group will consist of international students who participated in IEP and one for ISVP. Each group will have four or five (4-5) people and be respectively invited to participate in a focus group interview that will take place at MSVU. After the focus group interview, all participants will be invited to take part in a semi-structured in-depth one-to-one interview, and the location can be negotiable, either at MSVU/DAL/SMU, or at public libraries in HRM. Depending on your preference, the location will be chosen by negotiation. Once the location is decided, a private meeting room in any of these locations will be booked by the researcher for the interview, so that the participants' privacy and confidentiality will be ensured. If you are uncomfortable being in the focus group or unable to attend the scheduled focus group meeting, you will still be invited to participate in a semi-structured one-to-one interview.

The time commitment for the focus group will be approximately 2 hours, and the one-to-one interview will not exceed one hour. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher will ask for your permission to start to audiotape the interview. The focus group and one-to-one interviews will be audio recorded.

Any Risks Involved: Anticipated risks and discomforts to participants are minimal. However, in reality, in the conversation about your negative experiences, you may feel emotional discomforts. In the event of such an occurrence, the researcher will make available the name of the available counseling and supportive service at MSVU. This resource will be available to you during the duration of and after the completion of the study.

What is the Benefit of this research: The study provides an avenue for you – through engagement in the focus group and participation in the semi-structured in-depth one-to-one interviews – to reflect on how your learning experiences are affected by your participation in the IEP or the ISVP. It will help to better understand the role of learning beyond the classroom through extracurricular programs, such as the IEP and the ISVP, and the role of informal learning and experiential learning in international education. In addition, participants are also able to share their experiences, which may influence the outcome of future university international students' learning experiences.

Compensation: Participants will receive an honorarium of \$20 by cash.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may, at any time, choose to stop participating or refuse to answer particular questions during the research. You may stop participating in the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide to stop participating in the research, you will still receive the \$20 honorarium by cash. Deciding to stop participating, or refusing to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or anyone associated with Mount Saint Vincent University (e.g. IEP or ISVP coordinators, or professors with whom you may be currently taking a course) either now, or in the future.

Your individual interview with the researcher will be deleted as soon as you have withdrawn from the research, and no data from the individual interview will be kept or used in the research. However, in the event of your withdrawal from the study, due to the difficulty of extracting out individuals' voices, in the focus groups, all associated data already collected during your involvement will still be used in the reporting of this data in the form of a Master's thesis, future academic publications and conferences. Information collected during the one-to-one interview will be destroyed immediately and will not be used in this Master's thesis, future academic publications and conferences.

Request for research report: You can receive a summary of findings from the study which can be mailed or e-mailed upon request. You can also have access to the thesis through the library at the Mount Saint Vincent University. If you would like a summary of the findings, please provide your mailing address or email address below:

_____ or E-mail _____

Confidentiality: All information supplied by you during the research will be held in confidence. Your name will not appear in the reporting or publication of this research. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym (a fake name to help conceal your true identity) before the beginning of the study. The pseudonym will only be used during the one-to-one interviews. The researcher will assign a number or pseudonym and a name tag to each participant and no names will be used during the focus group. Participants will refer to each other by the pseudonym or number and in the write-up, your actual names and other identifying information (e.g. countries of origin) will not appear, to help further eliminate the possibility of being identified in the write-up of the research.

Data from the focus groups and one-to-one interviews will be collected by note taking and digital audio recording, and you will be assigned a number/pseudonym in the write-up as well to protect your identity. Data collected will be stored securely. All digital audio files will be saved on a password-protected computer and on the MSVU secure data storage — OneDrive. The computer will be kept secure at my home. The written data (such as the consent forms and my notes taken during interviews) will be safely stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home, and only I will have access to this information. These papers will be shredded upon the completion of the thesis approximately one year from now. The audio recording will be immediately erased from the recorder, and all digital data will be deleted permanently from my computer and MSVU OneDrive upon the end of the conservation period, which will be approximately five years after the completion of the thesis.

Duty to Report

Please note that there are legal limits to the information researchers can promise to keep confidential, and that the researchers have a duty to report. If, during the course of this research, the researcher learns that you plan to harm yourself and you present immediate danger to yourself, the researcher is required to report this. In addition, if the researcher learns you plan to harm someone else, the researcher is also required to report this. If the researcher learns that you are currently harming a child, or a vulnerable adult, the researcher is required to report this.

Do you have Questions About the Research? If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Junfang Fu, by e-mailing junfang.fu2@msvu.ca or calling [REDACTED]. You can also contact my graduate thesis supervisor, Dr. Susan Brigham by e-mailing susan.Brigham@msvu.ca or calling (902) 457-6733.

This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in this study, you may contact the University Research Ethics Board by phone at 902-457-6350 or by e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

I _____ consent to participate in the research study **“The Role of Two Extracurricular Programs in International Students’ Informal Learning Experiences in Atlantic Canada”** conducted by Junfang Fu and supervised by Dr. Susan Brigham, thesis supervisor at Mount Saint Vincent University. I have understood the nature of this research and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Researcher

I _____ consent to the audio recording of my focus group and interview sessions as part of **The Role of Two Extracurricular Programs in International Students’**

Informal Learning Experiences in Atlantic Canada conducted by Junfang Fu and Supervised by Dr. Susan Brigham, thesis supervisor at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Researcher