

The Unspoken Voices: Access to Food Choices and Implications Among International Graduate Students at the University of British Columbia

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Abstract

The number of international graduate students enrolled at Canadian universities has continuously increased, indicating the importance of their cultural and economic contributions. The difficulties international graduate students encounter in obtaining food, which have an impact on their academic performance and general well-being, have received little attention. This study investigates how University of British Columbia (UBC) international students see food access and how it affects their academic experience. Six qualitative interviews with international graduate students at UBC were conducted. The research found that finding food acceptable for one's culture to be a challenge, and logistical issues, including time limits, underemployment, and lack of family support, can make it difficult to access food choices. It was discovered that these issues have a negative impact on these students' health and academic performance, emphasizing a crucial area for action. The results highlight the necessity for Canadian governments and academic institutions to acknowledge and tackle the food access difficulties encountered by international graduate students. Improving this student population's access to reasonably priced, culturally relevant food choices might significantly impact their well-being and academic performance.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Canada, Food Choices, International Graduate Students, Qualitative Research, Ethnography

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1. Introduction

Enrollment of international university students is increasing across Canadian university campuses since they find Canada an appealing destination to complete their overseas education since completion from a Canadian university offers a road to permanent residency. According to UBC Annual Enrolment Report 2022/23, it has seen an increasing number of international students, from 13,712 in 2018/19 to 15,149 in 2022/23 for the Vancouver campus (University of British Columbia, 2023) see Figure 1. According to Singer (2024) and Torontosun (2024), 355,000 international students in Canada were granted permanent residency status in 2021–2023, which fueled economic expansion by bringing in new consumers and labor. At the beginning of 2020, Canada benefited from over \$22 billion economically, with over 640,000 international university students contributing annually, supporting around 170,000 economic jobs (Anderson, 2015; El-Assal & Thevenot, 2020; Government of Canada, 2019). International university students pay a more significant amount of tuition than local students, significantly boosting Canadian universities' revenue streams (Guo & Guo, 2017).

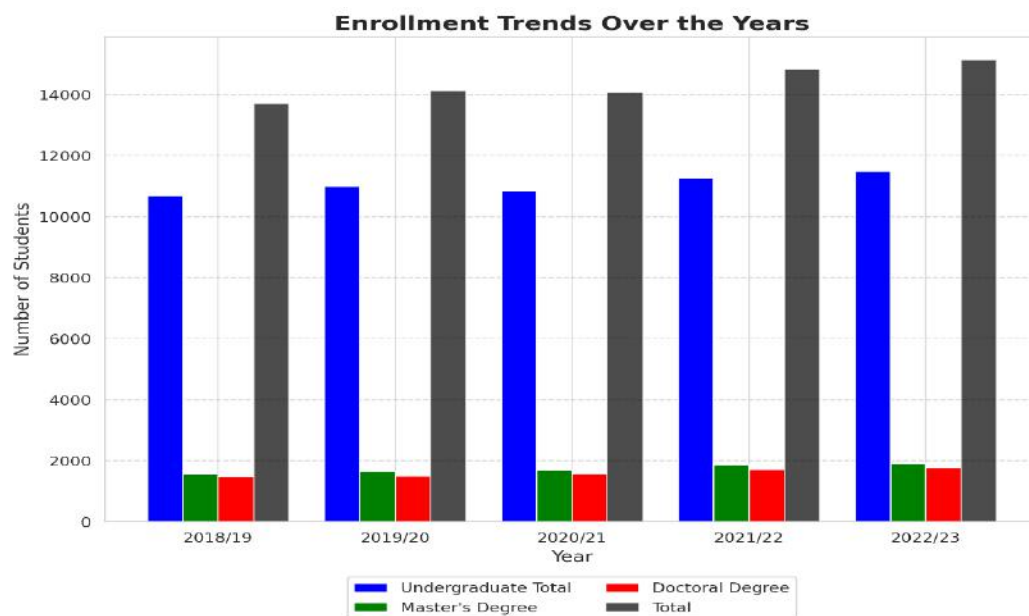


Figure 1: Enrollment Trends Over the Years

Regarding Canadian universities and the country's economy, international university students are economically significant but also face a high risk of not having access to their choice of foods (Aljaroudi, 2018; Mollaei, 2023). As defined by Eufic, “Food choice refers to how people decide on what to buy and eat” (Eufic, 2024). A multitude of factors influence food choices, which are intricate and influenced by biological factors like hunger, appetite, and taste; psychological factors like mood, stress, and guilt; physiological factors like access, education, and time; social factors like culture, family, and peers; and economic factors like cost, income, and availability. Food choices are also influenced by attitudes, convictions, and knowledge about food (Eufic, 2016). However, these factors may have differing effects depending on an individual's background, personality, social circles, and sociocultural standing. Financial limitations resulting from higher tuition costs for students (Shi et al., 2021; Tam et al., 2017) and limits on international university students' work hours are the unique factors influencing eating choices among international university students (Frank, 2018; Sanchez-Serra & Marconi, 2018). A research conducted at a large public university in

western Canada found that International students' access to food choices was caused by their inability to pay for costly tuition (J. J. Farahbakhsh, 2015; Hague et al., 2004; Xiao et al., 2018). Financial difficulties faced by international students were caused by several factors, such as little or no financial aid from their universities or families, expensive living and tuition cost. International university students had fewer ways to manage their dietary or food choices as compare to domestic students (J. Farahbakhsh et al., 2015; Hague et al., 2004).

International students' dietary choices are influenced by price, but other considerations are typically disregarded. Being entirely responsible for food choices for the first time can change eating patterns (Hilger et al., 2017; Martín Piñero, 2022; Papadaki et al., 2007). International university students in Canada, like other immigrants, may have trouble finding meals that meet their cultural and religious dietary constraints (Aljaroudi, 2018; Shi et al., 2021).

A lack of food choices can hurt international university students' academic performance, nutrition, physical and emotional health, and social lives. They struggle to meet basic requirements, worry about food shortages, can't study, and have trouble socializing (Bruening et al., 2017; Enriquez & Archila-Godinez, 2022; J. Farahbakhsh et al., 2015; J. J. Farahbakhsh, 2015; Lambert et al., 2019; C.-C. Lee et al., 2023; Lordly et al., 2021; Mhurchu et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2016; Ssali, 2019).

Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research on the experiences of international university students with access to food choices to help develop strategies to lessen the impact of limits on their access to food choices, as well as to improve the positive experiences of studying in Canada. We provide the answers to questions from qualitative interviews with international graduate students who face difficulties accessing food choices. The questions addressed (a) challenges in accessing food choices and (b) consequences of limited access to food choices on the university experience.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

This qualitative descriptive study of access to food choices among international graduate students took place at the UBC, Canada. The goal of qualitative descriptive studies is to present an in-depth account of events in the everyday language of those events; this design was appropriate for obtaining direct and useful insights from international graduate students about food choices that higher education policy makers can utilise without requiring extensive interpretive intervention (Major, 2023; Sandelowski, 2000).

2.2. Participants

This study recruited international graduate students through friends, classmates, and other personal connections who indicated their willingness to participate in individual interviews about their experiences with access to food choices. The given emails were used to get in touch with consenting participants to ask them to confirm their willingness to participate. To be included in the study, participants had to (a) be an international graduate student enrolled in the UBC, and (b) lives in British Columbia without relatives.

2.3. Data Collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data about the perspectives of international graduate students experience with access to food choices. The interview guide was created by the larger body of literature on the subject. 6 international graduates were selected using convenience sampling, and the interview questions were then pilot tested with them; this procedure made it easier to see any limitations on the interview questions and to understand how participants may understand and respond the questions (Creswell, 2019). Graduate students were selected since this was the level of study where most international students attempting to get access to food choices were enrolled. Small editing adjustments and improvements were made in response to these pilot interviews to enhance the interview questions' readability, clarity, and order.

The study also included an ethnographic approach in addition to semi-structured interviews to capture the complex, day-to-day experiences of foreign graduate students with relation to their dietary choices. To supplement the interview data with rich, contextual insights into the participants' actual experiences, this comprised observational sessions and casual encounters with the participants in both university settings and their houses (Ariell, 2023; Conde-Caballero et al., 2021).

The participants were asked the following questions that were modified from previous studies (Aljaroudi, 2018; Aljaroudi et al., 2019; Bessey et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2018).

- a) Challenges in accessing food choices
- b) Consequences of limited access to food choices on the university experience

Five of the participants in the study were given an individual meeting in a private location on campus in March 2024 by the researcher, who was also an international graduate student at the time the study was done. One of the participants interviewed was done in an ethnography way. Participants were encouraged to answer the topics in greater detail by using prompts and probing questions. The interviews took place between 20 and 40 minutes, were audio recorded, and were verbatim transcribed. For descriptive reasons, sociodemographic and educational information (e.g. student status) was gathered. To maintain anonymity, identifying information (such as name, ethnicity, country of origin, etc.) was removed. There was no compensation made to participants for their participation. Prior to the collection of data, participants provided signed and informed consent.

3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the participants' sociodemographic and educational characteristics. Conventional content analysis was utilised to do qualitative data analysis at the manifest level (Lindgren et al., 2020). Data were gathered over the course of a week, and processing didn't stop until the data was saturated. When the study produced no new categories, data saturation was deemed to have been reached (Bremnes et al., 2018; Klassen et al., 2012). An inductive approach was used to identify and categorise terms and expressions pertaining to obstacles in obtaining food choices and their effects on the university experience. The complete data set was then subjected to improved codes, with new codes being created repeatedly as needed. Afterwards, comparable codes were divided into groups, which were then examined and combined. Peer debriefing was implemented to

improve the data coding and analysis process's credibility (Holloway, n.d.; Ponterotto, 2015). For every category and subcategory, supporting quotations are included.

4. Results

The study involved 6 international graduate students, ages ranging from 27 to 39 years old, with an average age of 29.9. There were three male and three female. Students (60%) received funding from their families, research assistantships, or teaching assistantships. Students (20%) were financially supported by scholarships or bursaries and students (20%) from savings. African (n = 2), Asian (n = 2), European (n = 1), and Middle Eastern (n = 1) students were enrolled full-time. Each of the (n = 6) participants was enrolled in graduate school. Living with other people (n = 3), single (n = 3, not married, or cohabiting with a partner). Out of the three participants who were living with others, all of them (n = 3) did not live with family or relatives. The following lists the categories and subcategories that are associated with obstacles to obtaining access to food choice and the resulting effects on the university experience.

4.1. Challenges in Accessing Food Choices

Logistical challenges and acquiring food that is appropriate for one's culture were found to be the two primary types of obstacles to food choices. To ensure their access to food choices, students identified several logistical obstacles, including lack of family support, difficulties with underemployment or unemployment and time restraints. In addition, problems with acceptability, cost, and availability were linked to barriers to consistently obtaining culturally appropriate meals.

4.2. Logistical Challenges

4.2.1. Lack of Family Support

As the participants have expressed, the lack of family goes beyond providing logistical help and encompasses a more profound loss of culinary legacy and custom. The participant's attempts to reproduce traditional dinners provide a painful example of the emotional aspects of food access difficulties, as they are challenged with obstacles related to the availability of ingredients and culinary equipment. A participant expressed this idea by saying:

“Without parents or other family members, it's just me. My schedule is so busy that I can't always make home-cooked meals, I miss its comfort. I'm on my own, figuring out how to live this path and accepting that fact.” (#2)

Some students mentioned that when they ran out of choices or needed help with some ingredients for meals, they want to prepare, it was difficult for them to get it because they didn't have family or close friends nearby.

“Being away from home means that I don't have close family to turn to for help when I run out of supplies or require the ingredients for a particular a meal.” (#5)

4.2.2. Under-Employment/ Unemployment

Four participants said that finding work as an international student made it difficult to have access to food choices. They discovered that job possibilities frequently favoured those with Canadian citizenship or permanent residency, even after their student visa limits were eased to allow them to work more than 20 hours per week off-campus until April 2024. As an example:

“I've been looking for a job anywhere and have been desperately looking for any way to get some money. Despite having a master's degree, it has been quite difficult for me as a foreign student to obtain work, even as a cleaner. I've been looking nonstop since coming here in September 2023, but it's been an uphill struggle. Regretfully, as a foreign student, I frequently get disregarded in favour of those who are citizens or permanent residents of Canada.” (#1)

Talks about underemployment revealed not only financial limitations but also a feeling of dissatisfaction with the local labour market, which further complicated their access to food by preventing them from affording to try and buy ingredients that are specific to their culture and are frequently expensive.

4.2.3. Lack of Time

The accounts of hurriedly preparing meals expose a problem that goes beyond simple schedule issues; they underscore the decline in culinary skills and the acceptance of less-than-ideal food selections, prompted by the unrelenting demands of academic responsibilities. Time limits made it difficult for all six participants to get access to food choices. They mentioned how they spend most of their time to attend classes and study at the university because they are full-time students. They mentioned that there was not enough time to cook, which made it difficult for them to cook nutritious and culturally appropriate meals. When faced with time restrictions, all participants expressed a preference for quick and easy meals over traditional and culturally significant foods, which often needed more preparation time.

"I found it to be really difficult since I came here in September. In every semester, I am busy because courses are from 9 am to 5 pm. I don't have enough time with this schedule to make meals the way I wanted them. I had to rely on eating my meal at the NEST during my lunch break." (#4)

“Say, for example, I am always engaged with my studies due to the coursework load, so making a meal like kaldereta is a hard because it takes two hours or longer to prepare and giving it this much amount of time is intimidating as I have lot of schoolwork to do.” (#6)

4.3. Appropriate Cultural Food Accessibility

According to the participants' accounts, the trip to specialty stores highlights the extent to which they go to obtain food that is appropriate for their culture. They face obstacles such as geographic and practical limitations, but also the harsh reality of price differences, which make these efforts to obtain food both financially and physically taxing.

4.3.1. Acceptability Issues

Three participants pointed out that the cuisine in Vancouver, Canada, is not the same as what they are used to from their home countries in terms of halal, quality, flavour, and aroma. Taste and Halal were significant factors in determining the food choices of the students; some chose not to eat local dishes that did not fit the halala and flavour profiles of their own regional cuisines (#3 and #5). The following quotations highlight these ideas:

“I can't help but want the tastes of home-made meals not just the food per se, but also the way it's seasoned and cooked. Replicating those similar preferences is difficult in Vancouver. My appreciation of the cuisine is significantly impacted by the fact that its core is different here. It can affect my appetite and how much I eat if the flavour is absent.” (#3)

“I have noticed that a lot of the recipes here are made with non-halal meats like salami, ham, and bacon etc. or are prepared in the same pots with halal meats like beef or chicken. Halal dietary standards are violated by these ingredients. These components are frequently included in recipes for things like beef or chicken balls. This makes it difficult for me to follow my halal dietary rules.” (#5)

4.3.2. Financial Stress

All six participants reported that finding foods that fit their cultural preferences was not difficult, but getting their hands on them was. They saw that these foods were far more expensive than what they would have paid in their countries. One of the participants stated:

“The limited availability of culture food leads to the high cost as compared to conventional foods available in the stores. Therefore, it's difficult to afford the foods I am accustomed to.” (#2)

4.3.3. Lack of Availability

Four participants encountered difficulties locating cultural food that are commonly found in grocery stores in their home countries. One of the participants said:

“Even when I go to local markets in Vancouver, I can't find the food or the ingredients I am accustomed to cook my own food. For example, I can't find guinea pepper seeds, dry smoked fish, and cow foot etc. that I am accustomed to.” (#3)

4.4 Effects of Limited Access to Food Choices on the University Experience

A participant's uncommon break from their regular lone eating habits sharing meals at home serves as a small-scale version of the larger obstacles to food access. It demonstrates how sharing meals with others not only lessens feelings of alienation from mainstream food culture but also briefly closes the distance to one's cultural origins.

Regarding the effects of limited food choices on the university experience, two groups were identified: (1) academic underachievement and (2) poor health. These included being unable to focus, absences from lectures and tests, and being in a poor physical, mental, and social condition.

4.4.1 Academic Underachievement

According to three participants, having trouble focusing during lectures, doing schoolwork, and performing well on tests was caused by their limited access to food. One of the participants said:

“I find it difficult to concentrate in class when I'm upset about not being able to buy the food I truly want or the supplies to cook it. There are moments when I simply want to go out of here and find the meal, I'm craving somewhere else in town, but having classes and particularly during tests makes that impossible. I just eat whatever is around the university.” (#1)

Two participants indicated that having limited access to food choices had a detrimental affect on their attendance at midterm examinations and in class. A participant said:

“Getting holds of the food I need has proven difficult since my arrival, particularly halal choices. Sometimes I use the little ingredients I have at home to make meals instead of attending class since preparing those meals take long. I skip some test when I'm low on energy from not eating enough to think clearly because I know my scores will be terrible. At times, I'd prefer to go without food on campus rather than consume the same things.” (#6)

4.4.2 Poor Health

The contrast between dining in a group and on one's alone provides insight into the emotional and social dimensions of food access. The companionship and laughter that surround a meal provide a striking contrast to the typical lonesome and frequently disappointing dining experiences, underscoring the complex relationship between food access and general well-being that extends beyond simple nutritional consumption.

4.4.3 Poor Mental Health

Four students brought up the psychological implications of not having access to food choices, including emotions of impatience, worry, rage, stress, and anxiety. A participant stated:

“I find myself thinking about what to eat next every day starting from breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I was used to having a wide range of food choices available to me every day back home. Here, I must think ahead for both today and tomorrow at the same time, figuring out when I'll have time to cook and where to get the supplies. I occasionally must travel all the way to Richmond to shop for necessities at a Chinese store. It's late when I get back home, and I still have homework to finish. It's emotionally and psychologically exhausting.” (#4)

4.4.4 Poor Physical Health

Two participants brought up the connection between their physical health and having limited access to food choices because sometimes even after eating some food, they still yearn for the food they are missing. One participant exclaimed:

“Sometimes I eat just to stop feeling hungry, but even after I've eaten, I still feel like I need something more because the food didn't really give me what my body needs. But I must eat to survive, so I eat whatever's available. Then, a few hours later, I start feeling cold and weak, which tells me that what I ate didn't really do the trick, it's like my body's way of saying it needs something that it is used to.” (#2)

4.4.5 Poor Social Condition

Two participants said that their inability to choose their food choices kept them from participating in day-to-day social activities, such as hanging out with their friends in restaurants or going sightseeing the city. One of the participants described going through a period of social withdrawal because of low energy:

“My friends often appreciate the food that's served at restaurants even though I don't always like it, so I feel like the odd one out when I go out and socialise. For this reason, I frequently lack the energy to go out and meet new people.” (#6)

5. Discussion

This qualitative study sheds light on food access barriers and their effects on international graduate students' university experiences in Canada. Financial insecurity is a key barrier to food access for overseas graduate students (C.-C. Lee et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2021, 2021). International graduates have financial hardship due to employers prioritizing citizens and permanent residents and employment issues, according to this survey. Canada allows only full-time international graduate students to work 20 hours per week without a work visa, but they can work full-time during school holidays. International graduate students with work permits can work off campus for more than 20 hours per week during regular academic sessions under a temporary governmental regulation from 11/15/2022 until 4/30/2024 (Canada, 2024). According to our interviews, the pilot programme, which allows students to work full-time during academic sessions, may significantly impact international graduate students' choices for food. By making this program permanent or eliminating it, employers may be less reluctant to hire full-time international graduate students. Due to the program's uncertain future, employers are cautious to hire international graduate students full-time. Clarifying the program's status may help these students get food by preventing them from being overlooked in favor of citizens or permanent residents. Consider how a full-time work may affect international graduate students' academic performance. It could interfere with their ability to sleep, study, and prepare healthful meals (Kamitewoko, 2021; Kwadzo, 2014).

Other than financial issues, international graduate students face non-financial barriers to food choices. University scheduling, schoolwork, and distance to food stores limit time to cook and acquire ingredients (Alakaam et al., 2015; O'Sullivan & Amirabdollahian, 2016; Shi et al., 2021; Shi & Allman-Farinelli, 2023). International graduate students eat less home-cooked cuisine and more convenience items than domestic students (Lee et al., 2018, 2018; Njambi, 2023). This research supports these findings and suggests that non-financial eating restrictions may affect overseas graduate students more. The first time they manage food-related obligations alone and live far from family and friends may affect their eating habits.

The study found that international graduate students struggled to follow dietary appropriateness, which balances food choices with cultural, religious, and ethnic preferences (Hingley, 2016; Khanna, 2022; Timiryanova, 2019). Due to dietary acculturation,

international graduate students, like many Canadian immigrants, may not be able to eat their sacred foods (Aljaroudi et al., 2019; Elshahat & Moffat, 2020; Zou et al., 2022), such as unfamiliarity with local cuisine and services (Brady & Chen, 2023; Griffith et al., 2016; Kim, 2017; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2010). Accessibility, time, affordability, convenience, and taste preferences are reasons international graduate students stick to typical diets. Religious and cultural upbringings often influence their tastes (Horacek & Betts, 1998; Yan & FitzPatrick, 2016). This study found that students from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East had problems finding indigenous cuisine; some had to go significant distances on public transportation to find them. These findings make it crucial to provide international graduate students with food choices, especially culturally significant traditional food. This method can substantially help their cultural adjustment (Amos & Lordly, 2014; Bista, 2017; Shi et al., 2021, 2024). To aid cultural adaptation, prior studies suggest educational institutions with international students to create social, cultural, and intellectual engagement programs (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2022).

Lack of food choice hinders food access for recent immigrants in Canada (Berggreen-Clausen et al., 2022; Vahabi & Damba, 2013; Viola, 2022). The study shows how important it is to inform international graduates about the campus local food choices during orientations.

The participants admitted not knowing about the university's international student services such as intercultural, financial, and interpersonal support, and Canadian cuisine culture programs. All these could improve their access to a wider variety of food choices (Bruening et al., 2017; Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2020; J. Farahbakhsh et al., 2017). Thus, international graduate students need support and programs to improve their health and well-being, including access to a range of cuisine. To promote, publicize, and customize these resources and services for these students, further steps may be needed.

In Canada, elements such as tuition fees, school schedules, and unemployment influence food choices (Entz et al., 2017; Hattangadi et al., 2019; Silverthorn, 2016). Many universities and colleges offer food banks and other charity resources for international graduate students. Several participants in the survey thanked the campus food bank for its variety. They also noted a major drawback: food banks may not contain culturally appropriate items. Due to their reliance on donated goods, food banks cannot address the diverse cultural and ethnic needs of international graduate students. Since it ignores students' cultural preferences, this mismatch can affect food access choices (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Hattangadi et al., 2019; Oldroyd et al., 2022; Silverthorn, 2016).

International graduate students' limited access to food choices may have a negative impact on their academic performance (Aljaroudi, 2018). This study found that limited food choices hindered international graduate students' ability to study, pay attention in class, and do well on tests. Few food choice access caused much worse effects, disrupting academic performance (Leung et al., 2019; van Woerden et al., 2019). International graduate students may suffer from poor mental and physical health and high stress due to limited food choices (Aljaroudi et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2019; Ssali, 2019; Xiao et al., 2018). Due to limited food choices and a growing fatigue with eating the same foods that are readily available, students skip meals, which is the root of these problems (Aljaroudi, 2018; Bessey et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2019; Ssali, 2019). International graduate students in this study experienced severe physical and mental effects from having limited food choices. In addition to feeling irritated from hunger, they also reported having low energy. They said that having little funds caused them to experience psychological suffering, such as tension and anxiety, which might

worsen issues with their academic performance. These results show that limited access to food choices has a negative effect on one's physical and mental health as well as contributing to continuous stress related to the cost and accessibility of culturally appropriate food.

Through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic methods, international graduate students' food choice access issues are illuminated. Undergraduate students' perspectives were excluded because the study only involved international graduate students and one university. The findings may not apply to different academic settings or adequately represent the experiences of all international students. Our findings are based on the sample's perceptions, as with any qualitative study. In structuring this research, the study aimed to examine how limited food choices affect academic performance, which may have overlooked other important effects on international graduate students. Despite these shortcomings, the study is based on real-life experiences of international graduate students who freely discussed consequences beyond academic accomplishment and their overall well-being. These first-hand stories are crucial to the creation or improvement of university, provincial, and federal food choice access programs.

6. Conclusions

Acknowledging the significant contributions that international graduate students make to Canadian campuses, universities have a social responsibility to assist their success. The contributions come in two types: non-financial such as encouraging cross-cultural interchange and diversity leading to internationalization and financial such as covering living and tuition costs (El Masri, 2020; McCartney, 2021; Sabzalieva, 2021). This study shows that international graduate students face specific non-financial and financial access food choice constraints. Due to the lack of culturally appropriate cuisine, its cost, and its time, their academic performance and health negatively impacted. An environment on campus with a variety of affordable, culturally appropriate food choices may improve student satisfaction, eating habits, and overall welfare, which would boost academic performance. University actions for international graduate students may solve these issues. This might be done by setting up campus communal kitchens and hosting free workshops on cooking with Canadian cooks who demonstrate how to cook cultural cuisines.

It might be beneficial to make information easily accessible about cultural food businesses and services in the city or inviting some of those businesses to open stores on campus. Enacting policy modifications to reduce barriers to food access, such as reducing variable tuition fees for international students, offering affordable housing choices, and broadening the requirements for Canadian scholarship eligibility since most of the scholarships available are for Canadian permanent residency holders and citizens. Such programmes might not only boost the number of international students who pay for their tuition, but they could also advance social justice (El Masri, 2020; McCartney, 2021; Sabzalieva, 2021).

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